

## LIVED EXPERIENCES OF EMERGENCY SERVICES VOLUNTEERS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA



## WHO ARE WE?



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# WHAT IS THE PROJECT ABOUT?

*What does it take to become an SES volunteer?*



Recruitment

*What keeps SES volunteers coming back for more?*



Retention

*What makes SES volunteers happy?*



Wellbeing

*How do we get more people to volunteer for SES?*



Diversity

## METHODS

- Semi-structured interviews
- 70 volunteers and unit managers from 17 different units were interviewed
- 10 units located in the regional or remote area of WA (59%)
- 36% of respondents were female
- Half of interviews conducted one-on-one, others in groups



# THE INTERVIEW

Interview section	Sample question(s)
Background	What is your current role with SES? When did you join? How long have you been with the service? Have you had other roles in the service?
Recruitment	What attracted you to become an SES volunteer?
Induction and training	What was your first day with the SES like? What happened?
Expectations	What did you expect as an SES volunteer, when you joined? How would you describe an 'ideal' SES volunteer? What does it take to be an SES volunteer?
Emotional experiences	What was the most exciting experience you had as an SES volunteer? How did you feel?
Wellbeing	What do you enjoy about volunteering at SES? What makes you happy?
Retention	How long do you intend to volunteer with SES? Why do you think some people leave SES?
Unit characteristics	Do you feel included in your unit? Does your unit have strong relationships with other parties: community, local government, DFES, others?

## FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

- 1) Individual experiences
  - a) Volunteering meaning/identity
  - b) Emotional experiences
  - c) Expectations
- 2) Human Resource (HR) practices
  - a) Recruitment
  - b) Training
  - c) Retention

## VOLUNTEER MEANING AND IDENTITY

- Key motivator – community
  - Broader community (town, state)
  - Smaller community of SES volunteers (unit) = family

*What I probably find the most special, but it's probably the most meaningful is when you go and help find someone or whatever and then their family, they write you a letter saying how thankful and grateful and all that sort of stuff. It makes you feel quite good.*

*It's camaraderie. You're all, you're all in it for the same reason. You want to give back to the community, and it's just a great team to be with. Everyone looks out for everyone.*



## EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

- **Positive** emotional experiences are often related to call-outs
  - Paradox!
- Overcoming personal barriers
- Training experiences also become a source of affection
  - But not the weekly type

*And just so many different experiences. Body, you know, many, many different body recoveries. Which are, which are horrible but they always give you that sense of closure [...] to rescues.*

*I hate heights. I get nervous and my hands shake and all that. . So, I worked on that. They, really, really got into that to the point where it actually really blew the unit manager and everyone who saw me the first time, who thought I wouldn't be able to do it. They were just blown away by the level of enthusiasm I showed.*



## EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

- **Negative** emotional experiences mostly related to dealing with organisational bureaucracy
  - Not being able to help at a call-out
  - Recognition from organisation

*Searches are probably one of the worst. Generally because we will show up [...] Then they make you wait, we'll wait hours for the police to sort themselves out with what they want us to do. Whereas we could just get in and quickly search an area, and rule that out. That's one of the hardest things with it all, is when you go on searches, is waiting. **Hurry up and wait.***

*I find that DFES itself is very fire orientated. Even the name. You know, the Department of Fire and Emergency Service. Is fire not an emergency service, or you know.*



## EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

- **Negative** emotional experiences mostly related to dealing with organisational bureaucracy
  - Administration
- Personal relationships in the unit
  - Bullying

*Why do we go to do a job, spend 4 hours on someone's roof at 2 o'clock in the morning, and come back and do an hours paperwork?*

*You know I thought, you know, joining there was you know, fun. But after being there for 5 years, I think you know, some of the volunteers, I think they run me down.*



# EXPECTATIONS

- **Initial expectations**

- Adventurous and exciting role that involved high-risk rescues and frequent callouts
- Helping the community – vague
  - > Change in motivation
- Some reported no expectations

*[I expected] jumping off a cliff and doing fun, crazy things. It's not quite like that, but it's still fun. Yeah, obviously a lot more serious than that sort of thing.*

*I joined up to contribute and ended up getting way more out of it than I thought I would. So, two things. Firstly just the camaraderie amongst members. Really, really decent bunch of people.*



# HUMAN RESOURCE (HR) PRACTICES - RECRUITMENT

- #1 pressing concern for ALL units
  - Lack of volunteers to attend callouts
  - Lack of volunteers with specific skills/knowledge
  - Active volunteers vs 'on the books'
- But no clear recruitment strategy or plan
  - Social media strategy
  - Recruitment officers

*[We need] someone who can go climb up a mountain and carry someone down. There's not many of our members that are actually capable of doing that sort of stuff.*

*We promote our, our unit very heavily. It's got a huge reputation in town, very positive. Because we've got Facebook and every time we do training, up go the professional photos and the stories. Every time we have an operation, people read it. We've got a local rag, we always have 2 full pages in there with pictures and carrying someone out of a gorge, or doing a cliff rescue. [...] But the best recruitment tool is word of mouth. And it goes back, in my opinion, word of mouth. Me talking to you, with that background, will have more chance of you joining than any other mode.*

## HR PRACTICES - TRAINING

- Training was a source many and frequent negative reactions and evaluations
  - Online training system is too complex to navigate, time-consuming, and lacks flexibility
- Inexperienced training managers
- Low access to specialised training
- Recognition of prior skills and knowledge

*Nowadays if I deliver a training course for 2 days, it takes me 4 days to do the administration. So it's 6 days. Why?*

*That's the same is if I've got a chainsaw ticket. That's not recognised by DFES. If I get one by DFES, that's not recognised by Work Cover.*

- Innovative training solutions

*[The unit encourages] members who have a skill to run a training night, a Monday night. And devise this training program of their own. And you know, pick it up and run with it. And there's been some very imaginative training nights, with these youngish guys coming out and you know doing.*

## HR PRACTICES - RETENTION

- #2 most pressing concern
- Reasons for turnover
  - Changes in individual circumstances
  - Quality of training
  - Rare callouts
    - Related to initial expectations!
- Retention strategies
  - Improve training quality
  - Design a 'job' for all members
  - Ensure early commitment



*I think sometimes people can get bored. Particularly when you've been around for a while and you're covering [in training] the same stuff again and again.*

*And then we developed the flow chart, giving almost everybody in the unit an actual job. Rather than as it had been in the past, the half dozen members of the committee doing everything in terms of admin. So, and the result of that surprisingly was an absolute flood of new recruits.*

# REFLECTIONS



## NEXT STEPS

- CRC report with all findings
- **Survey for ALL SES volunteers in Western Australia!**



**THANK YOU!  
QUESTIONS?**



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