

Fact Sheet

Volunteers during disaster and emergency events

Community Response

An emergency or disaster event will trigger a range of coordinated responses and services from both government and non-government agencies and organisations. In addition, there is usually a groundswell of support from the broader community, which triggers generous offers of time, goods and resources.

Many individuals will be responding spontaneously to the situation, without specific training or affiliation with an emergency service organisation. These Spontaneous Volunteers can provide an invaluable resource at a time when the responding agencies are stretched beyond day to day capacity. Local Spontaneous Volunteers can also contribute invaluable local knowledge and experience.

Spontaneous Volunteers also bring challenges for emergency service agencies who may need to manage an influx of largely untrained volunteers who are keen to contribute to the response effort, but may have unrealistic expectations of their contribution.

Emergency and disaster events can also trigger generous offers of material and in kind donations. Overwhelming volumes of often unneeded and inappropriate donations of goods and services can add further challenges to those agencies in the front line.

It is recognised that a lack of critical planning, coordination and management of Spontaneous Volunteers and in-kind donations represents a risk to the impacted community, to the urgent work of emergency services organisations as well as a risk to the Volunteers themselves.

The following sections discuss some of the ways in which this risk can be minimised, and the Spontaneous Volunteers can be best utilised in emergency and disaster response.

Managing Spontaneous Volunteers

If your organisation is involved in an emergency or disaster response and recovery situation that includes the need for Spontaneous Volunteers and donations of goods and services some of the issues and procedures you should consider include:

Engaging and Screening

As Spontaneous Volunteers will not have completed the standard screening and training procedures, it is important that risk management strategies are in place. If spontaneous volunteers are to be deployed in an emergency situation, ensure that:

- you have a trained and experienced Volunteer Manager to engage, manage and direct Spontaneous Volunteers
- personal identification is sighted for all spontaneous volunteers
- a standard registration process is in place, recording: the volunteers personal details (name, address and contact details); skills and trade qualifications; relevant experience; availability; pre-existing medical conditions; existing volunteering affiliations; the types of tasks they could undertake; and any current, police or working with children checks that are in place (evidence of which may be required immediately or at a later time)
- there is a public communication strategy which clearly describes the process for registering to volunteer in incidents of emergencies or disasters. This should be on your website and at any point of contact for the public.
- evidence of the relevant, current trade registration is provided where Spontaneous Volunteers could be assigned to undertake specialist tasks.

Assigning and managing

To make the best use of your Spontaneous Volunteers, ensure that:

- tasks assigned to Spontaneous Volunteers are of a generalist nature such as general clean-up, debris removal etc, and can be undertaken within a short space of time. Spontaneous Volunteers are not usually deployed to high risk activities.
- all Spontaneous Volunteer activity is supervised and volunteers receive appropriate briefings so that all activities are carried out as required
- tasks do not involve direct, unsupervised contact with people impacted by the emergency or disaster
- Spontaneous Volunteers sign in and out after each shift
- authority, a government agency or an organisation to which they are assigned
- Spontaneous Volunteers are acknowledged for their contribution
- Spontaneous Volunteers are informed about alternative volunteering opportunities.

Safe practice

The safety and wellbeing of the volunteers is paramount. Ensure that Spontaneous Volunteers are:

- well supervised, equipped and briefed on the situation on a daily basis
- fully briefed on the tasks they will be required to undertake and when and to whom they should report
- aware of the importance of taking care of their own safety including adhering to shift times, taking regular breaks and consuming adequate food and water
- provided with adequate and appropriate protective clothing, where needed
- appropriately de-briefed
- covered under your insurance or that insurance for Spontaneous Volunteers is covered by the local government authority

Managing expectations

Australians have demonstrated their willingness to lend a hand and help others in times of emergency and disaster, and may have an expectation that their offer of assistance will be vital to the emergency response and recovery. In reality, some situations require trained and skilled teams and general assistance from the public is not suitable and may even hinder the operation. At other times, accommodating and managing large numbers of untrained Spontaneous Volunteers can be beyond the capacity of the emergency responders.

Following natural disasters, there are generally many offers from the general public to provide household goods, clothing, food, accommodation etc. Experience has shown that the offers may exceed the demand, and in some cases the offers are simply not suitable for the circumstances.

Managing the public's expectations in relation to offers of time, goods and/or services is essential and Spontaneous Volunteers should be dealt with efficiently and appropriately. If their assistance is not required then this should be clearly explained and their offer of support acknowledged.

To help influence the public's expectations, organisations are encouraged to consider educating the community and media around emergency and disaster phases, structures, practices, roles, and how people and organisations can help. Organisations are also encouraged to develop consistent, clear messaging to help understanding, awareness and the management of expectations. Disaster and emergency response is focused on helping those affected, and not on the expectations of Spontaneous Volunteer or their willingness to help.

Follow up

- don't forget to thank all Spontaneous Volunteers.
- the experience Spontaneous Volunteers gain through their involvement in even one incident is invaluable. A follow up can provide an opportunity to register them formally so that they can be called upon in the future.
- follow up on screening and police check records to ensure that this information is also recorded in the event of future involvement of these volunteers.

Volunteering WA's role

Ongoing involvement

Volunteering WA is a member of the State Welfare Emergency Committee (SWEC) which is tasked with bringing together government agencies and non-government organisations to assist with the coordination of state-wide welfare requirements arising from an emergency or disaster situation.

Volunteering WA is also a member of the State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) Community Engagement Sub-committee, tasked with providing specific expertise to report to and assist SEMC to focus on strategising, organising and overseeing the coordination and continuous improvement of emergency management in Western Australia. This includes:

- promoting shared understanding and responsibility across whole of government and the wider community
- establishing an emergency management framework based on a risk management approach
- promoting preparedness for emergencies to minimise their impact and accelerate recovery
- providing advice to government on any matter in relation to emergency management.

Before, during and after emergencies and disasters, Volunteering WA supports community mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

At times of emergency or disaster

When called upon, and where appropriate, Volunteering WA assists with the recruitment, screening, management, training and retention of Spontaneous Volunteers; community mitigation (reducing both risk and impact to the community); and longer term recovery. Volunteering WA also assists with the management of material and in-kind donations at times of emergency and disaster.

Volunteering WA can provide much support immediately following an emergency or disaster. When Volunteering WA services are activated:

- Spontaneous Volunteers can register their interest via the VWA website or the 1800 number
- information obtained via the Volunteering WA website and the 1800 number is shared with emergency response organisations who can then contact the individuals as and when required
- regular information and status updates are provided to authorised emergency services agencies and impacted local government authorities.

During the recovery phase of emergencies and disasters, Volunteering WA continues as required to support impacted communities through the State Welfare Emergency Committee and their local government authorities.