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To Serve and Protect

Bringing diversity to Australia's emergency services

by Trish Prentice





The author

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Australia has an estimated 250,000 emergency service volunteers.ⁱ They are vital to the country’s capability to respond to emergencies and disasters.ⁱⁱ However, their contribution is under threat.

Australia’s volunteer workforce is shrinking.

Both the number of people involved in formal volunteering and the number of hours individuals are dedicating to these roles have declined in recent years.ⁱⁱⁱ Time pressures on families and increasing work commitments are playing a role,^{iv} along with growing individualism and a decline in altruistic values, according to some.^v For emergency service organisations that rely on volunteers, this is a worrying trend.

These concerns have led to much strategic thinking about how to boost volunteer numbers. Emergency service volunteer ranks have traditionally been filled by “able-bodied, Anglo-Celtic, heterosexual men,”^{vi} with little representation from Indigenous, culturally diverse or LGBTI groups.^{vii} Female volunteer numbers have also been low, due to perceptions of an ‘old boys’ or ‘military’ culture in emergency service organisations.^{viii} Yet these organisations are coming to see that to remain viable and, as some would argue, to operate effectively in their communities,^{ix} they will need to attract and retain a more diversified volunteer pool.

This essay tells the stories of volunteers from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds who have joined the emergency service volunteer ranks. It describes why they joined, what they have gained from the experience (and the challenges), and how their organisations and the broader community have benefited from their service. While numbers of volunteers from diverse backgrounds are still small,^x

these individuals are paving the way for broader institutional change.

Why Australia’s emergency service organisations rely on volunteers

The storm that tore through the eastern suburbs of Melbourne on 9th June 2021 was the most recent in a series of natural disasters that have devastated Australian communities. From the bushfires that ravaged many Australian states in late 2019 and early 2020 to the storms and floods that isolated communities in New South Wales and far North Queensland in early 2021, Australians have continually been reminded of their vulnerability to the power of Mother Nature.

In the midst and aftermath of disasters, communities rely on the assistance of emergency service organisations. First responders provide critical aid to individuals and communities, ensuring public safety, assessing damage or injury, and offering practical, medical and emotional support. The recent Victorian storms sparked more than 5000 calls for help to the State Emergency Service (SES).^{xi} A thousand volunteers were deployed to affected areas and many remain there, working to restore access and essential services to homes and suburbs. Such events remind us how much we rely on these organisations to ensure our communities are safe.

In Australia, emergency service organisations consist of fire and ambulance services, state emergency services, marine rescue, the coast guard and lifesaving organisations.^{xii} These organisations are predominantly volunteer-based,^{xiii} supported by only a small number of career or paid staff.^{xiv} The vastness of the Australian landscape, differences in population density and the unpredictable nature of emergencies make it unfeasible to employ a full contingent of paid emergency workers for every Australian community.^{xv} Volunteers like these give their time and skills freely to ensure that communities have emergency support all day, every day.

The Volunteers

Lidya (Ambulance Victoria)

Born in Ethiopia and Eritrean by background, Lidya, her parents and her three sisters arrived in Australia in 2016. Perhaps it was the experience of growing up as a refugee in Kenya but Lidya always knew she wanted to work in the medical field. While her parents wanted her to become a doctor, in Australia Lidya decided to pursue a different direction—nursing.

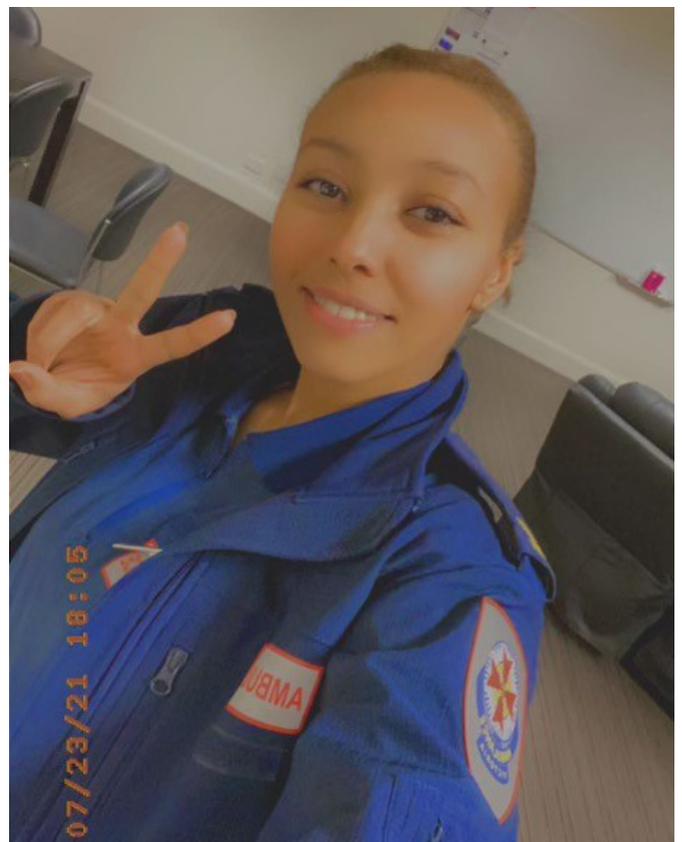
She completed her diploma, confident that it would lead to work or further studies but that wasn't the case. She also did some studies in pathology but hit the same barriers to going forward.

In 2019 things turned around for Lidya. One of her first goals upon arriving in Australia was to learn to swim. Her youth worker had enrolled her and her sisters in a Life Saving Victoria (LSV) swimming program. Lidya embraced the opportunity, hoping to become a lifeguard. While she did not become a strong enough swimmer to reach that goal, the LSV program opened up a pathway for her to become involved in a joint program with Ambulance Victoria where she, along with others, could train to be an Ambulance Community Officer (ACO).

After completing some interviews and undertaking

theory and practical training, Lidya was deployed to regional Victoria—to coastal Anglesea—as an ACO.^{xvi} Each fortnight she travels an hour and twenty minutes to do her rostered shifts in the town, working on a call-out basis as a first responder, providing early intervention, first aid and support to local paramedics. Although she is the only person from her cultural background in the town, Lidya doesn't find it uncomfortable. People are genuinely curious. "A lot of people ask questions about my background or my name," she says. "My culture and religion are so different to what is here. They ask me so many questions but it has been very welcoming. They are very interested in me." She has also found the Anglesea ACO team very welcoming.

While her family were initially confused about why she wanted to be a volunteer, they have come to see it as important for her future career. While there is a strong tradition of volunteering in Eritrean culture, it is mainly informal, with people dedicating their time to serve the church. For Eritreans, religion and culture are strongly intertwined, governing the ebb



and flow of life and daily decision making.

Lidya has grown in confidence since becoming a volunteer. She’s learned to communicate with people of different backgrounds — skills she will use in her future nursing. The role has brought a new dimension to her life and thinking, as well as new practical skills like driving an ambulance. It has helped her acculturation, giving her the opportunity to adapt to different accents. “People in Melbourne have a particular accent when they are speaking,” she says, “but it’s different in regional areas, in Ballarat, in Anglesea. It used to take me a few seconds to understand what people were saying. But I am getting used to it now.”

Lidya recognises there are barriers to people volunteering in the emergency services (and in general). “People are getting busier with family, school and other things. It is difficult to find the time.” Some people from different cultural backgrounds find communicating in English difficult or lack confidence to do it. Lidya reflects, “I was fortunate to have learned English in Kenya but people who learn it from scratch here might find it harder.” However, there are opportunities for reaching out to different cultural communities, including her own. “Go to the migrant resource centres or

multicultural centres. Go to where the communities are. Reach out to community leaders. That’s a starting point” Lidya says.

For Lidya, diversity amongst the volunteers is valuable and essential:

The differences make it beautiful. Different faces, different accents, different mentality, different ways of thinking. Everyone brings something different.

Ramzi (Life Saving Victoria)

Many pivotal moments in Ramzi’s life have involved water. When he was 16 years old he came to Australia by boat as an asylum seeker from Afghanistan. Travelling alone, he was conscious, during those long days and nights on the water, that he didn’t know how to swim. In Australia he got into trouble whilst swimming at a pool. One day Life Saving Victoria (LSV) came to his school and invited students to take part in a water safety program. It was the first time he realised that water was not only dangerous, it could be fun.

With the support of LSV, Ramzi started taking swimming lessons. It took him a year, practising three times a week at the local pool, until he’d mastered it. With his newly acquired swimming skills



he became a volunteer surf lifesaver. For Ramzi, the role was not just about ensuring people were safe in or near water. He was a teenager in a new country without close support, and the surf lifesaving club became like family to him. It helped him learn the language, understand the culture and make the transition into Australian life.

Ramzi has been a surf lifesaving volunteer for about seven years and is passionate about his work. His club, Bon Beach, hosts many water safety education programs delivered by LSV to teach young people from multicultural backgrounds how to be safe around water. If they are interested, they can go on to train as volunteer surf lifesavers at Bonbeach. LSV partners with many language schools and community groups who support new arrivals to Australia, and work with students from high schools in lower socio-economic areas. Many young people they train come from families who have never learned to swim. “The parents are often scared to have their children around water,” Ramzi says. “They don’t want their children to be put in a situation where they are vulnerable.”

Ramzi is challenging some of the barriers to volunteering. In many communities, formal volunteering is uncommon, which is the case in the Afghan community. “People just don’t work for free,” he says. Ramzi’s journey as a volunteer has led him to a position of leadership—in LSV as Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator and in the Afghan community as someone who is looked up to. While this later role was perhaps incidental to his journey, it is no less important. “People value role models,” he says. When people in the Afghan community see him succeed, they take notice and come to him for advice. They refer their friends and family members to LSV programs and the young people go back to their schools and friends and talk about the program. This brings more people to LSV and encourages them to participate in the programs.

Ramzi believes role models are crucial for young people in his community. Without this form of leadership and guidance they struggle to settle, to transition. “They don’t know who to go to... and they may not listen.” For Ramzi and other young arrivals like him, volunteering has provided not only skills, structure and a place to put their energy. It has helped them find a place to belong.

Ahmad (Country Fire Authority)

Outside his local halal kebab shop, Ahmad saw a poster seeking CFA recruits. He’d come to Australia from Sri Lanka as an international student and was keen to make ‘Australian’ friends, to learn more about the culture and to feel more integrated. Being part of the CFA looked like fun. The recruitment poster featured refugees and showed that anyone was welcome to join, so in 2017 he signed up. “I was



attracted to the adrenaline, the lights and sirens,” he says. “We don’t have anything like this back home. I wanted to put back into the community.”

Four years later, as a member of the Narre Warren CFA brigade, Ahmad tries to go to as many callouts as possible outside his work hours. The brigade attends house and industrial fires, car accidents and other types of rescues. Ahmad has fought a number of bushfires. The 2019 Gippsland fires was a time he’ll never forget:

I was deployed for five days to East Gippsland. It was different. It was scary. We were all anxious but also ready and prepared to fight the fire and help the community. Everyone got together. There were donations of food for the firefighters. Local businesses provided free food. Everyone helped each other. As much as that time was difficult and scary, I think back to it. We got messages from around the world. I learned a lot. We went there and did what we were supposed to do.

Ahmad says his work as a volunteer “is awesome for a graduate, for getting into the workforce, for learning how to deal with stakeholders. You start off learning skills that are accredited, things like first aid and firefighting skills, then you learn a whole

lot of soft skills like communication, working under pressure, working in a team. These go hand in hand with the technical skills you gain. They are both things you need in a workplace.”

Ahmad knows a few other Muslims in the CFA and a few other ‘people of colour.’ He says this has been helpful for drawing others in:

People don’t know if they can join. They are quieter and more laid back. They don’t make the effort to inquire. When you have people from different backgrounds it’s easier for people from those cultures to approach them and ask questions. People have been able to have conversations with me about what it’s like.

For Ahmad, having people like him from different cultural backgrounds in the brigade is crucial for the recruitment process. His brother has even joined. That’s part of CFA’s recruitment strategy, he says. “If you have one family member join you can draw in other family members as well. It helps break down those barriers.”

Barb (Country Fire Authority)

Barb, of polish background, says she is no longer a



“spring chicken.” Hesitantly admitting she falls into the 60–70-year-old range, she says she thought about joining the CFA for a long time before she did. Barb lives in the Dandenong Ranges, about 50 kilometres from Melbourne’s CBD. While a major fire hasn’t come through the hills in the 10 years since she’s been there, she is aware of the risk. Fire moves with frightening speed. The more people who can be mobilised to fight it, the better for everybody.

When Barb accepted a volunteer role in the CFA she envisioned working behind the scenes. Providing food or drink for those out firefighting and offering other forms of relief. The kinds of tasks she felt people like her could do so others could concentrate on doing the physically demanding emergency work—arguably the ‘real’ work of emergency service volunteering—or at least that’s the perception.

Like other CFA volunteers, she had to complete certain modules of compulsory training. These included elements of the firefighting course, such as tree hazard awareness and safety on the fire ground. She completed the training thinking it would help her to understand firefighters’ needs when they are physically engaged and on the job. But the CFA encouraged her to continue. Living in the hills, Barb had the advantage of being nearby if there was an

emergency. Most other volunteers work full time and it can take them some time to respond to call-outs on the ridge.

Three years later, Barb is PPC Officer (quartermaster) of her brigade. She manages and distributes the protective clothing and gear that is critical for firefighters to do their job. She also has a range of emergency skills she never thought she would have. She can direct traffic, clear a field so a helicopter can land, hose down an oil spill and set up emergency lights. She can also clean gear and restock fire trucks. While there are a range of physical skills where she will never be on par with others, she knows her contributions make a difference. She relieves others from these tasks so they can concentrate on demanding physical work.

Being a CFA volunteer has enriched Barb’s life. She says she’s continually learning and keeping her mind and body active. She loves the social element, meeting new people, “the sense of mateship that comes from people relying on each other, from putting their lives into each other’s’ hands.” The bonds of trust and respect they’ve developed in the brigade run deep. They need them to keep the team safe, to keep each other safe.



Zulfi (State Emergency Services)

Zulfi joined the SES because, coming from Afghanistan at war, he was mindful of what Australia had given to him. He wanted to give something in return. He said to himself, “Let’s do something for these people.” So he did.

Four years into his service Zulfi has been involved in many emergencies, from road accidents to fallen trees. He also fought the 2019 Gippsland fires in Victoria, and has taken part in missing person searches. These memories stay with him.

I’ve done a lot of missing person searches. Sometimes the outcomes are not so great but when you get a good outcome it’s fantastic. I’ve had times when I’ve found someone and the family have come and hugged me. In those times I feel like I’ve done something for the country. I’ve helped someone from here.

Most SES units are not culturally diverse, but Zulfi’s in Greater Dandenong is one of the most diverse in the state. Its 45 members speak 16 languages. Members use this cultural capital in their volunteer recruitment drives, asking people in their own language to join the SES. Zulfi has found that people in the Afghan community value this approach. “When we are speaking in their language, they ask, ‘How did you get into that? What do you do?’ They are interested in how I am giving back to the community.” He also says it creates trust. “If they see someone like me, they see an idol, they want to be like me.” It’s led to others becoming involved.

“It’s very good for us, an opportunity to work with local people, participate in local events and better understand local culture and society. There is always something to learn.”

Yet Zulfi knows there can be barriers to getting involved. He found the application process difficult because of the language on the application form. But the unit helped him. “They broke down the process into smaller segments,” he says.

Zulfi says being part of the SES has changed his life. He’s developed new skills — not least, how to use a chain saw. He’s expanded his social group, meeting a range of people from different backgrounds, many of whom have become friends. But giving back to the community — “that’s the best bit for me.”

Jing (St John Ambulance)

Jing came to Australia from China in 2013 as an international student with a medical background and found out about St John Ambulance after she arrived. Hoping to practise her medical skills, gain new experience and meet new people, she first applied to St John in 2017, but she wasn’t accepted. “There was a group interview. My English wasn’t good and I didn’t talk much. So I failed the interview. I was a foreigner and it was my first time doing a group interview. I didn’t know how to perform.”

Yet she was determined to join and applied again the following year, moving through the recruitment process to be appointed as a first aider. Since then, she has been sent out to assist at various events, from corporate competitions and annual conferences to large scale events at AAMI Park.

Being a volunteer with St John has added another dimension to Jing’s medical training. Compared to working at the hospital, it provides different insights into medical practice and a different cohort of people to work with and for. “If I go to events, I go with a different event team. I am learning to work with different people from different backgrounds. I am also learning how to do assessments in an emergency situation, who to contact, how to communicate and how to prioritise tasks.”

Jing says she values the people she has met as a volunteer. While some have a medical background, others are members of the community just willing to help. “There are ladies in their 50s. They have the patience to learn new things.” She doesn’t know any other volunteers from a Chinese background.

Although some events can be boring if they don’t have cases to respond to, Jing sees great value in volunteering. “As a foreigner, it’s very good for us, an opportunity to work with local people, participate in local events and better understand local culture and society. There is always something to learn.”

Vivek (State Emergency Services)

Vivek had his first experience with emergency services when a tree fell on his car in a storm. He had

no idea that an organisation existed that could come to his assistance, let alone one that relied on the “selfless” contributions of volunteers. “There aren’t volunteer-based emergency services like the SES in India,” he says. Vivek decided to become involved. He had spare time on weekends; volunteering would enable him to use it productively and make new friends.

For an international student, the process wasn’t straightforward. He contacted one unit but was uncertain whether he could join because he wasn’t a permanent resident. Later, he applied through a recruitment drive at his university. He did an induction and was assigned to a unit.

Five and a half years later, Vivek still serves as a first responder. Even though he works full time, he dedicates 20 to 30 hours per week to volunteer service. The experience has changed him. He’s learned skills, like driving a heavy gauge truck under full lights and sirens, he never imagined he would have. He’s developed new interpersonal skills, like how to listen carefully, vital in an emergency. His leadership skills have also grown. He’s learned how to make decisions under pressure and how to decide on a course of action on the spot.

Volunteering has enriched Vivek’s life. He loves the feeling that comes from helping people. But



there are also challenges. “Some accident scenes are pretty awful to witness and it’s difficult to see people in distress,” he says. He’s had to learn to control his emotions; to concentrate on the task at hand.

Some in Vivek’s community don’t understand why he gives his time for free. “They think it’s a waste of time,” he says. Yet many see how he’s benefited from the experience. A couple of friends have decided to join too. He’s found that most Australians are positive about his involvement. “They often have the misconception we are paid for our work but when they realise we are volunteers they want to know more, particularly about why I got involved.” They often ask about his cultural background, too.

What Vivek thinks about with most pleasure is being able to help the community in small ways. One stormy night he was called to help an elderly Italian man whose roof was leaking. The man was so grateful he invited the unit to stay for dinner, and cooked them pizza in a wood fired oven. Vivek saw the smile on this man’s face and went home happy.

Mohammad (St John Ambulance)

Mohammad arrived in Australia from Bangladesh in 2004 as an international student. He soon joined the Red Cross, serving for five years as a volunteer and five more as a paid employee. In 2005 he also joined the SES as a volunteer and served for 10 years. In 2008, he joined the Australian Army Reserve and in 2013 he joined St John Ambulance, where he still serves today. He has volunteered as an emergency service worker around Australia in response to flood and fire emergencies. While he now works full-time as a PSO Sergeant in the Victorian Police, he still volunteers 6 to 8 hours per month as a community transport driver with St John Ambulance. He has been involved in the COVID response, driving patients who have tested positive to quarantine. He was also deployed to the Gippsland fires as a volunteer with St John Ambulance.

Volunteering has helped Mohammad find what

he is good at, and learn things about himself he did not know. “It’s opened up so much for me,” he says. He’s grown in empathy, in understanding and connecting with other people. Learning how to deal with people in a crisis has made him more resilient. He’s also received valuable training, and grown in his leadership skills. He sees himself as a leader.

Yet, it hasn’t always been an easy journey. “Knowing myself was the first challenge, then knowing what I was able to offer.” He had to be brave and to find courage to overcome challenges. Yet he is proud of his achievements. “It’s given me the drive to promote and advocate for others so they can be empowered and motivated to do what I have done. I can tell them how it will shape them as a person, how volunteering can benefit you.”

Mohammad thinks that Australia is unique in giving people the opportunity to volunteer. “How many countries offer this? To have the opportunity to learn so much for free. To serve the community and the nation.” But he acknowledges that some will face hurdles to getting involved. “You have to have the passion or at least the personal connection to do it.”

Mohammad feels privileged to serve:

Every event you go to has volunteers involved in it.



“We are all people and all need to be treated equally but because of differences in culture, our diversity and our individuality, we need to be able to adapt.”

These people are giving their time to the community to help people out. It resonates with what our nation is made of.

We can all make a difference.

Does diversity matter?

Emergency service organisations are grappling with Australia’s cultural and religious diversity. Strategic thinking about how to draw on this human capital and how such engagement can lead to better outcomes in emergencies is underway. Yet there has been some resistance to change.

A program initiated some years ago highlights some of these barriers.

In 2000, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia (FESA) decided to host a series of workshops for staff on understanding Islam. One local unit wanted to talk to new arrivals from Somalia, Sudan, Iraq and Afghanistan about emergency services and hazards but were unsure how to go about it without being “clumsy.”^{xvii} Unit members, wanting to build relationships with Muslim community leaders to deliver safety messages, decided to circulate an expression of interest to gauge how many staff might attend professional development to improve their understanding of Islam. The organisers didn’t expect the backlash. Emails challenged the need for the activity, since ‘standard operating procedures’ (SOPs) were applied equally to all people, irrespective of nationality, race or religious beliefs.’^{xviii} Other staff said, “Why do I need to know anything about someone’s religious beliefs? I am saving lives — I treat everyone the same.” Another said, “Firefighters deal with all people equally. Nationality, race or religious beliefs

do not affect our SOP’s...all the public we come into contact with deserve to be, and in fact are, treated the same.”^{xix}

The question of when and how cultural diversity or difference might play a role in emergency service work is controversial. Some believe it plays little role because individuals are treated equally in an emergency — preserving life takes precedence above all other considerations. Others believe cultural considerations should be taken into account in an emergency response. One of these is Jared Taylor, Executive Director of the Queensland State Emergency Service Volunteer Association and a long serving Queensland SES volunteer:

We are all people and all need to be treated equally but because of differences in culture, our diversity and our individuality, we need to be able to adapt. We need to be able to treat our cultures slightly differently, because they are all different.

As an example of this, in some cultures it is not appropriate for men to be left alone with women. Whether we agree or disagree with that is not for us to determine. But to be able to reach those parts of our community we need to have an understanding of that because at the end of the day we still want these people to receive help and to get on the flood boat and be evacuated.

There are some communities that are very focused on their elderly and their wellbeing. We need to have systems and processes in place that allow us to understand that and to assist those cultures.

Likewise, language is also important. We don’t all speak English. We need to be able to adapt to differences so we can provide assistance. We can’t

expect in a time of crisis for everyone to all of a sudden speak the same language, that's not a reality.

We are all unique, we are all diverse, we are all individuals, and in order to reach individuals we have to adapt accordingly.

Some volunteers can cite times when the cultural capital they brought to an emergency situation did affect the outcome. Ahmad can recall two callouts where his Sri Lankan cultural background helped. One was a car accident involving Sri Lankans. Ahmad says they were immediately drawn to him: "They started speaking in Sinhalese and asking me questions." The other was a house fire involving a Sri Lankan family. The family felt comfortable speaking to him and through their conversation, Ahmad was able to convey information back to the fire captain. Similarly, Vivek says people who share his Indian background feel able to approach him easily and to ask him questions.

Whether cultural capital might lead to better emergency service outcomes is intrinsically linked to the question of what level of diversity should be

present in the emergency service volunteer ranks. If diversity can or does make a difference, it must exist amongst those who are active in an emergency.

The volunteers agree. Jing says, "Australia has people from lots of different backgrounds so it's good for organisations to have people working there from different backgrounds... They can understand patient needs better."

For some cultural groups, seeing someone visibly 'like them' in the emergency services doesn't just help smooth their interactions or make communication easier. Some communities face big barriers to engaging with emergency service workers. Zulfi says: "In the Afghan community, if someone sees a cop they get scared. They think something is wrong. But when they see me it's a different story."

Chevra Hatzolah, an emergency response team for Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust survivors, was established for this reason. Many elderly members of the Jewish community were reluctant to seek medical help because of a residual fear of



people in uniform. Established in 1994, the team, predominantly operated by volunteers, still meets the “cultural, religious and emotional needs” of Melbourne’s Jewish community.^{xx} Yet given growing demand for paramedic services, Chevra Hatzolah serves all people in its catchment area in partnership with Ambulance Victoria.

Competing priorities

Another debate within emergency services turns on whether seeking greater diversity in the volunteer ranks is the most important need at the moment. Given declining volunteer numbers, should organisations focus on recruiting diversity or on bolstering volunteer numbers in general?

Barb believes it’s not a person’s background that should determine whether they are chosen:

It always strikes me that if the person standing before you has something to give, is suitable and is willing and is a good fit in terms of the culture, then go for it. It doesn’t matter if you are blue, green or purple, or if you believe this, that or another thing, or if you eat snails for breakfast. If you can give something and it fits, and if the thing you are trying to fit into is comfortable and good, then what is stopping you?

A strong advocate for volunteering, Barb believes a person’s motivation is the crucial factor:

Everyone can do a little bit and every little bit counts. I don’t think an individual can change the world but an individual can add a drop of water and if enough drops of water fall, then something happens.

While Jing acknowledges the value of diversity, like Barb, she believes it shouldn’t be the first priority:

People have skills, regardless of their cultural background. If they want to help and have the skills to help, then it is good to have the person in the organisation. It doesn’t matter which culture a person comes from.

Mohammad agrees: “Volunteering should be open to everyone. We don’t need to categorise. We need to be open. There should be more campaigning to encourage people in general to volunteer.”

Challenges

Organisations face further challenges in increasing the diversity of their volunteers. They need to have the right environment to foster inclusion. Serving staff and volunteers may need training to expand their understanding of relevant cultural norms or potential barriers to inclusion. There needs to be a welcoming culture^{xxi} so that volunteers feel accepted and part of the organisation. The additional support that volunteers from diverse cultural backgrounds may need will take time and resources from organisations that are already stretched. Razi explains this dilemma:

Inclusivity is great for the community, but not everyone is capable of fostering that inclusion. There needs to be a process or strategy to achieve it. Then you need to hold the volunteers’ hands and tell them what to do. You need to communicate and support them step by step. LSV has developed a mentoring system for this. A lot of organisations

“Organisations face further challenges in increasing the diversity of their volunteers. They need to have the right environment to foster inclusion.”



struggle because they assume. Assumptions can ruin the process and the strategy and cause it to fail. For example, setting a meeting at 5pm and emailing recruits to invite them. They may not necessarily understand the message and if they do, they might forget. So you need to give them a call—a month before, a week before, a day before. You need to explain your obligations and theirs again and again so it's in their mind.

There are always 5 or 10 percent of recruits who are not motivated or as organised as they should be, and they don't stay. But you've tried your best. You know you've held their hands and taken them through every step necessary. The investment in volunteers will take multiple years. The achievement is not only how long you can keep them in the club but the invaluable settlement outcomes they achieve along the way.

Organisations also need to be aware that volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds have a range of different reasons for pursuing voluntary work. Some seek to serve the community; others hope to gain particular skills, to get a head start in their vocation or to expand their social circle. Still, others are motivated by altruistic, cultural or religious values that put the service of others first. Understanding

what draws volunteers to an organisation is important for meeting their needs and will contribute to their effectiveness and retention. From his time at LSV, Ramzi knows this to be true:

Just volunteering is not enough. People want to develop through the process—English skills, lifesaving skills, learning the culture. These give people things to look forward to, to aim for.

Lack of confidence in spoken or written English may mean the application process for volunteers needs to be adapted. Many may never have experienced a group interview and might need support to understand how to navigate its dynamics or how to show their strengths and capabilities amongst others. There may be confusion about how a person's visa status may impact their ability to volunteer, and the hours they can commit to the organisation. There may also be different cultural understandings about how volunteering works. Mohammad says this was a hurdle for him: "The biggest challenge was understanding what volunteering means. It means not being paid. That was a challenge."

Looking forward

Emergency service organisations looking to recruit more religiously or culturally diverse volunteers might do best to start with the cultural capital that already exists within the organisation. If volunteers know no one else from their cultural background in the organisation, it could be a missed opportunity. Each volunteer brings social, educational or professional networks that could facilitate broader recruitment. Could their story be used to encourage others from a similar cultural background to join? Word of mouth is a powerful medium.^{xxii} Hearing about an organisation from a friend, relative or another social contact is often perceived as a “more credible and trustworthy source of information” than a brochure or poster.^{xxiii} Current volunteers may have knowledge or experience about how to engage their community. An “understanding of values, community structures and... pathways for communication”^{xxiv} can all be drawn on to encourage further volunteering within their communities.

It is clear there is significant interest among international students in emergency service volunteering. A number of these volunteers first came to Australia as students and became volunteers in an attempt to acculturate and gain practical and vocational skills. How could this interest be tapped into to encourage more to become involved?

For volunteers like Razi, cultural diversity is crucial for emergency service work. “People from different backgrounds can bring brilliant ideas. Having diversity complements the organisation. It also provides an outlet for engagement in the community.” Others agree. They argue that emergency service organisations that do not engage are missing out on the benefits of “innovation and

productivity” that diversity brings. Homogeneity fails to take into account the “breadth of capability, knowledge and perspective that exists within the community.”^{xxv}

In the face of disasters and emergencies, communities need to band together, then work together towards recovery. Emergency Management Victoria says the emergency management sector can “lead and encourage this cohesion, through embracing diversity within its own organisations, openly reaching out to diverse groups in the community, delivering services that meet the needs of the whole community, and positively influencing change more broadly.”^{xxvi} By becoming more inclusive and diverse, emergency management organisations will strengthen their connection to the communities they serve.^{xxvii}

These volunteers provide powerful examples of how individuals from different backgrounds can work together. Through their service, they are not only making a tangible contribution to Australia but paving the way for others from culturally or religiously diverse backgrounds to get involved in emergency service volunteering. While emergency service organisations face genuine challenges as they seek to become more representative, the benefits of tapping into Australia’s cultural resources will set them up to meet Australia’s emergency and disaster response needs into the future.

There is clear interest in emergency service volunteering amongst individuals from culturally and religiously diverse backgrounds. Those already involved in service are a testimony to this. As Mohammad says:

We are proud to serve and protect.

“People from different backgrounds can bring brilliant ideas. Having diversity complements the organisation. It also provides an outlet for engagement in the community.”

Notes

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- vi Emergency Management Victoria, “The Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework: Respect and Inclusion for All.” (2016) <https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/DiversityAndInclusion> (last accessed 11 July 2021), 10.
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- xii Calcutt, “Emergency Service Volunteering”, 1.
- xiii McLennan, “Issues Facing Australian Volunteer-Based Emergency Services Organisations”, 4.
- xiv Ibid.
- xv Ibid.
- xvi ACOs are voluntary positions, however they are paid for call outs
- xvii Farida Fozdar and Karen Roberts, “Islam for Fire Fighters – A Case Study on an Education Program for Emergency Services.” (2010) 25(1) *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 49.
- xviii Ibid 49-50.
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