

## Summary of the NSW Emergency Volunteering Review

### Introduction

The NSW Government commissioned an Independent Inquiry into preparation for and recovery from the 2022 floods across NSW, which lead to a Parliamentary Inquiry. Both inquiries identified volunteers as an important part of emergency responses in NSW. These findings prompted a Review of emergency volunteering, undertaken by the Premier's Department in 2023, based on consultation across NSW and over 4000 reviews. The Review has recently been published as two reports, one on the current state of emergency volunteering and a second making recommendations to prepare for the future of emergency volunteering.

The Review made 13 recommendations made, broadly they recommend improvements to:

- how we recognise the contribution of both volunteers with our emergency services, and informal volunteers who stand up during disasters.
- how we engage with informal volunteers, and better integrate them into the emergency management framework.
- how we collect and report data on our emergency volunteering workforce.
- how we recruit and retain our emergency volunteers.

The recommendations from the review are now being addressed and overseen by the State Emergency Management Committee.

### Report 1

The first report provides a summary of the current state of emergency volunteering in NSW. Per the report, emergency volunteering is defined as all that supports the community to prepare for, prevent, respond to and recover from an emergency. The report's objectives are to provide advice on:

1. the current nature of emergency services and emergency management volunteering in NSW and trends, including a particular focus on trends in regional and remote NSW.
2. opportunities to integrate spontaneous volunteers into the emergency management framework.
3. how well-placed NSW is to meet projected future demand for emergency services volunteers, and additional actions that would assist.

They summarise volunteering and its relationship to emergency response in Fig 2.1.

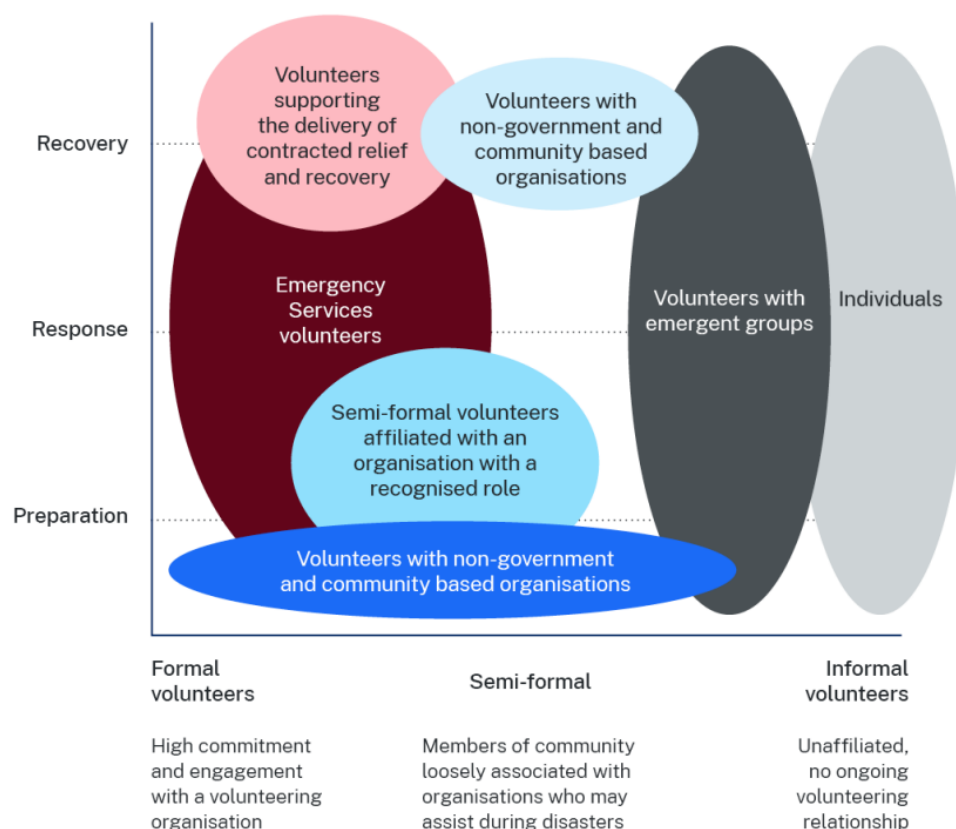


Figure 2.1 – Key volunteer groups mapped across the spectrum of volunteering and the phases of emergency management.

The report opens by providing the policy context that governs emergency responses and volunteering in NSW. Specific handbooks about emergency volunteering are discussed and broader support is noted from the National Standards for Volunteering Involvement, the National Strategy for Volunteering, and the NSW Volunteering Strategy 2020-2030.

Several different types of volunteer groups are discussed, with the importance of informal emergency volunteering (both spontaneous volunteering and emergent groups) specifically noted. The report also observes that five of the state's emergency services are predominantly volunteer organisations – the Rural Fire Service (RFS), State Emergency Service (SES), Surf Life Saving (SLS), VRA Rescue NSW, and Marine Rescue NSW.

Volunteering trends are compared as well, especially noting the clash between the 2021 NSW State of Volunteering Report's 'intent to volunteer' stats and other broader data that is less confident about future volunteering statistics. The general concern with a decline in formal volunteering from other areas is echoed here in terms of ensuring that there is adequate disaster preparation in NSW, given how much of it is reliant on volunteer support.

Other trends that the report notes include:

- While the emergency services volunteer workforce is increasing and broadly staying stable, it is not keeping pace with population growth.
- Major disasters of a certain type lead to an increase of volunteers in the same type (e.g., major fires lead to an increase in volunteers with the RFS), but this surge population declines to its pre-disaster levels over short periods of time.
- Most emergency services volunteers are located in regional NSW.
- Some regional areas are experiencing difficulties with volunteer recruitment and retention.
- Different agencies see different trends in the age profiles of their volunteers, with RFS and SES seeing increases in young volunteers (age 26-34).

With regards to volunteer experience, the report notes that:

- Common motivations are:
  - Wanting to make a difference (63%)
  - Develop new social connections (35%)
  - Build new skills and experiences (31%)
  - Reciprocate help they received (18%)
  - Compare this to the 2021 State of Volunteering Report motivations:
    - Help others
    - Social connection
    - Use skills and experience
    - Support a cause
    - Develop new skills/gain experience
  - And the 2023 State of Volunteering Report motivations:
    - Help others
    - Be active
    - Use skills
    - For enjoyment
    - For social and community connection
- Emergency volunteers have high levels of satisfaction.
  - Areas of particular satisfaction include positive team/unit culture, active involvement with attending emergencies, and the training offered.
  - Areas with lower satisfaction include administrative burden, support received (financial and other) and the availability of technology to support volunteering.
- Burnout is a challenge for volunteers, especially since the 2019/20 bushfires and attendance at traumatic events.
  - The 2023 State of Volunteering Report also notes burnout as the #4 reason why people do not volunteer more.
- Most volunteers are likely to continue volunteering.
- Key barriers to volunteering include:
  - Needing to work/earn more money/study.
  - Difficulty balancing volunteering with other commitments.

- The time commitment to volunteering.
- Compare these to the top 2 barriers in the 2023 State of Volunteering Report – Time and Cost.
- Cost of living is an emerging issue for emergency volunteers.

Community perception was another major theme of the report. The volunteer consultation noted:

- Emergency volunteers are seen as needing to be community focused, fit, and available.
- The broader community has little awareness of the full scope of emergency volunteering beyond first responses (e.g., dispatch, admin etc).
- Motivations and barriers for community members who do not currently volunteer are broadly the same as for volunteers, and community members report being more likely to volunteer than not to.

Overall, the report is consistent with other research on volunteering in NSW, such as the State of Volunteering Reports, and provides a useful and detailed exploration of emergency volunteering specifically.

## Report 2

Each recommendation given in this report has substantial context and discussion that is beyond the scope of this summary to include. We will summarise the recommendations with our commentary below and encourage readers who would like more information to read the full report [here](#).

**Recommendation 1:** The State Emergency Management Committee Capability Development Sub Committee develop and implement a collective approach to planning and capability development for emergency services volunteering to better understand and prepare for the anticipated increase in demand.

- We recommend consulting with relevant stakeholders, such as emergency volunteering organisations, and The Centre for Volunteering, and building upon the NSW Volunteering Strategy 2020-2030 in developing this approach.

**Recommendation 2:** The State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) include a report on the state of emergency services volunteering as part of its annual report.

- We support this being a regular consideration for the SEMC.

**Recommendation 3:** NSW's volunteer-based emergency services organisations improve and align data collection with regard to their volunteer workforce to better understand the nature and experience of emergency volunteers and support better planning and decision making.

- We agree that better data is needed to fully understand the issue.

**Recommendation 4:** The Minister for Emergency Services establish a new state-based emergency volunteering award to improve recognition of emergency volunteers.

- With support from the NSW Government, we would welcome including this award within the Volunteer of the Year Awards currently administered by The Centre for Volunteering.

**Recommendation 5:** Both the *State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989* and the NSW State Emergency Management plan be updated to recognise the contribution of emergency volunteers

- We support this further and specific recognition of the valuable role that these volunteers play in Emergency Management.

**Recommendation 6:** NSW update its emergency volunteer webpage to be an effective and engaging single-point entry for people seeking information about emergency volunteering, support, and responses.

- We welcome more current and engaging information on volunteering and encourage efforts to make messaging and information as consistent and accurate as possible.

**Recommendation 7:** The SEMC develop an action plan to grow and strengthen emergency services volunteering. The Action plan should be aligned to the NSW Volunteering Strategy's focus areas and have 8 specific implementation areas (see report for more information).

- We support the development of an action plan and particularly the alignment with the NSW Volunteering Strategy. We also recommend collaboration with The Centre for Volunteering, NSW Volunteering, and key volunteer-involving organisations.

**Recommendation 8:** The NSW State Emergency Management Plan be updated to recognise and expressly enable the use of informal volunteers as part of emergency management arrangements.

- We support the further recognition of the important role played by informal volunteers.

**Recommendation 9:** The SEMC issue guidelines to support member agencies to refresh supporting plans about how informal volunteers are used and establish consistent operational models for the engagement and coordination of informal volunteers.

- We support consistent engagement models for informal volunteers in an emergency volunteering context.

**Recommendation 10:** The SEMC develop an Informal Volunteers Working Group, guidance materials, and a shared platform to support informal volunteers.

- While we support the development of a working group, we recommend a shared platform is not developed. Informal volunteering, by its nature, tends not to engage with mechanisms of platforms and registration. There are also several platforms of this nature available in the sector already and we would recommend utilising these rather than developing an additional platform.

**Recommendation 11:** The SEMC Community Engagement strategy and action plan be refreshed to include a stronger focus on building community capability by equipping the community with practical tools and resources for informal volunteering.

- We support this recommendation.

**Recommendation 12:** The NSW Reconstruction Authority repurpose funding for one-off spontaneous volunteering grants to local councils in order to support a more comprehensive approach to supporting informal volunteering. This would include training and support for councils; engaging an expert external organisation to coordinate, train and support informal volunteers; and grants to support business, NGOs and community groups in high-risk areas.

- We support this recommendation and await further detail as to how this scheme would be funded,

**Recommendation 13:** NSW develop and prosecute a series of priority initiative with the Commonwealth Government to better support emergency volunteering and community capability in partnership with other States and Territories.

- We support greater support for volunteering broadly from all levels of government and recommend that the State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies are involved in the process of developing these initiatives.