

Submission to review on Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

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The Defence Strategic Review recommended our fighting forces be released from most of their domestic disaster-response role to concentrate on deterring wars and winning them if deterrence fails.

The DSR found that the increasing use of the military for disaster response was negatively affecting its force preparedness, readiness, and combat effectiveness. It said the Australian Defence Force should be the force only of last resort for domestic aid except in extreme circumstances. The Albanese government has accepted this - recommendation.

There still will be occasions when Defence is called on by the states in circumstances when their resources are inadequate or exhausted because of the scale of the disaster event. But the unanswered question is how we improve our civilian disaster response to plug the gap left by the withdrawal of the ADF from all but last-resort missions. Climate

change is resulting in increased frequency and intensity of [natural disaster events](#). We're going to be king hit more often.

The issue is not having enough volunteers show up when the proverbial hits the fan. Retention is also a huge issue in the state volunteer emergency services, even though there are periodic surges of people joining after major disaster events. But the practice of remaining a volunteer for decades is in decline.

We should establish a scheme modelled on the [ADF Gap Year](#) program and create an emergency management volunteer program (EMVP). The gap year program enables 17 to 24-year-olds with a year 12 education to experience segments of ADF training and employment for up to 12 months. There's no obligation to continue their service beyond the year. They're paid about \$70,000 a year.

A total of 718 participants enlisted in last year's program. The gap year program is now established as a key avenue of entry to the ADF, with a high proportion of entrants electing to remain in the permanent or reserve workforces. Since the introduction of the program in 2015, the ADF has retained up to 89 per cent of its gap year participants.

The EMVP should likewise be a one-year program, during which participants work with emergency management organisations in the states and territories, gaining and practising skills applicable in emergencies. It would give people an avenue to volunteer but without demanding a long-term, full-time commitment from them.

It would also introduce a common national approach to the training of emergency volunteers that would enable them to be used cross-jurisdictionally. There's already a model here in Queensland with its [Auxiliary Fire Service](#). Personnel are trained as firefighters and are on callouts. They need to be available at short notice. They get paid when they undergo training and when they're called out.

Under the EMVP, the paid volunteers' main roles would include severe flooding response and post-impact recovery and clean-up, bushfire, and severe storm and cyclone response.

Once they've completed their training, they'd be kept at a high state of readiness, available for immediate deployment within the state or nationally. Some would go on and join state voluntary emergency services or be attracted to serve in full-time emergency service organisations.

The EMVP could start as a pilot program of about 500 applicants in the first year and grow across five years to 1000. If we look at the cost of the ADF Gap Year program, the costs of a pilot EMVP wouldn't be significant. Based on a paper from the federal parliamentary library, the ADF Gap Year scheme cost \$78.7m in 2017-18.

The EMVP should be funded and co-ordinated by the new federal disaster and emergency response agency, the [National Emergency Management Agency](#), in close co-operation with the jurisdictions. Our emergency services include volunteers on top of volunteers on top of volunteers, with only a very thin layer of paid staff. There is nobody in the current structure who could manage hundreds of EMVP people. So resources would need to be provided to the states for a new function to train, direct, and deploy EMVP people.

The sweetener for NEMA would be that those in the EMVP could be sent anywhere in the event of a domestic disaster. It would be a case of federalising our disaster resources. The training curriculum for the paid volunteers in the EMVP could draw upon subjects covered by the state fire and rescue, rural fire service and state emergency services. The paid volunteers would be trained with the necessary generic skills and knowledge to support the jurisdictions.

Defence might also be able to assist in some aspects of training in the EMVP. There's already the Army emergency responder, a soldier in the Royal Australian Engineers. That soldier provides personnel recovery to the forces and combat first aid to the deployed force.

Civil defence roles could also be part of EMVP's program. The DSR stressed that our strategic environment has changed and warning times may be very short. Long-range missile strikes on this country are a possibility. We need some planning on how and what civil defence measures are needed to protect the civil population during conflict and recover from any hostilities. The EMVP volunteers could be trained in civil defence roles such as assisting in evacuation, management of protective shelters, rescue, and emergency accommodation and supplies.

Volunteers aren't complaining types. But sometimes they note that when they go to a fire there are lots of people getting paid (the traffic managers, the cops, the bulldozer contractors, the helicopter pilots, the bulk water tanker contractors, and national parks people). Everybody except the volunteer fireys who are holding the hoses.

There's therefore a risk of an EMVP creating a rift between volunteers who don't get paid and those who do. The EMVP would be there to

support and supplement our volunteers, not replace them. This can be managed by making it clear that the program is designed as a long-term training investment in human capital to respond to more frequent and severe disasters.

To sum up:

1 My proposal for an Emergency Management Volunteer Program is supportive of existing organisations by providing training and by encouraging new volunteers in part by offering a living wage, in part by offering a range of activities to get involved in after training. Any attempt to combine existing organisations will meet strong opposition.

The gap-year cohort is also promising as I think most young people would consider disaster/rescue work more appealing than the ADF gap year.

2 My idea stresses the environmental factor which would appeal to young people. This is not about overemphasising 'climate change', but rather pointing to the floods, fires, storms etc. that need to be dealt with. An environmental focus would also appeal to parents and grandparents of likely volunteers. They are not so much worried about climate change

for themselves but are worried for their children and especially grandchildren.

There is some element of danger in fire-fighting, flood rescue etc which might worry parents and grandparents, but much less so compared with the military. Emergency type dangers, moreover, are much more under control if there is proper training and good management. A manageable element of danger (in a good cause) would be an attraction to many young people.

3 Finally, mixing together at an early-stage volunteers who will go into different organisations later will bring subsequent benefits of greater mutual understanding and cooperation (there is a parallel with the rationale for the Australian Defence Force Academy here). It is a common complaint that the existing different emergency management organisations do not coordinate as well as they could.

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