



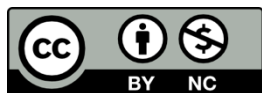
THE ROLE OF PRIVATE RESPONSE ORGANISATIONS IN COMMONWEALTH CRISIS RESPONSE

A response to *Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response* public consultation

DOCUMENT INFORMATION

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Date September 2023

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest. The author has previously been employed by Medical Rescue and is currently employed by Medical Edge Australia.

DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this submission:

“Private response organisations” refers to privately owned companies and organisations that are involved in the delivery of emergency response services, emergency medical services, or healthcare services. Examples include:

1. Emergency response organisations
 - a. Security companies
 - b. Fire/rescue companies
2. Emergency medical organisations
 - a. Aeromedical service providers
 - b. Special operations medical companies
 - c. Event medical providers
 - d. Industrial medical service providers.
3. Other healthcare organisations
 - a. General practice clinics
 - b. Other primary health services
 - c. Non-emergency patient transfer providers
 - d. Allied health services
 - e. Pathology services
 - f. Private hospitals
 - g. Aged care centres.

“Non-government organisations (NGO)” refers to privately owned charities or privately owned not-for-profit organisations.

“Combat organisation” refers to an organisation engaged to provide emergency response services during a crisis or disaster.

FOREWORD

On the 24th of January 2019, I received an emergency activation notice from St John Ambulance. In my role as a volunteer first responder, I was directed to urgently respond to the Huon Valley bushfires to provide emergency support to the local evacuation centre. In less than 12 hours, two others and I were the first wave of medical responders to arrive. I was 16 years old.

On the 22nd of June 2021, I received a call from Medical Rescue requesting additional responders for a COVID-19 vaccination strike team. They were urgently deploying to QLD to vaccinate a rural community, imminently expected to experience an outbreak. 13 hours later, I was on a plane. 24 hours later, I administered my first vaccine. I was 18 years old.

On the 13th of October 2021, I received an email from senior management at Medical Rescue, informing me I was re-tasked from the field to headquarters to assist in the coordination of our COVID-19 taskforce. 24 hours later, I was on a plane. Over the next 6 months, I independently led vaccination strike teams across Queensland. I was 19 years old.

Alongside my health career, I now own and direct a small adventure guiding not-for-profit with the mission of using our commercial income for the good of the community. We are currently planning programs to assist our communities during crises. I am 21 years old.

Disasters have already had a profound impact on my life as a young Australian, and I am privileged to have contributed to response efforts through my engagement with both NGOs and the private response sector. However, during each disaster, our capable involvement is regularly delayed while we try to get the government's attention to say, 'we want to help'.

I assert the changing nature and scope of disasters calls for increased utilisation of the highly capable and well-resourced private response sector. This submission explores private response organisations and their role in crisis response, discusses current engagement and deficits, and proposes mechanisms by which private response organisations can be effectively utilised in times of emergency and disaster.



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INTRODUCTION

It is asserted that the Commonwealth would benefit from expanding the role of private response organisations in Australian crisis response. This submission argues that private response organisations are highly capable, demonstrating a number of unique strengths that complement NGOs and government agencies. Current engagement is briefly explored, with integration into a number of state plans but no integration into Commonwealth arrangements. The benefits of including private sector response organisations are discussed and it is concluded that expanding the involvement of these organisations would be beneficial.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PRIVATE RESPONSE SECTOR

The Australian private response sector is broad and comprehensive. A number of well-managed, resourced, and experienced organisations exist across multiple industries, including healthcare, security, and fire/rescue.

REVIEW OF CAPABILITIES

Private response organisations generally possess strong capabilities, characterised by outstanding operational management systems, a highly competent workforce, and high-quality equipment. A very brief review of select private response organisations is outlined below.

Respond Global | Emergency Medical Organisation

Respond global is a well-respected organisation, with extensive specialist capabilities in emergency medicine and primary healthcare. The organisation's *Capabilities Statement* outlines their capacity to engage in:

- Disaster and Emergency Management
- Public Health and Advisory Services
- Rapid Disaster Response
- Training and Simulations¹

Respond global also maintains a specialist maritime resource to assist in healthcare response.²

Medical Rescue | Emergency Medical Organisation

Medical Rescue is an experienced organisation, with specialist capabilities in complex and austere healthcare response. The organisation offers services in aeromedical retrieval (fixed and rotary wing aircraft), deployable healthcare, remote health facilities, and urgent care centres.³

Aspen Medical | Emergency Medical Organisation

Aspen Medical is a well-respected organisation, with specialist capabilities, experience, and current operations in humanitarian and disaster response, aeromedical retrieval, and healthcare administration.⁴

Wilson Security | Emergency Response Organisation

Wilson Security is a large, multi-faceted, and innovative organisation with a wide array of capabilities in crowd management, facility management, AI technology, and medical services.⁵

Ochre Health | Healthcare Organisation

Ochre health is a high-impact clinical organisation that provides innovative GP and primary healthcare services to communities across Australia. The company maintains capabilities in primary health, health management, and training.⁶

This brief review highlights the resources, capabilities, and expertise of the Australian private response sector. Numerous organisations operate and demonstrate an excellent performance record, including in complex operations response.

COMPARISON TO NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS

NGOs are a key component of emergency and disaster response, both globally and within Australia, and organisations such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army, and St John Ambulance are integral to the Australian service identity. There are many differences between NGOs and private response organisations, with varying strengths demanding engagement in different crisis response capabilities.

Workforce variation is a pertinent point in the comparison between NGOs and private response organisations. The domestic emergency workforce of Australian NGOs is primarily volunteer based. While volunteers are an essential resource, their work is often associated with casual, paraprofessional roles. Further, volunteer rates are declining in Australia.^{7,8} In comparison, private response organisations generally retain a highly skilled and extensively qualified workforce with a mixture of casual, part-time, and full-time frontline employees.

Experience and expertise are a further point to acknowledge. Australian NGOs demonstrate a strong track record of deploying a large number of volunteers to assist in low-complexity functions during disasters. Conversely, Australian private response organisations demonstrate strong competence and experience in prolonged, intensive, and complex emergency operations domestically and internationally. With the changing disaster landscape and increased frequency of severe events, a high level of experience and expertise is called for from professional crisis responders.

Financing is an important factor to explore. Australian NGOs typically rely on donations and grants, with a limited number of commercial activities to generate income. However, funds raised are designated to charitable purposes. In comparison, private response organisations typically rely on commercial activities and investment to generate income, and funds raised can be utilised for personal gain.

This short analysis highlights the complementing strengths of both NGOs and private response organisations. The strengths of NGOs make them well suited to low-complexity crisis operations that demand an empathetic, compassionate, and spontaneous workforce. The strengths of private response organisations make them well suited to complex, prolonged, and intense crisis operations that require highly skilled professional responders.

ENGAGEMENT OF PRIVATE RESPONSE ORGANISATIONS

CURRENT ENGAGEMENT

Private response organisations are currently engaged in crisis response to a limited extent in Australia. Current involvement includes both integration into response planning and arrangements, and a recent history of crisis response.

A number of state plans recognise private response organisations as combat organisations in disaster response. The NSW and Victorian state emergency management plans make specific reference to engaging private response organisations during crises.^{9,10} The South Australian and Northern Territory emergency management plans expand beyond this and name specific private response organisations that can be engaged when required.^{11,12}

In addition are recent contributions to crisis response from private response organisations. COVID-19 presents a pertinent example of this, with states/territories and the federal government engaging a number of private response organisations to assist in the management of COVID-

19.^{13,14} Additionally, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has explored the engagement of private organisations in regional humanitarian aid and disaster response.¹⁵

The current engagement of private response organisations is limited, but scope for engagement is expanding with the developing crisis response landscape. This is characterised by integration into disaster frameworks and recent crisis response engagements.

DEFICITS IN ENGAGEMENT

Despite the national coordination mechanism, key Commonwealth disaster response plans do not identify private response organisations as a resource in disaster response. Neither COMDISPLAN or AUSHEALTHRESPLAN acknowledge private response organisations or identify specific organisations as possible partners in crisis response.^{16,17} This is in contrast to a number of state/territory emergency management plans that specifically identify and name potential partners.

This deficit in strategic-level engagement between the Commonwealth and private response organisations represents a strong opportunity to implement initiatives designed to develop new, and expand existing, partnerships to enhance Commonwealth crisis response capabilities.

THE VALUE OF PRIVATE RESPONSE ORGANISATIONS IN CRISIS RESPONSE

The private response sector presents unique value in crisis response. Similar to government response agencies, private response organisations are highly skilled, professional, and capable. However, private response organisations present additional specific advantages that value-add in the crisis response setting, including adaptability, resource preservation, redundancy, and rapid response capabilities.

Of critical value is the inherent capacity of private response organisations to be incredibly dynamic, flexible, and adaptable – paramount in the fast-paced and unpredictable disaster setting. Due to the private response sector's independence from government administration and the associated bureaucracy, private response organisations can operate without the degree of scrutiny required in public agencies. Further, private response organisations generally maintain a smaller chain of command than public agencies. These factors empower expedited decision making, dissemination of intelligence, planning, and response, allowing for rapid adaptation to the wide scope of unpredictable demands in crisis response. This enhances the performance of private response organisations and can be strategically utilised by government.

Additional value is provided by partial discharge of combat responsibilities to private response organisations through the reduction of impact on government resources and critical services. Disasters and crises can be incredibly resource consuming and can overwhelm capabilities at the state and national level. By discharging part of this non-financial resource consumption to private response organisations, public resources are conserved and can be better positioned to respond to increases in disaster workload, while reducing impact on routine services.

Redundancy is also provided through engagement with private response organisations. Numerous organisations exist, with variation existing across a large range of factors including location, workforce, equipment, operational systems, IT services, policies and procedures, specialist expertise, engagement with financial institutions, and integration with domestic and international economies. This provides significant redundancy, as failure or compromise in one area (e.g., a major cybersecurity incident, economic crisis, or major bushfire) will not necessarily affect other private response organisations with the same capabilities.

Further, private response organisations, incidentally, often maintain the expertise, equipment, and workforce required to effectively undertake crisis response through their ongoing commercial operations. This allows private response organisations to rapidly respond to requests for assistance and integrate effectively into broader response structures with minimal additional work.

This brief discussion of the advantages of private response sector utilisation demonstrates the value of private response organisations in complementing government responses to disaster. It is asserted that private response organisations are a valuable, unique, and important resource in domestic crisis response, and the Commonwealth would benefit from expanding engagement of private response organisations.

INCREASING THE INVOLVEMENT OF PRIVATE RESPONSE ORGANISATIONS

DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PRIVATE RESPONSE ORGANISATIONS

It is asserted that developing and expanding relationships with private response organisations is an important step in enhancing Commonwealth crisis response capabilities. This can be achieved through a wide variety of initiatives and mechanisms, including integration into planning and response arrangements, integration into training and exercises, and the initiation of preliminary engagement of private response organisations.

Formal integration of private response organisations into Commonwealth disaster response arrangements is recommended. This may take the basic form of a procedure outlining the criteria, threshold, and method for engaging private response organisations, or may scale up to include specific service agreements with a number of private response organisations across the country. The scope for innovation in this space is significant.

Integration of private emergency response organisations into interagency disaster training and exercises is recommended. This maximises interoperability, facilitates ongoing relations, and ensures response readiness of private response organisations when required.

Finally, preliminary engagement of private response organisations across a wide array of emergency management responsibilities is recommended. This commences the establishment of relationships and facilitates early interoperability, allowing for effective progression to response partnership.

RAPID RESPONSE MECHANISM

Similar to the national coordination mechanism, it may be beneficial to introduce a mechanism to allow rapid engagement and deployment of private response organisations during crises. This may take the form of a system that notifies private response organisations of a potential, forecast, or immediate need for assistance and calls for a report of available providers, the resources they can contribute, and the forecast cost of their engagement. There is significant scope for innovation, creativity, and ongoing refinement in relation to such a mechanism.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that the Commonwealth would benefit from expanding the role of private response organisations in Australian crisis response. It was asserted that private response organisations are highly capable, with unique strengths that complement the work of NGOs. It was found that private response organisations are identified in a number of state/territory emergency management plans,

but no engagement with the private response sector is outlined in Commonwealth crisis response plans. Private response organisations provide unique value to domestic crisis response, and it would be highly beneficial to expand their involvement.

OFFER OF ASSISTANCE

I note the discussion paper's call for views, ideas, and offers of assistance regarding commonwealth capabilities for crisis response. I express interest in offering assistance consistent with the email accompanying this submission.

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