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18/09/2023

National Resilience Division
Department of Home Affairs
PO Box 25
Belconnen ACT 2616

Via: Online Submission

Dear Sir/Madam,

Subject: Discussion Paper on Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

I write on behalf of Disaster Relief Australia (DRA) to provide our insights and recommendations in response to your discussion paper seeking input on enhancing Australia's national-level emergency response capabilities. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the development of policies and strategies that will strengthen our nation's resilience in the face of evolving strategic challenges.

Acknowledging the primary role of states and territories in emergency response, we believe that the Commonwealth has a critical role to play in developing longer-term capacities and capabilities to meet the challenges of the changing strategic environment. To address the questions posed in your discussion paper, we offer our insights and recommendations as follows:

Models that can supplement or support services currently supplied by the ADF

At a national level, there are several key pressure points and challenges for the Commonwealth when responding to competing and concurrent crises. One key challenge is resourcing functions currently performed by the ADF in domestic crises. The 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements identified that the Australian Defence Force (ADF), has finite capacity and capability. While the ADF is proactively postured to support the response to domestic disaster relief, the unprecedented scale, duration, and frequency of ADF support is unsustainable without accepting significant impacts to ADF preparedness for its primary role. The enduring requirement for Defence in responding to more frequent and intense domestic disasters impacts its capacity to conduct specific training, exercises, or deployments.



The Defence Submission to the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience identifies that the establishment of a deployable contingency workforce to support national crisis response and recovery could provide an alternative option to utilising the ADF workforce. DRA seeks to work in partnership with Defence to provide such a workforce. The benefits of the DRA model are twofold. The first is that it will alleviate the impacts to ADF preparedness. The second is that it will provide an additional benefit to Defence by engaging ADF personnel in a civilian organisation ahead of discharge, thereby assisting them with their transition from full time service.

DRA has a history of successfully working alongside the ADF in disaster-affected areas. We have created a disaster relief workforce comprised serving ADF members on leave, transitioning members of the ADF, Defence employees, veterans and first responders.

DRA provides the following capabilities:

- General duties disaster recovery work
- Spontaneous Volunteer management
- Incident management
- Damage and impact assessment
- Aerial damage assessment and mapping
- Debris management and access restoration
- Logistics management and aid delivery
- Work order management
- Expedient home repair
- Building community resilience

These capabilities are increasingly being performed by the ADF, decreasing its capability to support its primary function of defence of the nation. DRA can provide an alternate resource available to the Commonwealth to activate in place of the ADF in disaster recovery.

The ADF is activated under a Defence Assistance to the Civilian Community (DACC) request. Whilst there are differing levels of DACC, **DRA provides a credible alternative to deploying the ADF** at DACC Level 3 (recovery from a civil emergency or disaster, which is not related to the saving of life or property).

The ADF continues to be activated under DACC arrangements because there are few agencies operating in a comparable manner in recovery. DRA's model of deploying veterans and first responders in disaster recovery provides a flexible mechanism by which the latent talent of Australia's veterans can be harnessed to provide an alternative workforce.

DRA can also facilitate decreasing the ADF's time in field once deployed, by providing a workforce for the ADF to handover to. This will allow the ADF to focus on its primary role, whilst critical community support remains in place.



A scalable, efficient, and effective surge capacity workforce, that harnesses the capacity of civilians and volunteers

The Commonwealth should support maintenance of a readily deployable contingent workforce capable of responding quickly to crises. This workforce would ideally consist of already trained volunteers from sectors including the military, veterans and first responders. Developing a surge capacity ensures that additional resources can be mobilized promptly when needed. A latent workforce that can mobilise quickly and efficiently during times of surge need is a model to be considered. A latent workforce must be trained and deployable but may be bolstered to respond to surge needs using non-skilled volunteers who have availability. This hybrid model of a skilled workforce managing volunteers allows for surge in response to demand, as well as a decrease in the deployment of skilled volunteers.

DRA is inherently scalable and can respond to surge capacity, as the organisation has a footprint in every state and territory. The Australian Government has agreed to fund DRA \$38.1 million over three years to support the recruitment, onboarding, and training of an additional 5200 DRA volunteers. DRA's veteran-led operating model provides trained 'boots on the ground', as well as a trained management capability.

DRA is also fast becoming the lead agency in managing "Spontaneous Volunteers". Spontaneous Volunteers are individuals or small groups who are not formally associated with any organisation but self-mobilise to assist community members impacted by disasters.

This type of volunteering has gained traction in recent years with the rise of social media platforms and communications technology, which has given communities greater access to real time information. **If well led, spontaneous volunteers are a significant force multiplier.** If unmanaged, and although well intentioned, there is risk of damage to themselves, to others, and to property.

Spontaneous volunteering is still an underutilised resource in Australia. This is because while many organisations hold large databases of willing volunteers, there are few organisations that can provide the logistics and leadership to deploy them safely on the ground. Similarly, many community groups, individuals who are allocated volunteering days as part of their employment and corporations are willing to contribute to disaster relief efforts but struggle to find a mechanism to do so.

A formal partnership between the NAB Foundation and DRA was announced in September 2023, to support DRA's Spontaneous Volunteer Management capability. NAB Foundation will invest \$1 million over two years to support DRA to grow the organisation's community and corporate volunteer capacity and manage more than 3,000 spontaneous volunteers. NAB will also support DRA operations by engaging NAB's large workforce to volunteer with local communities at critical times of need.

DRA has contributed to NAB's submission on this topic and supports its comments and recommendations.

DRA is well placed to manage Spontaneous Volunteers, as veterans are inherently leadership trained and have proven to be adept at leading Spontaneous Volunteers, corporations, and community groups, including volunteer emergency services organisations in disaster recovery. It is our experience that there is no shortage of volunteers, but rather a lack of infrastructure that allows them to participate how and when they can.

The volunteering landscape is changing. Volunteer numbers have decreased from 19.0 % of the population in 2016 to 14.1% in 2021. Rigid models of volunteering that require regular attendance and training on-site are a contributing factor to this decline. **DRA provides a flexible model of volunteering**, recognising existing skills and experience and allowing members to participate when and where they can. In this way, DRA's management of SV allows a significant surge capacity across the nation in times of need.

Regulatory or policy changes that could be undertaken to make it financially viable for other sectors to contribute to a Commonwealth crisis response capability

Emergency Management regulatory frameworks at both state and federal levels has primarily focused on the response and relief phases of a disaster. Whilst there is need for surge capacity and support at this time, this need is extended throughout the recovery phase.

Inclusion in the Commonwealth Disaster (COMDIS) Plan as a recognised Agency facilitates special leave arrangements for public service employees to volunteer in disaster response. These leave arrangements are not extended to recovery activities, or organisations outside of government that are operating in disaster recovery.

To facilitate greater surge capacity to support recovery efforts, **consideration should be given to the inclusion of private, public, or not-for-profit organisations in emergency management plans at both state and federal level**, who are able to facilitate volunteering opportunities during disaster recovery. Specifically, public service leave arrangements should allow for volunteering leave with these private, public, or not-for-profit organisations. Formal recognition of these organisations against a determined criteria will legitimise their contribution to disaster recovery and provide a lever to access leave arrangements.

Critically, this would allow the Australian Public Service (APS) and corporate Australia to access volunteering leave to deploy with DRA. We have a proven capability of gainfully employing volunteers in a short-term capacity in disaster recovery. DRA's utilisation of volunteers in this manner provides a force multiplier which can be efficiently and effectively stood up as a surge or sustain capability to increase the impact and reach of disaster recovery operations.

As outlined, the challenges of responding to competing and concurrent crises, while maintaining the readiness of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), are significant. DRA presents an alternative model that not only alleviates pressure on the ADF, but also harnesses the latent talent of veterans and first responders to support communities in times of need. Our scalable, efficient, and effective surge capacity workforce, coupled with our management of spontaneous volunteers, is poised to be a force multiplier for Australia's disaster relief and recovery efforts. DRA's flexible model of volunteering recognises the changing landscape of volunteering and empowers individuals and organisations to participate when and where they can, thus addressing the declining trend in volunteer numbers.

By formalising the inclusion of private, public, or not-for-profit organisations in emergency management plans, we can facilitate greater surge capacity during disaster recovery and allow for public service leave arrangements to extend volunteering with these organisations. This approach not only enhances our nation's disaster recovery arrangements, but also encourages corporate Australia and the Australian Public Service to contribute effectively.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Discussion Paper. DRA looks forward to ongoing engagement on this topic.

Yours Sincerely



Geoff Evans
CEO
Disaster Relief Australia