

# Planning for an uncertain future: future scenarios for emergency volunteering in Australia

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November 2022



Towards a  
**National Strategy  
for Volunteering**



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# Planning for an uncertain future: future scenarios for emergency volunteering in Australia

Dr Blythe McLennan<sup>1</sup>

*The key problem faced in preparing for future disasters is a problem of imagination. It is a problem embedded in the stories we tell about what we imagine might happen.*

Sutton et al., 2019, abstract

## Key insights

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- At the time of this study in 2019 and 2020, four broad, important trends were widely expected by stakeholders to shape any potential future scenarios for emergency volunteering in Australia: 1) broad shifts in the way people volunteer and the way volunteers are coordinated, 2) changing community and government expectations of emergency management, the voluntary sector and volunteers, 3) demographic and community change, and 4) climate change and rising hazard exposure.
- Three other important areas of change were expected to shape the future of emergency volunteering, but it was not yet clear to stakeholders whether trends in these areas would increase or decrease over time, and hence these remained major areas of uncertainty about the future: 1) societal involvement in emergency management (deep to shallow), 2) enabling infrastructure for volunteering (strong to weak), 3) degree of technological disruption (high to low).
- In this study, all stakeholders saw a need for change, underlining the fact that the predominant volunteer strategies, models, and management approaches of the past are not going to be adequate on their own for any of the potential scenarios in the future.
- The use of alternative, plausible, future scenarios to inform decision making can make volunteer workforce planning in emergency management more 'future proof': that is, more robust and adaptable in the face of the uncertainties generated by a complex and dynamic environment.
- A set of research-based resources are available for workforce planners and volunteer managers in volunteer-involving organisations to help them consider a wider range of strategic issues and options for supporting emergency volunteering, and to consider ways they can future proof volunteer workforce strategies.

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## Introduction and context

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A wide range of volunteering provides crucial support to communities before, during and after emergencies and disasters in Australia. This includes volunteers with fire and emergency service agencies, ambulance services and surf life saving, as well as with not-for-profit relief and recovery organisations like the Australian Red Cross and the Salvation Army. It also includes volunteers with the many community service organisations such as the Country Women’s Association, Rotary, and many faith-based groups that support their communities before, during and after emergency events, as well as those who help informally through emergent groups and spontaneous volunteering. In this paper I use the term ‘emergency volunteering’ to refer collectively to all these forms of volunteering.

This paper distils key insights from a study that systematically examined stakeholder’s understandings of potential futures for emergency volunteering and of the forces shaping those futures.<sup>2</sup> It presents four alternative, plausible, future scenarios for emergency volunteering and the major trends and uncertainties that stakeholders participating in the study expected to shape the future of this volunteering. The purpose of the study, conducted in 2019 and 2020, was to increase the emergency management sector’s foresight about emergency volunteering (“insights into how and why the future could be different than today”, Bengston, 2019, p.1099) and support its volunteer-involving organisations to consider the implication of future uncertainties for today’s volunteer workforce planning decisions.

The insights included here come from over 200 stakeholders with deep knowledge of the forces shaping emergency volunteering, including: volunteer workforce managers from emergency response and relief and recovery organisations, including not-for-profits; emergency service volunteer representatives and leaders; community engagement managers from emergency response organisations; local government emergency management representatives; representatives of large and small community sector organisations; representatives from state/territory volunteering peak bodies, and; academic researchers with expertise in emergency management and volunteering.

The methods used to gather these insights involved two stages. Stage 1 was a qualitative environmental scan that used semi-structured interviews and qualitative surveys to collect views about key trends and uncertainties for the future of emergency volunteering from 183 stakeholders representing the groups listed above (McLennan, 2021). In Stage 2, the results of this scan were presented to a panel of 86 experts, including both academics

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2 See <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/research/resilience-hazards/3533>

and stakeholder experts, using the Delphi technique (McLennan, forthcoming). The Delphi technique is a method used to bring a range of experts together in a structured, moderated, group communication process to address a complex problem (Nowack et al., 2011). The Delphi participants in this study rated the importance and certainty of an expansive list of potential drivers of change in emergency volunteering that were identified in Stage 1. This was done in two rounds of review. The trends and major uncertainties described below are outputs of that Delphi process. The future scenarios for emergency volunteering were developed by the author from these outputs. They represent potential futures that could plausibly emerge for emergency volunteering depending on how three major areas of uncertainty unfold over coming years.

## Findings

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### **Trends expected to shape all future scenarios for emergency volunteering**

At the time of this study, four broad, important trends were widely expected by stakeholders to shape all possible future scenarios for emergency volunteering in Australia:

- Broad shifts in volunteering practices
- Changing community and government expectations
- Demographic and community change
- Climate change and rising hazard exposure

#### **Broad shifts in volunteering practices**

Broad transformations in the way people live and work in the 21st Century “have recast the conditions and values that shape people’s choices about how, when, where, and why to volunteer compared to the past” (McLennan, Whittaker, & Handmer, 2016, p.2033). The dominant shift in volunteering practices has been away from more formal and higher commitment volunteering, towards more flexible and lower-commitment, shorter-term volunteering (McLennan, et al., 2016). Factors contributing to this shift include:

- time restrictions on people’s availability to volunteer
- growth in use of social media and online platforms to mobilise and self-organise (predominantly informal) volunteers
- fewer young people choosing to engage in traditional, formal volunteering, and ageing volunteers
- the changing structure of work including the rise of the gig economy, growing time committed to paid work, and more women in the workforce

## **Changing community and government expectations**

This trend involves a broad collection of factors that are altering both the public and governments' expectations of the emergency management sector and its organisations (Bosomworth, Owen, & Curnin, 2017), of emergency volunteers, and of the wider voluntary sector and volunteer involving organisations (Oppenheimer and Warburton, 2014). Many stakeholders see expectations as not only changing, but also rising and becoming unrealistic. A dominant driver of this trend is the impact of professionalisation and corporatisation on the emergency management and voluntary sectors. It is linked to a rise in risk averse government regulation (Bode and Brandsen, 2014). While this trend brings improvements to service quality and volunteer safety, participating stakeholders also strongly associated it with:

- a surge in the administration and training requirements on volunteers causing increased volunteer workloads
- greater organisational oversight and control of volunteers, with potential to undermine volunteer motivations
- greater demands on community sector volunteers to deliver a wider range of public services, especially in rural communities
- growing public expectations of levels of service in the emergency management sector

When combined with the impacts of new information and communications technology (ICT), particularly social media, this has led many stakeholders to fear that expectations may be outstripping the capacity that volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations, both public and not-for-profit, have to meet those expectations.

## **Demographic and community change**

This trend is reorganising the community contexts of emergency volunteering. Dominant drivers of demographic and community change include are rural depopulation and ageing, Australia's more widely ageing and growing population, and urbanisation, along with greater mobility of people and growing diversity within and between communities. These shifts are curtailing and changing who is available to volunteer and where. For example, rural restructuring combined with ageing and depopulation has left many smaller communities with a dwindling and ageing volunteer pool as well as rising volunteer workloads and burnout (Holmes et al., 2019).

Australia's population growth and ageing trends are well established in demographic data. Population projections also see these trends continuing into the future (ABS, 2018). While population ageing and decline are dominant trends in rural and regional Australia, there is significant complexity and variation in rural demographics from region to region and place to place (Dufty-Jones and Connell, 2016). Care therefore needs to be taken to not oversimplify or stereotype rural and regional Australia.

## **Climate change and rising hazard exposure**

Some of the key impacts of climate change on Australia are rising temperatures, increases in extreme fire weather and lengths of fire seasons, increased rainfall in northern Australia, decreased rainfall in southern Australia, and an increase in heavy rainfall events (CSIRO and BOM, 2020). Increasing severity, frequency and duration of natural hazard events due to climate change is expected to place even greater burden, and expectations, on volunteers to support communities in the impacted areas (CSIRO, 2020). This is further exacerbated by the impacts of drought on rural communities and greater hazard exposure due to poor urban and land use planning (Gissing, Eburn, & McAneney, 2018).

## **Major areas of uncertainty in the future of emergency volunteering**

While the above trends were expected by a wide range of stakeholders to shape all possible future scenarios for emergency volunteering, the study also revealed three major areas of uncertainty about the future that participating stakeholders indicated were important for emergency volunteering. Depending on how developments in these areas unfold over coming years, the future of emergency volunteering could move towards one or other of a range of possible, alternative future scenarios. These major areas of uncertainty are:

- Societal involvement in emergency management (deep to shallow)
- Enabling infrastructure for volunteering (strong to weak)
- Degree of technological disruption (high to low)

### **Societal involvement**

There were two aspects to the uncertainty that existed for participating stakeholders about how deeply people who are not emergency management professionals will be involved in emergency management in future. First, was the extent to which Australian people will be willing and able to engage in volunteering and community service (societal drivers). Second, was how well the emergency management sector will engage with the wider population, for example through collaborating with non-traditional stakeholders, supporting community-led initiatives, and including informal, emergent and spontaneous volunteering in emergency management planning and arrangements (sector drivers).

Regarding societal drivers, stakeholders convey uncertainty about the degree of community mindedness in Australia and the impacts of individualism. This is mirrored in research also. There is some evidence that people's willingness and capacity to participate in civic life through volunteering and other activities has fallen (e.g., Leigh, 2011). However, other research shows that contributing to communities is still important to people, but more and more people are doing it in different ways compared to the past.

For example, despite media stereotypes of younger generations as individualistic and self-oriented, research shows that young people care deeply about contributing to society but choose to do it in more diverse ways (Case Foundation, 2019).

### **Enabling infrastructure**

This area of uncertainty concerned the degree to which strong leadership, direction setting and support across the levels of federal and state/territory governments, the emergency management sector and within organisations might exist in future for emergency volunteering. Significantly, two of the issues deemed most important for the future of emergency volunteering by stakeholders are related to this area: strategic leadership and coordinated planning in the emergency management sector, and the value of volunteers being more strongly manifest through enhanced resourcing, consultation, advocacy, and supports. Perhaps even more significantly, the changes considered least certain to unfold in the future are also in this area: strong government leadership for volunteering through policy and resourcing, and a revision of funding arrangements within the emergency sector to better support a wider range of volunteering and volunteer-involving organisations.

### **Degree of technological disruption**

While technological change is certain to impact the future of emergency volunteering in some way, there remains significant uncertainty about the type of technological advances that could occur, and their potential to disrupt both how people engage in volunteering, the kinds of volunteering they do, and how volunteers are managed. Two areas of technological change highlighted by participating stakeholders were changes in physical technology such as the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in emergency response; and the potential for new information and communications technology to fundamentally change who mobilises and coordinates societal response to emergencies, and how.

### **Areas of high disagreement about the future of emergency volunteering**

In addition to these three major areas of uncertainty above, there was also high disagreement amongst participating stakeholders about both how important and how likely the following developments will be into the future:

- the extent to which rewards and incentives would, or should, be available for emergency response volunteering
- occurrence and impact of anthropogenic hazards, including pandemics (noting that the study took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic)
- future levels of public trust in government institutions
- the degree of legal risk that is associated with volunteering for individuals and organisations, and
- impacts of outdated or restrictive legislation



## Four alternative future scenarios for emergency volunteering

Whether or not trends increase or decrease in the three major areas of uncertainty outlined above will largely influence what the overall scenario for emergency volunteering is likely to be in future. Taking these uncertainties into account, Figure 1 outlines four alternative, plausible future scenarios for emergency volunteering. These scenarios help to draw out the potential implications of major areas of uncertainty that ought to be considered in planning today. Each scenario reaches beyond the current situation for emergency volunteering to depict a possible future that could potentially unfold. It is likely that the actual future will not look like any one of the scenarios but will instead include elements of each. However, which specific elements is currently unclear.

**Scenario 1, 'Many hands'** is closest to a best-case scenario for volunteering and is also closest to the vision in resilience-based policy statements such as the Australian National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (COAG, 2011). It is characterised by deep societal involvement in emergency management and a strong enabling infrastructure for all forms of emergency volunteering, and for volunteering more widely in Australian society. In this scenario, all volunteering is widely celebrated, deeply valued, and well-resourced. There is a high level of community and business activism around emergency management, and service delivery is collaborative, community-centric and well-integrated.

**Scenario 2, 'Techno-proficiency'** can be considered an extreme version of the impact of increasing professionalisation and corporatisation, combined with low societal involvement in emergency management, and catalysed by high levels of government resourcing and a strong uptake of new technology within the emergency management sector. In this scenario, emergency management services are delivered by highly professional, well-supported, technology-enabled workforces. Government and community expectations of services are extremely high.

**Scenario 3, 'Too many cooks'** represents the potential outcome of poor integration and coordination between formal emergency management organisations and volunteering and community action that occurs outside of those organisations. It is characterised by high societal involvement that is driven by societal shifts but in the context of a closed and uncollaborative emergency management sector. In this context, new ICT advances and social media have significant potential to further disrupt existing foundations for coordination. Thus, in this scenario, the emergency management sector is insular and risk averse. Emergency service organisations struggle to provide services with low volunteer numbers. Many, diverse, digitally enabled, and self-organised groups have formed with mixed capacity to deliver on community needs and low levels of coordination between them.

**Scenario 4, 'Falling short'** is a worst-case scenario, in which there is low societal involvement in emergency management, weak infrastructure to support emergency volunteering, and low capacity to take up new technology. In this scenario, emergency management is falling far short of public and government expectations. There is high discontent amongst a shrinking and ageing emergency service volunteer workforce due to lack of organisational support, poor community outcomes, and burnout. Private property protection services are increasingly contracted by the few who can afford it, leading to high inequality in community coping capacity and the distribution of disaster impacts.

Scenarios	Scenario Drivers (major areas of uncertainty)			Description
	Societal Involvement	Enabling Infrastructure	Technological Disruption	
Many Hands	DEEP	STRONG	LOW	Volunteering is widely celebrated, deeply valued, and well-resourced. Community and businesses are highly engaged in emergency management through a wide range of activities and organisations. Emergency management service delivery is collaborative, community-centric, and well-integrated.
Techno-Proficiency	SHALLOW	STRONG	HIGH	Emergency management services are delivered by highly professional, well-supported, technology-enabled volunteer and career workforces. Government and community expectations of services are extremely high.
Too Many Cooks	DEEP	WEAK	HIGH	There is poor integration and coordination between formal disaster management organisations and volunteering and community action that occurs outside of those organisations. Many, diverse, self-organised groups have formed with mixed capacity to deliver on community needs.
Falling Short	SHALLOW	WEAK	LOW	Emergency management is falling short of public and government expectations. There is high discontent amongst a shrinking & ageing volunteer workforce due to lack of support and burnout. Private property protection services are increasingly contracted by the few who can afford it creating high inequality in community coping capacity & resilience.

**Major Trends (underlying all scenarios)**  
 Shifts in Volunteering | Rising Expectations  
 Demographic & Community change | Climate Change & Rising Risk

**Figure 1: Overview of Four future possible scenarios for emergency volunteering representing the terrain that participating stakeholders collectively saw as possible by 2030. (Grey shaded boxes indicate an increasing trend, while white boxes indicate a decreasing trend.)**

Source: McLennan, 2022.

## Policy and practice implications

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In this study, it is highly significant that all participating stakeholders saw a need for changes to current approaches and conditions to support vibrant, sustainable and well-supported emergency volunteering into the future in Australia. This underlines the fact that the predominant volunteer strategies, models and management approaches of the past are not going to be adequate for any scenarios in the future. Given the rising frequency and severity of natural hazard events expected under climate change in the future, and Australia's heavy reliance on volunteers to provide emergency services and community relief and recovery across such a geographically large and sparsely populated country (e.g., Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, Binskin et al., 2020), the need to strategically plan to support, preserve and enhance a significant emergency volunteer workforce over time, despite future uncertainties, is clear.

The scenarios presented above, while not predictive, can assist workforce planners, volunteer managers and leaders, and decision makers in volunteer-involving organisations and governments to consider the implications of future uncertainty for today's workforce planning. The use of scenarios to inform decision making can make workforce planning in emergency management more 'future proof': that is, more robust and adaptable in the face of the uncertainties generated by a complex and dynamic environment. As the author (McLennan, forthcoming) concludes in a research report on this study, "being attentive to future shifts and uncertainties can improve policy and planning by challenging common perceptions, enabling an expanded range of strategic options to be considered, and supporting decision makers to see the future from a wider range of perspectives" (see also Riddell).

To support this, a set of research-based resources has been prepared from the findings of this study (McLennan et al. 2022). Workforce planners and volunteer managers in volunteer-involving organisations can use the resources to help them consider a wider range of strategic issues and options for supporting volunteering, and to consider ways they can future proof volunteer workforce strategies.<sup>3</sup>

## Gaps in knowledge and future research

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The future is never entirely knowable, and the shapes of trends and uncertainties change over time. Because of this, future research will need to update and inform our understanding of the future of emergency volunteering in light of shifts such as the

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3 A copy of these resources is available from the author by request. Please email [blythe.mclennan@naturalhazards.com.au](mailto:blythe.mclennan@naturalhazards.com.au)

COVID-19 pandemic, and experiences with recent disaster events and their aftermath for communities and policies. Another critically important area for future research is evaluating the suitability of current volunteer strategies to enable vibrant, sustainable, and well-supported emergency volunteering into the future under the four alternative future scenarios outlined here.

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