

Support and Preparedness of Fire and Emergency Services Volunteers

Report 17: August 2015

Objective and Overview

Volunteers are a critical part of the state's response to the fires and emergencies that occur every day. They freely give their time to perform what is often demanding and dangerous work. In return, there is an expectation that volunteers receive appropriate training, equipment and support.

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) is Western Australia's lead hazard management agency and is directly responsible for 1 100 career firefighters as well as about 23 per cent of the state's reported 29 000 fire and emergency services volunteers. The remaining 77 per cent of volunteers fall under the authority of local governments (LG). LGs administer their own Bush Fire Brigades, with support from DFES.

DFES is involved in the recruitment, training and support of all volunteers. However, its level of involvement is less for volunteers that report to LG.

This audit looked at whether DFES is effectively recruiting, preparing and supporting fire and emergency services volunteers. We focused on three lines of inquiry:

- Does DFES effectively recruit and retain fire and emergency services volunteers?
- Does DFES effectively train and equip fire and emergency services volunteers?
- Does DFES provide sufficient support to fire and emergency services volunteers?

Audit Conclusion

Maintaining a sustainable volunteer workforce is a looming issue. Identified errors in DFES' records of volunteer numbers suggest that the actual number is about 20 per cent less than the reported 29 000 members. Compounding this is an upward trend in volunteer turnover, a declining number of volunteer groups, especially in regional areas, and a rising concern about volunteer fatigue.

But since forming in November 2012, DFES has made considerable progress in identifying ways to improve how it recruits, prepares and supports its volunteers. A number of projects should deliver improvements in these areas though many are still in planning or early implementation stages.

DFES rely on local governments to provide it with data about their volunteers but records on volunteer availability, training and attendance at incidents is often inaccurate. As a result, DFES lacks data to identify gaps in volunteer service capability and to inform its recruitment and retention efforts.

Since 2012, DFES has been developing good training programs for volunteers and has made major changes to its professional development branch. However, volunteers are often unable to access training due to limited availability of DFES trainers and assessors and cancellation of training courses.

Volunteers generally had the equipment they needed to perform their roles. However, there is room for improvement in DFES' consultation and engagement with volunteers around equipment decisions.

DFES provide recognition and support services to volunteers but communication around which services are available to volunteers needs to improve. There is a gap in the awareness and understanding about what services are available to both DFES and LG volunteers.



Office of the Auditor General Western Australia

Key Findings

- DFES does not know how many volunteers it needs. It has not assessed the number of volunteers required in specific locations to respond to incidents. Without a clear understanding of this, DFES cannot know if it has gaps in its service capability and the seriousness of those gaps.
- DFES knows that volunteer membership records are inaccurate and that volunteer numbers are about 20 per cent less than the reported 29 000.
- Data trends show that volunteer turnover has been an ongoing issue since 2006, with an annual turnover of around 15 per cent across all services. To address increasing turnover, DFES is developing an Emergency Services Volunteer Workforce Sustainability Strategy. DFES expects to circulate the Strategy by September 2015.
- DFES knows what operational skills its volunteers need and has developed training programs based on this. However, geographic isolation, availability of trainers and assessors, and inaccurate training records affect training delivery. This means, volunteers may not be appropriately skilled to respond to incidents, potentially leading to significant safety risks.
- Almost 82 per cent of the respondents to our statewide survey of volunteers said that they had all or most of the equipment they needed to perform their roles. However, during our site visits a few volunteer groups raised concerns around the suitability of some equipment for their local conditions and delays in getting equipment, particularly personal protective clothing.
- Existing DFES policies do not address volunteer fatigue and as a result, volunteers must self-manage their fatigue. This carries considerable risks when volunteers do not manage their fatigue effectively.
- While volunteers were generally happy with the recognition, counselling, and insurance provided by DFES, some issues exist. Primarily, volunteers and some DFES staff are confused around what services are available to which volunteers.

Recommendations

DFES should continue to implement the major change projects it has in place. It should also:

- within six months:
 - set priorities and begin implementing the Emergency Services Volunteer Workforce Sustainability Strategy
 - consider improved processes for consulting with and engaging volunteers, and continue to work with LGs to improve information sharing and communication.
- within 12 months:
 - improve processes for collecting and maintaining volunteer membership, availability and training records
 - develop volunteer specific policies and procedures, including fatigue management.



Follow us on
Twitter @OAG_WA



Download QR Code Scanner app
and scan code to access more
information about our Office