

Submission from the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR) to: Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR) is pleased to provide a submission to the review of Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response. AIDR presents a strategic submission in response to the [discussion paper](#) and recommends that:

- Creating or enhancing Australia's crisis response workforce be considered carefully through the lens of enhancing community resilience outcomes in the immediate, intermediate, and long term.

AIDR also provides an environmental scan of research and literature related to incentivising and retaining the volunteer workforce.

AIDR agrees that there is a need for increased national focus, resourcing and support for disaster risk reduction and resilience building initiatives across Australia, to strengthen the work being undertaken by many organisations across the system, to reduce the demand on response workforces in future disasters, and to support stronger outcomes for the DRR workforce and for communities themselves.

AIDR's role in building national capabilities for disaster risk reduction and resilience.

[AIDR](#) is Australia's National Institute for disaster risk reduction and resilience. AIDR works to strengthen the resilience of Australian communities to disasters by building and sharing knowledge, developing capability, and supporting networks and communities-of-practice across the disaster risk reduction and resilience system. AIDR operates through a partnership with the Australian Government's National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), AFAC, and the Australian Red Cross.

As trusted knowledge brokers and strategic advisors, AIDR draws on the subject expertise and lived experience of diverse stakeholders across the disaster resilience system. AIDR looks to contemporary, evidence-based research and examples of leading practice to inform our work.

AIDR has developed a strong body of work over the past decade to strengthen national capabilities in disaster resilience, which includes crisis response, through a growing suite of knowledge and capability development products and services. These include:

1. The Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook Collection:

The Handbook Collection currently comprises 20 Handbooks on a range of topics related to disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Publications with particular guidance related to building national capability in crisis response include: [Public Information and Warnings](#), [Incident Management](#), [Community Recovery](#), [Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers](#) and the soon to be published reviews of [Evacuation Planning](#) and [Managing Exercises](#).

A suite of Handbook companion documents supports the practical implementation of the principles and practices. These resources are developed and reviewed with the support of expert working groups from diverse organisations and sectors across Australia to ensure the Handbooks reflect nationally agreed principles and good practice and help to build national capability and consistency.

The [Recovery Exercising Toolkit](#) is a recent addition to AIDR's suite of companion resources. It supports recovery planning and capability development through exercising at the regional and local emergency management levels. Integrating recovery exercising into regional and local emergency management programs is critical to build holistic approaches to preparing for, responding to, and recovering from extreme events.

2. **Major Incidents Report:**

AIDR's Major Incidents Report provides an annual record of major incidents from a national perspective that have been identified as significant by the emergency management sector. The soon to be released 2022-23 report describes the complexities of responding to consecutive, concurrent, and compounding hazards, often across vast geographical locations and over extended periods of time. The report also details observations from eight in-depth case studies.

The 2022-23 Major Incidents Report will be complemented by an inaugural report on Australia's Riskscape. The report identifies the complex social, political, economic, and technological factors that can contribute to both increased risk and resilience to natural hazards. These factors manifest in a variety of ways at all scales - from the individual and local, to the national and international. The report highlights the importance of a systemic understanding of natural hazard risks, vulnerabilities, and capacities for resilience.

3. AIDR's extensive events and **professional development program:**

AIDR leads a national capability and events program so that individuals and organisations can build knowledge, skills and connections that support disaster resilience through a regular program of curated professional development events and learning opportunities tailored for the disaster resilience sector.

- [Decision Making Under Pressure: New Skills for the New Normal](#)
- [Facilitating Successful Debriefs](#)
- [Leadership in Crisis and Adversity](#)
- [Leading Multi-Agency Teams in Deep Uncertainty](#)
- [Managing Organisation Crises](#)
- [Meteorology for Disaster Managers](#)

4. **Volunteer Leadership Program:**

AIDR develops local leadership capability for disaster resilience and emergency management volunteers across traditional emergency services and emergency management agencies and with emerging disaster resilience volunteers from community organisations, not-for-profits, disaster relief organisations and local government.

5. **Education for Young People program:**

AIDR promotes the development of disaster resilience education as a vital component in children and young people's learning through facilitating networks and professional learning opportunities for stakeholders from the education sector, emergency services, and youth-focused organisations.

6. **Australian Journal of Emergency Management (AJEM):**

AIDR published AJEM as a quarterly journal of analysis, considered views, lessons learned and insights into current and future issues from researchers and practitioners at all levels of emergency management. AJEM is an open access publication that allows unlimited, free, and immediate access to all.

AIDR also manages a growing roster of networks and communities of practice across the disaster resilience system and works closely with our partner organisations to coordinate and build national capabilities such as the [Australian Warning System](#).

Shifting the focus from crisis response to disaster risk reduction and resilience

AIDR's work increasingly emphasises the need to shift Australia's approach from managing disasters after they occur, to proactively understanding, preparing for, and adapting to risks, and to building resilience before an event.

This shift is increasingly urgent given the compounding and cascading nature of risks and emergencies. Disaster events are increasingly occurring simultaneously or in quick succession. These events are often combined with other risks like climate change, conflicts, epidemics, inflation, and economic downturn. This phenomenon of multiple disasters is increasingly referred to as a 'polycrisis' (See: [GAR Special Report 2023: Mapping resilience for the sustainable development goals | UNDRR](#)).

Recent research highlights the challenges emergency management workforces face, as a result of climate impacted disaster events (See: [Implications of climate change for emergency services operations](#)). In 2022, half of Australia's LGAs were subject to a disaster declaration. This situation is stretching the response and recovery workforce. This coupled with decreasing numbers of volunteers (See: [Volunteering Australia](#)) leads to calls for a dedicated volunteer or response workforce. (Refer Appendix 1: AIDR's environmental scan of research related to the volunteer workforce. p7)

AIDR firm position is that there is a greater need to focus on disaster risk reduction and resilience (prevention and preparedness) initiatives, to curb the growing demand on response and recovery workforces when a disaster occurs.

Disaster risk reduction initiatives aim to prevent new risks, and reduce existing disaster risk, by strengthening the resilience of people, systems, and approaches. Increased focus and investment in disaster risk reduction is a national priority to secure a safe, healthy, and prosperous future. Greater resilience before an event reduces the need for and pressure on response and recovery arrangements. Australia is heavily reliant upon people volunteering their time and resources, either formally or informally, to help individuals and communities prepare, respond to, and recover from disasters.

The rationale to rapidly scale-up investment in national capabilities for preparedness, adaptation and disaster resilience is also demonstrated through economic analysis and data. It is now well established that financial investment in preparedness and prevention reduces the economic cost of response, relief, and recovery, and provides an estimated \$9.60 return on each dollar invested.

The benefits of investment are reflected in the seminal report commissioned by the Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience and Safer Communities (ABR) in 2017 (See: [Australian Business Roundtable | Disaster Resilience & Safer Communities](#)). The report states that an understanding of disaster risk requires comparative visibility of spending on disaster risk reduction and resilience, compared to the difference it has made. The report also recommended funding priorities should be determined through cost-benefit analysis, including the investments' ability to deliver 'co-benefits' such as economic growth and community connectedness, and further recommended that priority should be given to options that mitigate the long-term costs of disasters. (See: [The long-term social impacts of natural disasters, pg. 103](#)). Australia's response to the Sendai Framework, [The National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework](#), similarly outlines the need for enhanced investment in disaster risk reduction to limit the cost of disasters when they occur. This is particularly pertinent given the ABR's updated projection of \$1.2 trillion in cumulative costs of disasters over the next 40 years. The report demonstrates the economic rationale for significant investment in physical (infrastructure) and community (such as preparedness programs) resilience measures, particularly if investments are maintained for successive years (See: [Special report Update to the economic costs of natural disasters in Australia.pdf \(australianbusinessroundtable.com.au\)](#)).

The tasks required to help manage these challenges have become more complex, and the range of stakeholders involved in risk reduction and resilience has grown beyond traditional emergency service providers, such as local government, rural fire services and State Emergency Services. Organisations involved in resilience and recovery activities include diverse organisations such as Red Cross, Salvation Army, Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal, local neighbourhood houses, health services and schools. Increasingly, new organisations such as the Monash University Fire to Flourish Initiative, Minderoo Foundation, as well as the private sector, such as Insurance Group Australia, Suncorp, and National Australia Bank are becoming active in supporting resilience building activities.

It is important to recognise and acknowledge that many communities also have capacities and social capital that supports resilience – before, during and after emergency events. Community members and groups build social capital and resilience in ‘peace time’ between emergency events. They also work to support disaster preparation and resilience building activities, to various degrees across the country. After a crisis, to support relief and recovery, these groups organise sporting teams, fundraising events, other community events, or by providing informal support to those experiencing tragedy. These actions all contribute to community resilience, as a well-connected community is more likely to be prepared and recover quickly from a disaster.

In the context of more frequent disasters, communities, practitioners, and a diverse range of stakeholders are increasingly seeking out knowledge to support capacity building and capability development. There is a growing demand for further resources for building disaster resilience.

The next section of this submission highlights AIDR’s increasing leadership role in supporting the development and dissemination of this knowledge.

Growing demand for AIDR’s products and services to build national knowledge and capability in disaster risk reduction and resilience.

Since 2019, there has been a growing demand for AIDR’s knowledge products and services. This demand for knowledge, capability development and access to networks and connections, can be clearly seen in the numbers of people, sectors, and jurisdictions participating in or drawing on AIDR’s suite of knowledge products and collaborative services.

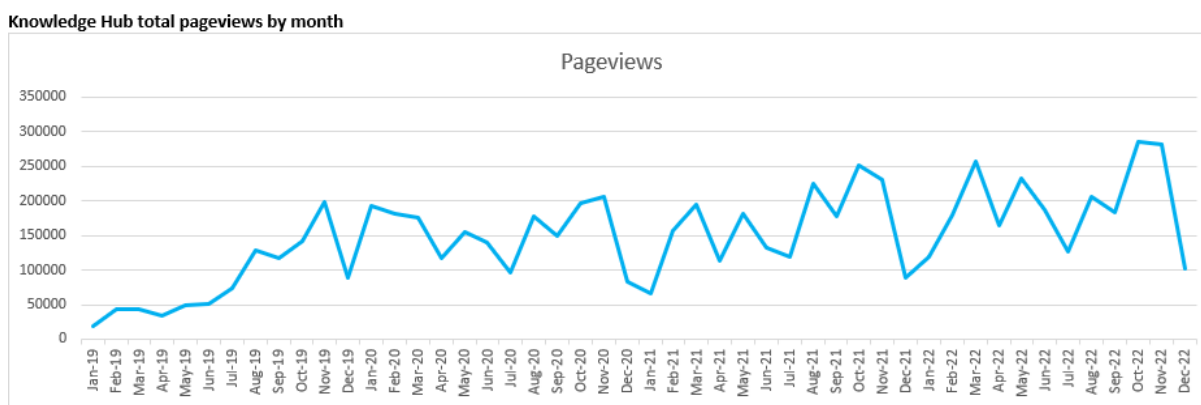


Figure 1: AIDR Knowledge Hub Pageviews – January 2019 to December 2022

Figure 1 above shows the steady increase in AIDR’s [Knowledge Hub](#) website usage over time. This highlights that a growing number of people are actively seeking out practical resources and knowledge. In 2021-22 alone, over 533,500 people accessed materials across the 3 AIDR websites with over 2,233,844 pageviews

on the AIDR Knowledge Hub. The number of people accessing AIDR's resources increases in times of disaster, as highlighted in the graph above, there are evident peaks during the 2019 – 2020 Black Summer bushfires and the 2022 floods.

The [Australian Disaster Mapper](#) was the most accessed resource with 306,285 pageviews, showing that people are interested in understanding disaster events, both recent and historical, impacting their communities. In 2021-22 AIDR connected over 5,214 people from a range of sectors and jurisdictions across Australia, including traditional and non-traditional emergency management organisations, by hosting 91 professional development events. AIDR engaged with nine jurisdictions, 27 sectors, and 10,164 stakeholders over this period.

AIDR's experience and data demonstrates there is significant value to the Commonwealth boosting investment in disaster resilience knowledge and capability development and acknowledges that this is reflected in the recently released [Second National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction](#). AIDR is well placed to expand our role in working with the Government to implement key actions within this plan.

[AIDR's work in an international context.](#)

Australia's arrangements for improving disaster resilience are guided by a range of international and national frameworks, including the UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (NDRRF), the Australian Preparedness Framework and the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (NSDR). The National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework identifies priority areas and strategies to assist Australia to achieve greater national coordination and accountability with respect to preparedness, resilience and risk reduction responsibilities are supported by five-year outcome statements. Australia's international agreements and national frameworks provide strong foundations with principles and priorities for improving resilience.

AIDR's program of work aligns with the principles outlined in international and national frameworks to accelerate disaster risk reduction. The Australian Preparedness Framework for example sets a common agenda for collective action and highlights the importance of:

- Fostering partnerships
- Planning and coordinating capabilities and partnerships
- Enhancing and developing capabilities, and
- Establishing effective governance roles and responsibilities.

AIDR supports investing in the implementation of these very well researched frameworks to achieve a cohesive and impactful national approach to managing current and future climate and disaster risk and supporting resilience.

Building upon Australia's existing emergency planning arrangements, there is a need to focus more on action-based resilience planning to strengthen local capacity and capability, with greater emphasis on community engagement and a better understanding of the diversity, needs, strengths and vulnerabilities within communities.

At a practical level, community resilience is developed and maintained by partnerships with all levels of government, non-government and corporate sectors through support programs, services and resources provided both pre- and post-disaster, such as those facilitated and provided by AIDR. Since its publication in 2018, the [Community Recovery Handbook](#) has been downloaded 6,689 times making it the 5th most downloaded product on the Knowledge Hub. Additionally, the [Community Engagement for Disaster Resilience Handbook](#) has been downloaded 3,515 times since publication in 2020.

Key knowledge included in these guidance materials is based on significant research and lived experience of DRR practitioners and community members alike. It is important to understand that disaster resilience cannot be developed for, or on behalf of, communities. Community engagement is the essential process through which all stakeholders come together to reduce the risk of disaster and enhance resilience collectively.

Effective community engagement for disaster resilience enables communities and partners to:

- develop an understanding of local risks and the actions required
- share and use diverse local information to better understand the assets, strengths, and capabilities of the community
- provide opportunities to share and use knowledge, skills, and ideas and to develop or enhance local disaster risk reduction and resilience activities
- provide mutual opportunities for learning and capability development
- build and strengthen networks and partnerships that promote trust, collaboration, and a sense of shared responsibility for disaster risk reduction and resilience.

Building resilient communities in the context of disaster integrates prevention, preparation, response, and recovery and is a complex and continuous process, rather than a process with a definitive end point or conclusion. It is also a process that cannot be imposed on a community (before or after an emergency event) with any success.

Conclusion

AIDR recommends that there is a need for an increased level of national focus, resourcing and support for disaster risk reduction and resilience building initiatives across Australia. Increased investment could strengthen the work being undertaken by many organisations across the system, reducing the demand on response workforces in future disasters, and supporting stronger outcomes for the DRR workforce and for communities themselves.

It is important that any new investment, or the creation of a new workforce or organisation, is considered in the context of the elements of the DRR system that are already in place, and in line with agreed principles and best practice.

It is also important that the focus on any such consideration be the desire to strengthen existing efforts, rather than to introduce or impose a new workforce or organisation onto the existing system or onto communities.

Finally, any such consideration should be considered carefully through the lens of enhancing community resilience, in the immediate, the intermediate and the long term.

Appendix 1: Environmental Scan on Emergency Service Volunteer Workforce Research

There is research that goes back three decades identifying the challenges of recruitment and retention of emergency management volunteers. This overview includes links to recent peer-reviewed research and non-peer reviewed reports on this topic. Most of this research, but not all, is open access (freely available to the public). An abstract is included where the article is not open access.

- McLennan, B. (2022). [Emergency volunteering 2030: Views from emergency response volunteer representatives](#). Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC
- Tsai, A., Newstead, T., Lewis, G. (2022) [Emergency volunteering: leading engagement and retention](#). Volunteering Australia.
- McLennan, B., Dunlop, P., Kragt, D., Holtrop, D., Gagne, M., Luksyte, A., & Farid, H. M. (2021). [Enabling Sustainable Emergency Volunteering: Final project report](#). Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.
- Kragt, D., Dunlop, P., Gagne, M., Holtrop, D., & Luksyte, A. (2018). [When joining is not enough: Emergency services volunteers and the intention to remain](#). *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 33(4), pp35–40.

Volunteer turnover is a continuing concern for emergency services organisations. Using a psychological contract perspective, this paper examines how meeting the initial expectations of volunteers when they join an emergency service is related to the volunteer's intention to remain with that service. A survey was undertaken by 539 emergency services volunteers in Western Australia after volunteering for about a year. The survey included questions about reasons why volunteers joined the service, activities they expected to undertake as a volunteer, their evaluation of the volunteering experiences in the first year and their intent to stay. Using Latent Class Analysis of their expectations, three types of volunteers were identified. These were:

- 'focused' volunteers (having well-defined expectations),
- 'lost' volunteers (lacking clear expectations except for serving the community) and
- 'overenthusiastic' volunteers (expecting status, reputation, and career progression among other things).

The results showed that the focused volunteers had participated in more activities and had a higher intent to remain a volunteer. Having too few or too many expectations seems to have negative consequences. Therefore, emergency services organisations could strive to understand and shape volunteer expectations to match a new volunteer's experience by using better aligned recruitment practices.

- Birch, A. (2011) ['Recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters in Australasia: An integrative summary of research'](#). Melbourne: LaTrobe University & Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.
- McLennan, B., Whittaker, J., & Handmer, J. (2016). [The changing landscape of disaster volunteering: opportunities, responses and gaps in Australia](#). *Natural Hazards*, 84(3), 2031–2048. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11069-016-2532-5>

There is a growing expectation that volunteers will have a greater role in disaster management in the future compared to the past. This is driven largely by a growing focus on building resilience to disasters. At the same time, the wider landscape of volunteering is fundamentally changing in the twenty-first century. This paper considers implications of this changing landscape for the resilience agenda in disaster management,

with a focus on Australia. It first reviews major forces and trends impacting on disaster volunteering, highlighting four key developments:

- the growth of more diverse and episodic volunteering styles,
- the impact of new communications technology,
- greater private sector involvement and
- growing government expectations of and intervention in the voluntary sector.

It then examines opportunities in this changing landscape for the Australian emergency management sector across five key strategic areas and provides examples of Australian responses to these opportunities to date. The five areas of focus are:

- developing more flexible volunteering strategies,
- harnessing spontaneous volunteering,
- building capacity to engage digital (and digitally enabled) volunteers,
- tapping into the growth of employee and skills-based volunteering and
- co-producing community-based disaster risk reduction.

Although there have been considerable steps taken in Australia in some of these areas, overall, there is still a long way to go before the sector can take full advantage of emerging opportunities. The paper thus concludes by identifying important research and practice gaps in this area.

- Rice, S., & Fallon, B. (2011). [Retention of volunteers in the emergency services: exploring interpersonal and group cohesion factors](#). *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 26(1), 18–23.

Emergency service agencies within Australia remain heavily reliant on the contribution of volunteers. As such, there is significant need for effective strategies and procedures to promote the retention of emergency service volunteer members. This study reports data from 2,306 emergency service volunteers on interpersonal and group cohesion factors thought to enhance volunteer satisfaction and promote ongoing commitment to the agency. Results indicate that supervisor support, interactional justice, recognition, and group cohesion all significantly contributed to greater volunteer satisfaction and ongoing commitment to the agency. Findings are discussed in the light of social exchange theory, highlighting the need for adequate supervisor training, enhanced volunteer recognition schemes, and attention to interpersonal climate within agency units.

- The [Emergency Services Workforce 2023 – Changing Landscape Literature Review](#) provides a comprehensive overview of how the emergency management landscape is changing and how it these changes are impacting the volunteer workforce. The seven themes included in the Changing Landscape Literature Review are:
 - demographic changes
 - changing nature of work
 - changes in volunteering
 - physical technology
 - digital technology
 - shifting expectations, and
 - changing risk.
- It is also worth noting that in 2012 the Commonwealth developed a [National Emergency Management Volunteer Action Plan](#) that may be helpful for the committee to revisit.

Forthcoming research:

- McLennan, B. J. (forthcoming) '*Scenarios for the future of disaster volunteering: An Australian, Delphi-based study*'.

This forthcoming paper considers future scenarios for emergency volunteering.

- *Reimagining emergency management volunteering – more than words project*

There is currently a gap in national strategy that supports and plans for the role of volunteering in disaster resilience. Research has been initiated by the AFAC Volunteer Management Technical Group, with support from the AFAC Workforce Management Group and Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum. This research project is being funded by Natural Hazards Research Australia.

This project will collaboratively design and then undertake a process to:

- Reframe and reimagine emergency management volunteering challenges and opportunities in different ways compared to the past to reveal new kinds of solutions.
- Identify and conduct key pieces of action research that can support volunteers and organisations to engage and learn from many different perspectives and experiences, with opportunities to influence the sector toward investing in new, innovative, and sustainable approaches.
- Develop a National Volunteer Sustainability Blueprint as a living document to guide strategic, national-level, and collaborative action to support EM volunteers (the people), volunteering (the activities) and volunteerism (the culture).