

SUBMISSION

Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

Reference: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-pubs/files/alternative-clth-capabilities-crisis-response.pdf>

The above reference requested public submissions in regards solutions for decreasing Commonwealth and State reliance on the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in crisis (disaster) and recovery events.

I submit this response as:

1. an ex-serving member of the Australian Army (Army) and
2. as a recently resigned Victorian SES (VICSES) staff member and volunteer.

Background. I served in the Army for approximately 18 years both in Australia and overseas.

In my civilian career since, I have worked and lived in many developing countries where I have witnessed first hand, the impacts of fire, flood, storm, tsunami and other critical and emergency incidents where the absence of competent emergency services - either professional or volunteer, have exacerbated and drawn out response, diminished community safety and then slowed economic recovery.

Also, I was an Operations Manager in the Victorian SES (staff) for only six (06) months at which time I resigned (May 2023) given significant disillusionment with the organisation.

My strongly held view is that there is no focus on (Victorian) regional units with the Service being metro-centric, bureaucrat and administration heavy, is increasing in average volunteer age while decreasing in effective numbers, is administratively compliance focused rather than realistic training and operations driven. **It is not attracting new, younger (fitter) members in the regions.**

Further, my observations from deployment to Echuca in October/November 2022 during the Murray river flooding crisis reinforce the above and provided for additional insight into State emergency 'response' and diminishing capabilities.

Australia wide? Discussions and observations from and with interstate emergency services staff and volunteers suggest that the issues and VICSES (and other state agencies) operational reality are similar in other State and Territory services.

Opinion 01. *If issues with regional emergency services and their capabilities are not fixed, then the ADF by virtue that it can function during a crisis will need to be deployed to assist in emergency response and be present for commencement of*

recovery processes. Further, I recommend that the Federal Minister NOT assume that the States nor Territories are today competent in delivering regional emergency outcomes. If they formally declare they can then before providing more funding, their competence to deliver regional emergency services should be tested.

Capital/major city volunteer ‘surge’ capabilities. Planning, budget and significant effort (in Victoria) has gone into building a volunteer surge capability in major cities. This failed given what I saw during my 2022 Echuca deployment. City volunteers simply did not volunteer to deploy in large numbers to cover the lengthy emergency period.

I also question the percentage of city based volunteers with appropriate medium and heavy vehicle licenses, qualifications to operate heavy earth moving plant and similar. In most city callouts, such skills are not required, hence they will not be qualified for such activities.

Opinion 02. *ADF units deploy to emergencies because they have the numbers of physically fit individuals, trained to operate as Teams and with functioning command and control capabilities. Further the ADF can rapidly deploy with individuals in quantity and quality, capable of operating the full range of heavy vehicles, earth moving plant and similar. If whatever emergency service that eventuates from this Inquiry cannot match this capability, then the ADF will continue to be required to assist in future emergencies of scale.*

Courses of Action. I see there are two broad courses of action for the Minister being:

1. **Limited change** with continued reliance on various State emergency services to expand/improve probably with the State and Territories requesting additional funding and support to match historic ADF emergency response, or
2. **Maximalist change** where a new and Federal civilian emergency organisation is created to address issues outlined in this submission and to resolve the multiple State and Territory emergency response capacity issues.

Opinion 03. *If the minimalist strategy is adopted, my opinion is that State bureaucracies will squander whatever additional funding and support will be provided and the ADF will still need to be deployed to assist in significant crisis circumstances, especially if large numbers of volunteers without medium, heavy or specialist vehicle and plant qualifications are available.*

A New Emergency Services Model. Opinion 03 is my assessment of what will happen if the States and Territories are simply provided additional funding. It won't work.

Nor would establishing a new and additional (State or Territory level) emergency service to fill the potential ADF emergency void concurrent with maintaining multiple State services. This

will further the 'double counting' of (regional) volunteers and be further impacted by non-effective 'metropolitan surge' thinking if such policies are maintained. It will either fail in emergency response or simply not attract the numbers required, resulting in continued reliance on and ongoing ADF emergency deployments.

I am not anti-volunteer but my assessment is that the volunteer operating model we have today is from last century and no longer functions.

It is time for a new model for both individuals as for organisational capability. The model would consist of:

A. A Federal Organisation. A single, unified Federal emergency services organisation, led by the National Emergency Services Agency (NEMA). This agency would report directly and be accountable to the Federal Minister for Emergency Management. It would replace all existing State SES and volunteer regional fires agencies and similar into one organisation. This would:

1. simplify and make more transparent emergency call out, command and control
2. ensure one single agency (and leadership team) is accountable for emergency response outcomes NOT the multiple we see today
3. enable establishment of a single, nation-wide procurement team to standardise vehicles, radios, uniforms and all supporting assets and equipment acquisition and preferably maintenance
4. enable creation of a single, Commonwealth wide unified training and certification recording system and standards to replace current multiple RTO and multiple state standards
5. enable decision on and deployment of a single nationwide emergency operations management and reporting system to replace the myriad of State systems that today do not work together
6. enable more efficient deployment AND tasking of newly arrived emergency volunteers arriving at the crisis location from interstate (due to the single training and qualification and operations management system)
7. stop costly construction of multiple, individual emergency unit facilities (often within the same town for the same volunteers who belong to different agencies) which would in future be replaced by larger, integrated facilities of standard design
8. enable creation of a simplified and nationwide career progression for full time staff within the new organisation, for volunteers wishing to transition for full time staff and for retiring ADF members and professional firefighters and similar who seek to further contribute with their knowledge, experience and training expertise, and

9. enable the creation of a single (simplified) and cost effective payroll, records and administrative system for the entire Commonwealth emergency service to replace the multiple of systems in place today.

B. Volunteer Attraction and Retention. In addition to the structure above I propose that:

1. volunteers maintaining specific fitness levels and achieving to-be-specified training, callout and/or (realistic) exercise attendance be given a significant tax deduction to reward their efforts and the maintenance of skills - this will ensure that a 'second' (or third) job is the emergency services
2. volunteer tax deductions be scaled so that those volunteers with higher responsibility and accountability be awarded higher deductions
3. that local government and SME businesses be formally recognised and rewarded for their support of their volunteers and those that do not are not
4. that significantly more focus than present be allocated to recruitment, numbers and location of professional emergency services trainers (see below), and
5. that a funded Federal emergency cadetship or similar be established to enable the new Federal emergency units to establish trainee entities in local schools within their volunteer catchment area.

Age challenges? When assuming my SES Operations Manager role I did engage with younger (20s-30s) 'locals' in my region who were not volunteers or had been (SES and CFA) and had stopped attending training.

Anecdotally, in my South West Victoria region we have NO shortage of fit men and women in this age group but this group is transient for employment, family and economic reasons¹. Further, many of them come with work experience and qualifications operating and maintaining the heavier vehicles and plant that are required for emergency response.

From my discussions there were four main drivers to their not joining, attending or remaining in their respective services being:

1. time (and cost)
2. (constant) administration
3. facilities, and
4. social attendance ('Dad's Army') not effective training being conducted.

Collective feedback was that if the 'system' provided effective, time efficient and realistic training in suitable facilities whilst reducing the administrative burden (a complaint from

¹ Though outside the scope of this submission, availability of regional housing, employment and similar matters are impacting the numbers and location of younger individuals and families in regional areas. An ideal world would be that such persons stay for extended periods to enable emergency units to build Team capacity. Further details can be provided on request.

experienced, longer serving service volunteers too) and rewarding efforts (tax deductions) subsequently reducing the need for a second job or partner/spouse having to do the same, then there would be more interest in joining and/or staying.

The commentary around 'Dads Army' was interesting. Quality training delivered by effective trainers would be beneficial and this is not happening today in all emergency units.

Opinion 04. *Volunteer units often rely on their own internal trainers to conduct most training. I suggest that many volunteer trainers (especially those that have full time jobs) simply cannot afford the time to prepare for and make effective training happen and then complete the administrative paperwork to record outcomes. In my opinion, unit operational capability is cycling down due to this reality and if this is not addressed, then people in our communities we could save simply won't be for the range of unit callouts let alone major crisis events.*

Opinion 05. *If a new emergency entity is established at either State or Federal level but it retains the bureaucratic/administrative focus that the present services exhibit, the new entity will have as much issue attracting and retaining volunteers as those that presently exist. Volunteers are not free bureaucrats.*

Conclusion. I thank the Minister for the opportunity to submit my thoughts on an alternative capability for crisis response.

There is opportunity now for a fresh start to address issues outlined in this submission in order establish an effective, **unified Federal organisation** to replace the State and Territory services that are degrading over time in numbers and capability.

If there is no action or a minimalist approach is taken to addressing this issue, the ADF will continue to be required to assist States and Territories in all but the most minor of emergencies.

A new Federal agency, working towards outcomes outlined in this document and especially focussing on effective and realistic training complemented by making volunteer service 'economic' will, I believe provide the foundation for future, effective emergency response capability.

This will permit the ADF to step aside from disaster response in order to continue to deliver and achieve on their important Commonwealth role.



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19 September 2023