VOLUNTEERING *and* CONTACT ACT

Volunteering and Contact ACT

Submission in response to the *Spontaneous Volunteer Management Handbook Discussion Paper*

April 2017

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Overview

Volunteering and Contact ACT (VCA) is the peak body for volunteering and community information, and the Volunteering Support Service in the Canberra Region.

VCA is a member of the ACT Community Recovery Sub-Committee and has a designated responsibility in the ACT Recovery Plan to coordinate spontaneous volunteers in an emergency. This includes registering offers of assistance, making low-level referrals, and screening requests for volunteers from volunteer involving organisations.

VCA uses the Emergency Volunteering Community Response to Extreme Weather (EV CREW) system and VIKTOR Online (national volunteer referral database), and is supported by its state and territory peak body counterparts, namely Volunteering Queensland and Volunteering Western Australia.

Since VCA was delegated formal responsibility for coordinating spontaneous volunteers, following the 2003 Canberra bushfires, there has been no activation of an Emergency Volunteering Coordination Centre in the ACT.

Response

The Discussion Paper succinctly outlines the possibilities and challenges associated with spontaneous volunteering. Broadly, VCA agrees with the principles, themes, and proposed approach outlined in the Paper. The feedback in this submission is based on VCA's perspective and is a broad response to some of the questions posed in the Discussion Paper. Of note is that VCA undertook a similar task to the Handbook in 2015, and produced the Guide, *Be Prepared: Managing Volunteers in Emergencies*. The Guide provides information on the management of both trained and spontaneous volunteers, and is based on consultations with official emergency response agencies that operate in the ACT and south-east NSW. A copy of the *Be Prepared* Guide is attached to this submission.

Discussion Question – Principles and Scope and Definition

Whilst a handbook will provide a solid foundation for the facilitation of spontaneous and emergent volunteering in the aftermath of a disaster, VCA is concerned that it will not be widely used in an emergency. It would be advisable to ensure that the companion tools, referenced on page three, are prioritised and are accessible and practical for organisations who may require them. Further, there should be careful consideration of the language used in the companion tools as it is likely that emergent groups will be unfamiliar with the terms commonly employed in the emergency management space.

VCA agrees with the statement in the *Spontaneous Volunteer Management Resource Kit 2010* that, 'in an emergency, good volunteer management practices should not be bypassed, only expedited.' However, VCA also recognises that this may be impractical in many instances. This will especially be the case for emergent groups and digital or micro volunteering opportunities where the formal infrastructure of volunteer management may be foreign to the group leader/s, or unfeasible to implement.

A definition such as 'spontaneous volunteer' is important because it is prudent to put demarcations on the term to foster a shared understanding. Whilst 'spontaneous volunteer' as a term might not be universally understood, it makes the most sense in the context of the Handbook, and is the predominant way people offer their assistance in the aftermath of an emergency. The other term VCA would suggest for consideration is 'emergent volunteer',

which is prevalent in associated literature and may be more relatable than 'spontaneous volunteer'.

In the 2015 review of the national definition of volunteering, concerns were raised about possible alienation caused by the term 'volunteer', especially for cultural groups. It was decided that the themes within the definition provided sufficient scope to encompass the main forms of formal volunteering that take place in Australia today. Similarly, the term 'spontaneous volunteer' has this applicability.

The Handbook should consider and address digital and digitally-enabled volunteering, as recent world disasters have shown this is one of the predominant ways people volunteer in response. Channelling volunteer effort in this way can reduce the burden on formal supports who are often inundated with offers of assistance they are unable to channel in a productive way. Further, digital volunteering can diminish some of the risks posed by unsolicited offers of assistance as the likelihood of injury is vastly reduced in an online environment. Cyber security considerations may play into the viability of digital volunteering opportunities; however, they provide an accessible forum for people to play a productive role in response and recovery. Organisations should also consider the use of technology to enhance their capability and capacity in an emergency.

Discussion Questions – Handbook Approach

A focus of the Handbook should be on upskilling organisations to involve spontaneous volunteers effectively, rather than undermining or dissuading emergent behaviour. The paradox identified on page eight ("*people's willingness to volunteer versus the system's capacity to utilize them effectively*") is something that emergency management organisations still contend with today. This is despite mounting evidence that people who are not utilised by the system will find a way to help outside it. Lack of capacity to manage large numbers of volunteers and the inability, or unwillingness, to be flexible are everyday issues for volunteer involving organisations. These issues are often compounded in an emergency. The Handbook should assist organisations to identify areas where additional capacity would be useful, and where this capacity could be filled through spontaneous offers of assistance.

Research into major disasters around the world continues to show that people feel a compelling need to help, and will oftentimes find a way to circumvent barriers that preclude them from being involved. This was particularly prevalent in the response to the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City, and is a pertinent example of why it is critical to channel volunteer effort productively to avoid deviance and possible injury. Major disasters throughout history, both natural and manmade, demonstrate that spontaneous volunteering continues to be a first response by members of the community. Yet, official response agencies are often quick to dismiss spontaneous volunteers. This dismissal can result in deviant behaviour or the creation of emergent groups, and these groups may duplicate or inadvertently hinder the work of other agencies.

It is essential that the Handbook pays due reverence to the learnings out of former disasters, namely to the benefits of spontaneous volunteers to the community and to the volunteers themselves. As noted above, emergent behaviour is often viewed negatively, but can provide vital surge capacity in times of great need. Disaster management literature often notes that first responders are spontaneous volunteers where official response agencies are unable to gain access or have insufficient resources to meet the magnitude of an emergency. Further, the phenomenon of convergence is also widely noted in literature, and should be addressed in the Handbook. Post-disaster studies have showed that convergent and spontaneous helping behaviour is cathartic for volunteers, and fosters community resilience. Considering

this, the Handbook should acknowledge the role that volunteering plays in recovery, and acknowledge peoples' right to make a positive contribution. This needs to be balanced with the requirements of official response agencies, who may be overwhelmed by offers of support and unable to harness them appropriately, or at all.

Rather than defining a 'best practice approach' the Handbook should focus on likely scenarios and provide model solutions or approaches. The greatest concentration of effort should be on risk mitigation and risk management strategies. For example, guidelines on how to deal with donations, including food, would be useful for agencies that may experience this kind of influx of support. The Handbook should also seek to clarify insurance requirements and risks, and how these considerations take on particular nuances in an emergency.

VCA is of the view that the Guide should be practical and informative, and should empower organisations to consider how they might take advantage of the capacity provided by spontaneous volunteers. On balance, VCA agrees with question five (page 11), that the Handbook should have a broader focus around engagement and structuring/integrating citizen responses.

Discussion Questions – Australian Context and Experience

One of the biggest strengths in the volunteering space in Australia is the national network comprised of Volunteering Australia and its state and territory peak body counterparts: Volunteering and Contact ACT, The Centre for Volunteering (NSW), Volunteering Queensland, Volunteering South Australia/Northern Territory, Volunteering Tasmania, and Volunteering Western Australia. Specifically, the high level of collaboration and knowledge sharing amongst the national network is a huge opportunity for spontaneous emergency volunteer management.

Shared systems, including EV CREW and VIKTOR Online, provide further opportunities for preparedness, response, and recovery. In time of crisis these systems provide the critical infrastructure to register offers of assistance, and deploy volunteers to areas of need. Further, the knowledge and experience of the volunteering peak bodies are instrumental in providing training, resources, and advice on best practice volunteer management. This expertise should be leveraged in an emergency to ensure that volunteers are provided with a well-supported experience, and organisations can utilise volunteers efficiently and effectively.

Discussion Questions – Handbook Content

As discussed above, the Handbook should be predominantly focused on assisting organisations to assess their unique circumstances, and how they might respond to the opportunities and challenges that arise in emergency situations. As noted earlier, in 2015 VCA developed the Guide *Be Prepared: Managing Volunteers in Emergencies*. Some of the information in this Guide, alongside the *Spontaneous Volunteer Management Resource Kit 2010* may prove useful in assessing what content could inform the Handbook. Where possible, content from existing resources should be embedded into the Handbook. The *National Standards for Volunteer Involvement* should also be heavily referenced.

Many organisations have a perverse fear of risk when it comes to involving spontaneous volunteers. The Handbook should seek to outline robust risk management processes that allow organisations to be flexible in the way they engage volunteers. In preparing the *Be Prepared* Guide VCA consulted with ten official emergency response agencies. All ten agencies said they would not engage spontaneous volunteers. This further demonstrates the need for a Guide that can educate agencies on the valuable surge capacity that spontaneous

volunteers provide, and encourage them to be creative in thinking through roles that would be suitable and appropriate for spontaneous volunteers to undertake.

The Guide should note the different legislative instruments in place across the country, such as Work, Health and Safety laws, that must be considered when involving volunteers. As legislation often differs across states, the Guide will need to consider how this information can be best presented to ensure that organisations are aware of their specific legal obligations, which may differ based on jurisdiction.

Whilst the principal focus of the Handbook is to provide information on spontaneous volunteer management, there should also be reference to the issues faced by vulnerable people in an emergency. For many vulnerable people, existing challenges are compounded in an emergency, and response and recovery activities should consider their unique needs. Further, the Handbook should consider how vulnerable people can play a role in response and recovery themselves, and how agencies can be inclusive to meet their needs.

Discussion Questions – Structure and Presentation of Handbook and Supporting Material

The most pertinent, practical information and resources should feature first in the Handbook. This will ensure that in an emergency individuals and organisations do not waste time searching for the material that is most useful to them. It is also crucial to have a comprehensive table of contents so people can locate information easily. Case studies should be included insofar as they are relevant and serve a purpose, but superfluous references to case studies should not be included at the cost of the Handbook being succinct and practical.

The literature review and any templates should be included as appendices. The development of independent fact sheets may also prove useful as an additional, downloadable resource.

Conclusion

The ACT is a unique jurisdiction when it comes to emergencies, as it does not have a council layer. Generally, the ACT Emergency Services Agency and its associated bodies are sufficiently resourced to respond to low-level emergencies. The McLeod Inquiry, following the 2003 Canberra bushfires, noted the lack of preparedness of Canberra residents for an emergency, and their almost complete reliance on the ACT Government and emergency services for protection. While the need for greater self-management by residents was noted in the report, no major emergency since the 2003 bushfires has pushed residents back to a state of complacency.

It should be considered how the Handbook can play a role in educating people and organisations on the importance of preparedness, especially in jurisdictions like the ACT, where there is heavy reliance on official response agencies. Whilst the ACT is significantly less likely to experience a large-scale emergency than its state and territory counterparts, resources such as the Handbook are critical to such regions. This is due to under preparedness, and very little experience in large-scale response and recovery, including the involvement of spontaneous volunteers.