

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

August 2023

Written by: Sarah Wilson (National Strategy Advisor, Volunteering Australia)

Overview

Volunteering plays a vital role in disaster response and recovery in Australia. The contributions of volunteers are integral to enhancing the country's disaster resilience, spanning across critical phases including prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Despite its importance, volunteering is not adequately and consistently supported in existing funding arrangements. A nationally co-ordinated, strategic approach to funding volunteer involvement across disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery, as well as the enabling infrastructure for volunteering in Australia, is urgently needed.

Volunteering Australia has three recommendations for how Commonwealth funding can support communities to reduce disaster risk:

1. Develop a nationally co-ordinated approach to supporting volunteer engagement in emergencies. As the frequency and scale of emergencies in Australia increases, a nationally coordinated approach would help to mobilise volunteers rapidly, safely, and effectively during times of need.
2. Invest in capacity and capability building of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, with an increased focus on preparedness. Strategic investment in volunteering infrastructure, including volunteer management capability, will ensure communities are better equipped to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.
3. Undertake strategic workforce planning with a focus on community-led solutions. Volunteering before, during, and after disasters is expansive and involves volunteers in diverse roles and settings. Understanding and planning for volunteer involvement will improve response capabilities and foster resilience.

Introduction

About the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

The Australian Government has commissioned an Independent Review of Disaster Funding (the Review) to take stock of Australia's disaster funding environment following the significant government financial support provided to impacted communities over the last three years in response to significant events.¹

The review will consider how Commonwealth arrangements for disaster funding can be optimised to support a system that is fit-for-purpose to support wellbeing, national productivity, prosperity and economic security and maintains state, territory and local government roles and responsibilities in the context of the projected increase in natural disasters over the coming decades. A final report is expected to be provided to Government in April 2024.

¹ <https://nema.gov.au/about-us/governance-and-reporting/reviews/Independent-Review-Disaster-Funding>

About this submission

This submission highlights the role of volunteering in Australia's disaster resilience and how it is supported by existing funding arrangements, and makes recommendations on how Commonwealth funding could better support communities to reduce disaster risk. It addresses the following questions on the Review consultation portal:

1. What experience have you had with Commonwealth disaster funding support?
2. How could Commonwealth funding support communities to reduce their disaster risk?
3. Please describe your understanding of Commonwealth disaster funding processes.
4. Are the funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local government, during disaster events clear?
5. Is there any further information you would like to provide?

The submission complements previous submissions made by Volunteering Australia on emergency management and disaster relief, including:

- [Submission to the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience](#)
- [Submission on the second National Action Plan to implement the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework](#)
- [Submission to the Senate Inquiry: Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20](#)
- [Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements](#)
- [Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Fair Work Amendment \(Respect for Emergency Services Volunteers\) Bill 2016](#)

Volunteering Australia's experience with Commonwealth disaster funding support

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. Volunteering Australia's experience with disaster funding support has predominantly been through policy and advocacy, rather than as a recipient of funding.

Volunteering Australia is a member of the National Coordination Group, which provides expert, evidence-based advice to the Minister for Social Services on emergency relief, food relief, and financial counselling. Volunteering Australia also sits on the Charitable, Not-for-Profit and Philanthropic Strategic Group convened by the National Emergency Management Agency and is a member of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum. Through these mechanisms Volunteering Australia highlights the role of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations in disaster response and resilience activities across prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Volunteering Australia also has strong relationships with relevant Federal Government departments, including the Department of Social Services and the Department of Home Affairs.

Additionally, Volunteering Australia works in collaboration with the state and territory volunteering peak bodies, which directly support volunteers and volunteer involving organisations at a state, territory, and local government level. The work of the volunteering peak bodies, in most jurisdictions, includes responsibility for coordinating spontaneous volunteers. It also extends to

support local, state, and territory governments and volunteer involving organisations to plan for and provide services and programs on the ground during all phases of disasters.

In 2022 Volunteering Australia led the development of the first National Strategy for Volunteering in a decade. All levels of government, emergency services agencies, and emergency services volunteers were significantly involved in the co-design process. The National Strategy for Volunteering has three focus areas, three aims, and eleven strategic objectives. Each of these objectives is pertinent to this inquiry and require significant, ongoing, strategic investment to ensure that the Australian volunteer workforce is equipped to prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies. We encourage reading the National Strategy for Volunteering in its entirety for the purposes of this review alongside Volunteering Australia's recent submissions to the Select Committees on the Cost of Living and Australia's Disaster Resilience. Investment in the implementation of the National Strategy for Volunteering is a key mechanism through which the Australian Government can optimise its role in supporting a national disaster funding system with scale and adaptability. As identified in the National Strategy, a whole-of-government approach is required to support a thriving volunteering ecosystem in Australia.

How could Commonwealth funding support communities to reduce their disaster risk?

Volunteering Australia has three recommendations for how Commonwealth funding can support communities to reduce disaster risk:

1. Develop a nationally co-ordinated approach to supporting volunteer engagement in emergencies. As the frequency and scale of emergencies in Australia increases, a nationally coordinated approach would help to mobilise volunteers rapidly, safely, and effectively during times of need.
2. Invest in capacity and capability building of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, with an increased focus on preparedness. Strategic investment in volunteering infrastructure, including volunteer management capability, will ensure communities are better equipped to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.
3. Undertake strategic workforce planning with a focus on community-led solutions. Volunteering before, during, and after disasters is expansive and involves volunteers in diverse roles and settings. Understanding and planning for volunteer involvement will improve response capabilities and foster resilience.

Whilst Commonwealth funding is predominantly used to support state and local governments during times of disaster, the increasing frequency of multi-jurisdictional emergencies highlights the need for a nationally coordinated approach to supporting volunteering. This includes resourcing for volunteering infrastructure that enables communities to self-mobilise. There are currently no 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. The establishment of a national forum that brings together these voices would contribute to improved planning and more efficient and targeted support for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations during times of heightened demand for services.

There is a need for ongoing funding of preparation and support for volunteers engaged through both 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. Increased flexibility for use of funding is required to ensure that programs delivered within disaster funding arrangements can better meet community need. Preparedness and resilience-building activities must be acknowledged and funded to ensure there is both capacity and capability to respond to emergencies. For example, skilled, qualified volunteers are required to provide frontline responses for disaster-affected wildlife; however, it often takes government agencies significant time to liaise with those that can assist, resulting in increased suffering and avoidable deaths. Similarly, more than 900,000 environmental volunteers play a pivotal role in mitigating disasters through conservation efforts. Positive, multi-agency collaboration and adequate resourcing for preparedness would simultaneously reduce disaster risk and ensure agencies are equipped to respond when required.

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 or resourced appropriately. Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations must be included in relevant strategic initiatives, including strategies and action plans, in the disaster resilience space. This includes expanding beyond the current focus on organisations involved in response and recovery to include those involved in prevention and preparedness. Many organisations and groups self-organise and self-fund to respond to emergencies, which is not sustainable and often involves disaster affected persons assuming a dual role as a volunteer.

Existing Commonwealth disaster funding processes

Volunteering Australia recognises the Commonwealth invests in resilience and recovery measures that support resilience building, preparation for disaster response, and effective recovery. This includes funding through the National Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements, through Services Australia via Disaster Recovery Payments, and through the Disaster Ready Fund, which is focused on resilience and risk reduction.

Volunteering Australia predominantly works with the state and territory volunteering peak bodies some of whom are recipients of Commonwealth disaster funding and who understand firsthand the issues for Councils and different levels of government. Volunteering Australia also works with volunteer involving organisations that deliver services and programs through Commonwealth disaster funding.

As identified above, one of the primary challenges for these organisations is lack of strategic consideration of volunteers and volunteering. This includes leveraging the expertise and lived experience of organisations and groups that do not form part of formal disaster response and recovery arrangements. Many of these are local, community-run, emergent groups that mobilise in response to disasters. They report challenges accessing and implementing Commonwealth disaster funding and reporting against the requirements. An associated challenge is the short, two-year timeframe for accessing funding as community recovery often takes much longer. Timeframes should be proportionate to the severity of disasters to ensure they adequately meet the needs of community recovery, including those that emerge over time. Longer lead times will also ensure

organisations can engage with disaster-affected communities to ensure funding applications reflect community need.

Finally, lack of strategic invest in volunteering, particularly before disasters, means that organisations find themselves ‘building the plane as they are flying it’. Managing and coordinating volunteers requires bespoke skills and this leadership capability is rarely invested in. This creates significant challenges for organisations and groups that find themselves inundated with offers of assistance or that are asked by government to undertake service provision that requires volunteer involvement in delivery. Skilled leadership (through volunteer managers/leaders/coordinators) is the lynchpin of effective volunteer involvement and needs to be adequately resourced to ensure that volunteer effort can be channelled effectively and efficiently.

Current funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local government

Funding roles tend to be clear to agencies with high levels of disaster management literacy, but less clear to agencies that operate on the periphery who are then brought into formal response arrangements. Likewise, community groups that mobilise in response to disasters are less likely to be aware of the roles of various parts of government, including how to connect and access support. Navigating different funding sources and processes, including varying eligibility criteria, can be overwhelming, particularly for disaster-affected communities. The difference in literacy levels extends beyond just funding to the functional aspects of governments’ roles in disasters. This makes it difficult to plan for and coordinate spontaneous volunteers and emergent groups because communities face challenges in understanding who is doing what and how their involvement can be most effective in enhancing capability or filling gaps. This speaks to the need for comprehensive data on the emergency management landscape at large.

At a national level, the availability of data on the involvement of volunteers enables evidence-based policy which supports disaster risk reduction. Official data informs key research on emergency volunteering; however, the limitations of available data also reduce the capacity to expand and better coordinate the role of volunteers. Precise data on the extent of volunteer involvement in disaster prevention and preparedness, disaster recovery, crisis intervention, and the provision of essential services during disasters is limited. Facilitating the engagement of volunteers and planning appropriately for their involvement requires more detailed, comparable, and up-to-date data on volunteering. This is particularly important for regional and remote areas that have been affected by intra-and-interstate migration, cost of living pressures, and changing volunteer workforces. For example, rural volunteer fire brigades have historically been able to rely on intergenerational volunteering as a recruitment strategy, but this is becoming untenable and puts these services, and their communities, at significant risk of having insufficient capacity. Contemporary data is critical for understanding supply and demand.

The state of disaster volunteering: supporting a sustainable volunteering ecosystem

It is critical to remember that disaster management involves more than just formal emergency services volunteers. Contemporary emergency management must also recognise and plan for other

forms of volunteering including spontaneous volunteering. Public awareness campaigns can improve understanding of the myriad of ways volunteers are involved in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. Diversifying the public understanding of volunteering, which is a strategic objective of the National Strategy for Volunteering, will encourage more people to get involved and will bring vital skills and experience.

There are specific psychosocial hazards for volunteers that staff recovery centres and provide assistance to disaster-affected people who may disclose traumatic accounts of their experiences to volunteers. Vicarious trauma and burnout are significant risks for volunteers in emergencies; however, many organisations do not have the resourcing to adequately mitigate and manage these risks. Disaster funding arrangements should consider and provide for this form of risk mitigation, including investment in psychological resilience.

The cost-of-living crisis is having an impact on Australia's volunteer population, which is exacerbated in regional and rural areas. Financial barriers are a significant barrier to volunteering and more than half of all volunteers incur out-of-pocket expenses. This is combined with increased financial pressures on organisations, who are struggling to simultaneously keep up with inflationary pressures and tackle the threat to the sustainability of their volunteering programs. Sustainable emergency volunteering is both a capacity and a capability issue. Urgent work needs to be done to consider how financial barriers to volunteering can be reduced and removed. This can be achieved through better provision of funding outside emergencies as well as making volunteer expenses tax deductible. Compounding this is the extremely competitive nature of available funding, which requires volunteer involving organisations to compete rather than collaborate.

Finally, the role and importance of volunteers in reducing disaster risk through their communities must be a critical focus within Commonwealth disaster funding arrangements. Place-based, community-led initiatives are imperative to improving disaster preparedness and reducing disaster impact. Harnessing the lived experiences of communities and strategically investing in volunteering infrastructure, including resourcing for volunteer management, will strengthen the capacity of organisations to respond to disasters.

As mentioned at the outset of this submission, investment in implementing the National Strategy for Volunteering will pay dividends in increasing the capacity and capability of preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters. A stronger volunteering ecosystem benefits all volunteers and all communities, but this cannot be achieved without ongoing, strategic investment and a commitment to genuine collaboration.

Recommendations

Volunteering Australia has three recommendations for how Commonwealth funding can support communities to reduce disaster risk:

1. Develop a nationally co-ordinated approach to supporting volunteer engagement in emergencies. As the frequency and scale of emergencies in Australia increases, a nationally coordinated approach would help to mobilise volunteers rapidly, safely, and effectively during times of need.
2. Invest in capacity and capability building of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, with an increased focus on preparedness. Strategic investment in volunteering

infrastructure, including volunteer management capability, will ensure communities are better equipped to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.

3. Undertake strategic workforce planning with a focus on community-led solutions. Volunteering before, during, and after disasters is expansive and involves volunteers in diverse roles and settings. Understanding and planning for volunteer involvement will improve response capabilities and foster resilience.

Authorisation

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



Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This position statement 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 a strong, connected, and resilient Australian community through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

Volunteering Australia Contacts

Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer
ceo@volunteeringaustralia.org
0428 186 736

Sue Regan
Deputy CEO & Policy Director
policy@volunteeringaustralia.org
0480 258 723

State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies

VolunteeringACT
www.volunteeringact.org.au
02 6251 4060
info@volunteeringact.org.au

Volunteering Tasmania
www.volunteeringtas.org.au
03 6231 5550
admin@volunteeringtas.org.au

The Centre for Volunteering (NSW)
www.volunteering.com.au
02 9261 3600
info@volunteering.com.au

Volunteering Victoria
www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au
03 9052 4524
info@volunteeringvictoria.org.au

Volunteering Queensland
www.volunteeringqld.org.au
07 3002 7600
reception@volunteeringqld.org.au

Volunteering WA
www.volunteeringwa.org.au
08 9482 4333
info@volunteeringwa.org.au

Volunteering SA&NT
www.volunteeringsa-nt.org.au
08 8221 7177
reception@volunteeringsa-nt.org.au