

Submission to the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience

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Overview

Volunteers contribute extensively to Australia's disaster resilience, supporting prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery functions and bolstering community connection. However, the role of volunteers in disaster prevention and preparedness is not adequately recognised in existing policy initiatives, and the resourcing of volunteer involving organisations engaged in disaster resilience activities has not kept pace with the increased frequency and severity of natural hazards in Australia.

Consequently, volunteers take on significant risks which are not adequately mitigated by existing disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery arrangements. Further, a mechanism for consistently coordinating the efforts of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations in national disaster resilience arrangements has yet to be formally implemented.

We recommend the following initiatives to ensure that volunteers and volunteer involving organisations can effectively support Australia's disaster resilience in the future:

- ***The establishment of a standing forum which includes volunteer involving organisations involved in national disaster resilience.*** There are no current arrangements which strategically plan for and facilitate coordination between the volunteering ecosystem and other organisations with a role in disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Such a forum would contribute to improved planning and more efficient and targeted support for volunteer involving organisations during times of heightened demand for services.
- ***The funding of preparation and support for volunteers engaged both through formal response and recovery organisations and informally in the community.*** This should include ensuring the availability of appropriate resourcing to prepare for disaster response, such as training and equipment, and for disaster recovery, including post-disaster support for volunteers.
- ***The development of an overarching national-level strategy which supports and plans for the role of volunteering in disaster resilience.*** This should include funding to finalise the scoping, development, and implementation of the National Volunteer Sustainability Blueprint for Emergency Management.

Introduction

About this submission

This submission responds to the Terms of Reference provided by the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience.¹ The Terms of Reference specify that the Committee will inquire into and report on "the role of Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based

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https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Disaster_Resilience/DisasterResilience/Terms_of_Reference

services in preparing for, responding to and recovering from natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability.” This submission outlines the contributions of volunteering in Australia’s disaster resilience and provides recommendations to better support this role.

This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.

Volunteering in Australia’s disaster resilience

Volunteers are involved in disaster resilience activities across prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery in Australia. These contributions are made across local and State/Territory government services, through major charities and not-for-profits, and directly through informal community groups or online platforms. Disaster resilience activities undertaken by volunteers include:

- Response and recovery during natural disasters.
- Preparedness and prevention activities, including environment management.
- Essential service provision, including food relief, the delivery of essential goods, and social connection.
- Supporting the response to public health crises.
- Mental health support.
- Environment and wildlife protection.

According to the most recent Report on Government Services, 225,937 people volunteered in government emergency services organisations in Australia in the 2021-22 financial year.² This number includes 193,312 volunteers in fire services organisations, 24,642 volunteers in State and Territory Emergency Service, and 7,983 volunteers in ambulance service organisations. However, data from previous years shows that the number of volunteers in government fire services organisations has decreased gradually since 2015-16.³ Over the same period, the number of volunteers in State and Territory Emergency Service organisations has remained relatively steady, while the number of volunteers in ambulance service organisations has increased. These changes have resulted in an overall decrease of 30,514 volunteers in government emergency services organisations since 2015-16.

Volunteers are also heavily involved in preparedness and prevention efforts, as well as recovery activities following a disaster. According to the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) Annual Information Statement (AIS) dataset, 217,776 volunteers are engaged in 1,192 registered charities which identified ‘emergency and relief’ as their main activity. This does not include any fire service or other government services organisations.⁴ Volunteers also contribute to

² <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2023/emergency-management>

³ Data taken from 2022 Report on Government Services for each year except 2010-2011, which was taken from the 2021 Report on Government Services

⁴ <https://data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-34b35c52-8af0-4cc1-aa0b-2278f6416d09/details?q=acnc>. The ACNC Annual Information Statement dataset is updated weekly. The figures presented in this report were accessed 11 April 2022.

disaster prevention. The most prominent example is volunteers in environmental organisations, who support sustainability efforts and contribute to natural disaster prevention. For example, in 2021, Landcare volunteers in the Snowy Monaro region planted over 4,500 native trees and shrubs.⁵ This revegetation activity will help control the invasion of weeds, rehydrate and restore soil life, and abate approximately 3,277 tonnes of carbon over the next 25 years.⁶ According to AIS data, 940,365 people volunteer in charities which identified 'environmental activities' as their main activity.⁷ Volunteers also deliver essential emergency relief services. For example, Foodbank volunteers provide essential supplies to people affected by natural disasters and first responders.⁸ Meals on Wheels, which engages 45,000 volunteers, delivered essential food and hygiene products to vulnerable communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹

A sustainable and well-integrated volunteer workforce is a crucial asset to Australia's disaster resilience. However, while the contributions of volunteers in formal and coordinated disaster response and recovery are widely known, the role of volunteers before a disaster are rarely acknowledged and resourced appropriately. To ensure a comprehensive approach to disaster risk reduction, collaboration on disaster prevention and preparedness activities must integrate volunteers and volunteer involving organisations. This means that volunteers should be included in relevant strategic initiatives, including strategies and action plans, in the disaster resilience space. Volunteer involving organisations should be engaged through standing forums with other stakeholders with a role in disaster resilience. Further, membership of these forums should be expanded beyond the current focus on response and recovery to include organisations involved in prevention and preparedness activities.

This submission recommends the inclusion of volunteering in national disaster resilience frameworks through a standing forum for volunteer organisations and by funding the completion and implementation of the National Volunteer Sustainability Blueprint for Emergency Management. These recommendations are outlined in the sections below.

Coordinating volunteer involvement

The increasing frequency and scale of emergencies in Australia has created a need for an effective, coordinated approach for the involvement of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations in disasters.

⁵ <https://landcareaustralia.org.au/news/2020-chep-land-management-and-sustainable-agriculture-landcare-grant/>

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ The AIS dataset includes information on all charities which access Commonwealth charity tax concessions and other benefits and publishes a variety of statistics including the size of the charity, their main activity, and the number of paid staff and volunteers they engage; <https://data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-34b35c52-8af0-4cc1-aa0b-2278f6416d09/details?q=acnc>

⁸ <https://www.foodbank.org.au/natural-disaster-relief/?state=nsw-act>

⁹ <https://mealsonwheels.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/MOWA-Annual-Report-2021-FINAL-Digital.pdf>,
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Primary responsibility for emergency management sits with the State and Territory governments. However, the Australian Government has a broader national view which can be beneficial in large disasters which cross state borders, and has a unique set of supporting capabilities including the provision of logistical support, transportation of personnel and equipment, assistance in large-scale evacuations, and provision of financial assistance, which can be activated during a disaster.¹⁰ The Australian Government may also have responsibilities in other emergencies, such as a public health crisis or threat to national security, which may occur at the same time as a natural disaster and overlap with State or Territory responses. An approach is needed that enables greater cooperation and coordination between State/Territory and Commonwealth arrangements for volunteering in national disasters. This would provide greater clarity to rapidly, safely, and effectively mobilise both volunteers and volunteer involving organisations in emergencies. A nationally coordinated approach should include:

- The establishment of a national forum, with similar forums at State/Territory level, to bring together and coordinate volunteer involving organisations that play a role in planning, responding to, and recovering from emergencies.
- National standards regarding the inclusion of emergency management volunteers in ongoing health and safety measures (including COVID-safe requirements), alongside a nationally consistent definition of essential workers.

A standing forum for volunteer involving organisations

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements made the following recommendation on the inclusion of volunteers in national arrangements:

Recommendation 21.3 – National coordination forums: The Australian Government, through the mechanism of the proposed standing national recovery and resilience agency, should convene regular and ongoing national forums for charities, non-government organisations and volunteer groups, with a role in natural disaster recovery, with a view to continuous improvement of coordination of recovery support.

Volunteer involving organisations are included in various coordination forums. Major volunteer involving organisations are represented through the National Coordination Mechanism, which was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic and is now embedded in the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework.¹¹ The National Coordination Mechanism convenes collaborative forums with relevant sectors including the community sector to address the impacts of a national crisis. The National Coordination Mechanism was activated during recent floods in Queensland and New South Wales.

Volunteer involving organisations involved in emergency relief and recovery are also represented on the Emergency Relief National Coordination Group, established by the Department of Social Services. The National Coordination Group advises the Government on the provision of emergency

¹⁰ <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/html-report/chapter-05>

¹¹ <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/aus-gov-crisis-management-framework-v3-1-2.pdf>, 45

relief, food relief, and financial counselling during times of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters.¹²

While these groups facilitate some representation for the volunteering ecosystem in national disaster resilience, they are only activated in response to crises. Consequently, there are no regular standing forums which coordinate the efforts of charities, non-government organisations, and volunteer groups with a role in natural disaster response and recovery. Further, there is no representation or coordination of volunteer efforts in disaster prevention and preparedness activities on existing forums.

An Australia-wide integrated network of coordinating forums would be made up of volunteer involving organisations active in disasters and include those working across disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. The national forum should be complemented by, and facilitate communication between, equivalent forums at the state and territory level. Such an approach would strengthen the contributions of volunteering to increase community resilience across all phases of disasters by:

- Establishing guiding principles, best practice, and resources for volunteer involving organisations working in and following disasters.
- Ensuring collaboration between volunteer involving organisations working in disasters, particularly when working across jurisdictions.
- Recognising that local volunteering is a fundamental recovery and resilience strategy and attribute of a resilient community that has the capability to lead its own recovery process.
- Influencing a more planned approach to surge requirements for large and catastrophic events.

The development of an Australia-wide network (of coordinating forums at national and State/Territory levels) would be an effective, efficient, and impactful solution to how volunteer involving organisations active in disasters can work together to best engage volunteers and provide positive outcomes for communities and governments. Such a network should also be informed by the national principles for disaster recovery, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, best practice volunteer involvement, and individual State and Territory and national disaster arrangements. Where relevant, it should be aligned with the objectives outlined in the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033) and State/Territory volunteering strategies.

Ensuring support for spontaneous volunteers

Spontaneous volunteers are volunteers who are not affiliated with recognised volunteer agencies, and may not have relevant training, skills, or experience, but seek out or are invited to contribute their assistance to various volunteering opportunities. Spontaneous volunteers are often recruited and coordinated over the internet, either through informal social media groups or through dedicated online platforms. Some State and Territory peak volunteering bodies operate online

¹² <https://www.dss.gov.au/communities-and-vulnerable-people-programs-services-emergency-relief/national-coordination-group>

matching platforms that are activated during crises. For example, the EV CREW platform run by Volunteering Queensland has made over 33,000 volunteer referrals to 200 disaster preparation or recovery campaigns since it was established in 2008.¹³ This platform offers spontaneous volunteers an avenue to contribute formally to disaster response efforts.

Spontaneous volunteers are a crucial resource for Australia's disaster resilience, often responding immediately at the site of a disaster and contributing to community-led response and recovery. However, they are not always covered by relevant volunteer insurance policies and do not have access to post-disaster services such as mental health supports or employee assistance programs. Ensuring these volunteers are aware of the risks of their roles and have access to sufficient information on the supports available to them and the rights of people in disaster-affected areas is crucial to enabling safe and effective spontaneous volunteering.

Preparing for disasters

Volunteer involving organisations across sectors and throughout Australia have reported experiencing greater financial strain and increased difficulty attracting and retaining volunteers. In a survey of volunteer involving organisations, recruitment and retention of volunteers were among the most pressing challenges identified.¹⁴ Most respondents also reported that recent events in Australia had put financial strain on their organisation.¹⁵ For organisations in the disaster resilience space, these challenges are compounded as disasters become more frequent and severe, and coincide with other crises such as COVID-19 outbreaks or cost of living pressures.

Volunteer involving organisations require more support to prepare to engage volunteers in disasters. This should include funding for the necessary training to onboard and manage new volunteers who will engage with organisations during and immediately following a disaster, the development of standard operating procedures, and the provision of necessary equipment. The State and Territory volunteering peak bodies, volunteering support services, State and Territory governments, and local councils all play a key role in facilitating coordination, training, and support for volunteer involvement in disasters. Greater support for these functions is needed to strengthen disaster resilience and safeguard the effectiveness and sustainability of volunteering in disasters.

Strategic planning for volunteering in disaster resilience

There is currently no overarching national-level strategy which supports and plans for the role of volunteering in disaster resilience. In January 2021, funding was provided by the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre to conduct a scoping consultation about the concept and process to develop a National Volunteer Sustainability Blueprint for Emergency Management, which would aim to provide national-level strategic direction for initiatives to support sustainable volunteering in the emergency management sector. Funding to finalise the scoping, development,

¹³ <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/services/emergency-volunteering>

¹⁴ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Organisation-Perspective.pdf>, 39-40

¹⁵ *ibid*

and implementation of the Blueprint, and similar strategic initiatives, is needed to progress the strategic consideration of volunteering in disaster resilience.

This Blueprint, and complementary strategic initiatives for the sector, should together consider the role of formal emergency management volunteers, spontaneous volunteers, and informal volunteers across disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

The National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033)

The National Strategy for Volunteering (2023–2033) is a ten-year blueprint for a reimagined future for volunteering in Australia. It is the first National Strategy for Volunteering in a decade, providing a strategic framework for enabling safe, supported, and sustainable volunteering. The National Strategy for Volunteering was developed through a 12-month co-design process with members of the volunteering ecosystem.¹⁶

The initiatives recommended in this submission are based on the strategic objectives which emerged through the co-design process. In particular:

- *The establishment of a standing forum which includes volunteer involving organisations involved in national disaster resilience* aligns with:
 - **Strategic Objective 3.1**, to ensure that governments are consistently considering the needs of volunteers and supporting volunteering through comprehensive policy and investment.
- *The funding of preparation and support for volunteers engaged both through formal response and recovery organisations and informally as spontaneous volunteers* aligns with:
 - **Strategic Objective 1.3**, to ensure that volunteers are engaged safely and ethically with appropriate supports in place to protect their safety, interests, and wellbeing, and,
 - **Strategic Objective 3.3**, to ensure that volunteering is supported across Australia by common infrastructure and continuous strategic investment.
- *The development of an overarching national-level strategy which supports and plans for the role of volunteering in disaster resilience* aligns with:
 - **Strategic Objective 3.3**, to ensure that volunteering is supported across Australia by common infrastructure and continuous strategic investment.

The implementation of these initiatives should be progressed with consideration of other relevant objectives of the National Strategy for Volunteering, namely:

- **Strategic Objective 1.2: Make Volunteering Inclusive and Accessible**
 - Resources developed for the disaster volunteering space should be available and accessible to diverse groups, and should contribute to creating socially, culturally, and psychologically safe volunteering experiences.
- **Strategic Objective 2.1: Diversify the Understanding of Volunteering**

¹⁶ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/the-strategy/>

- Initiatives to support disaster volunteering should recognise volunteering happening in culturally specific contexts and find ways to better support diverse expressions of volunteering.
- **Strategic Objective 2.4:** Enable a Community-Led Approach
 - Initiatives to support volunteer involving organisations and spontaneous or informal volunteering should include mechanisms for bottom-up approaches that provide people and communities with control over the ways volunteering takes place with and through them.

Recommendations

Volunteering Australia makes the following recommendations to better support the role of volunteering in Australia's disaster resilience:

1. ***Establish a standing forum which includes volunteer involving organisations involved in national disaster resilience.*** There are no current arrangements which plan strategically for and facilitate coordination between the volunteering ecosystem and other organisations with a role in disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Such a forum would support improved planning and more efficient and targeted support for volunteer involving organisations during times of heightened demand for services.
2. ***Fund preparation and support for volunteers engaged both through formal response and recovery organisations and informally in the community.*** This should include ensuring appropriate resourcing is available to prepare for disaster response, such as training and equipment, and for disaster recovery, including post-disaster support for volunteers.
3. ***Develop an overarching national-level strategy which supports and plans for the role of volunteering in resilience.*** This should include funding to finalise the scoping, development, and implementation of the National Volunteer Sustainability Blueprint for Emergency Management.

Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.



Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This submission has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.



About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote, and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

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