



Security and Emergency Management Division  
Justice and Community Safety (JACS) Directorate  
Via email: [JACSSEMD@act.gov.au](mailto:JACSSEMD@act.gov.au)

13 March 2024

## Re: Disaster Resilience Strategy Consultation

VolunteeringACT welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the development of an ACT Disaster Resilience Strategy (the Strategy) and welcomes an overarching and coordinated approach to disaster resilience in the Territory. We make the following key recommendations:

- 1) The Strategy should align and connect with other related reform work currently underway, including the ACT Social Recovery Framework.
- 2) The Strategy should clearly acknowledge the vital role volunteers and volunteer involving organisations play within ACT disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.
- 3) The volunteering ecosystem should be engaged as a key stakeholder in the Strategy development and its ongoing implementation.
- 4) The Strategy should highlight the importance of providing more investment and sustainable funding for volunteer programs, to ensure volunteers remain safe and supported throughout their roles in disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

As reflected in the definition provided as part of this consultation, disaster resilience is a multi-faceted concept that incorporates risk reduction, preparedness, response, recovery and adaptation. Given this, we would like to emphasise the importance of ensuring the development of the Disaster Resilience Strategy is connected with and informed by other related reform work currently underway in the ACT, in particular the Social Recovery Framework being developed by the Community Services Directorate.<sup>1</sup>

A critical element of disaster resilience is the capacity to recover and so this work is intrinsically linked to and intertwined with social recovery.

Ensuring the volunteering sector is supported, strengthened and sustained is critical to achieving a more disaster resilient ACT. The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience recognises that a disaster resilient community requires a “*strong emergency management volunteer sector*”<sup>2</sup> – however this is only one of the multiple volunteering sub-sectors that directly contribute to disaster resilience in the ACT.

Volunteers support activities across ACT government services, through charities and not-for-profits, and directly through informal community groups. They are at the forefront of disaster resilience, contributing across prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery activities.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/social-recovery-disaster>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/emergency/files/national-strategy-disaster-resilience.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-and-Australias-crisis-resilience\\_web.pdf](https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-and-Australias-crisis-resilience_web.pdf)

This includes, but is not limited to:

- **Prevention and Preparedness**

For example, ACT volunteers provide essential bushfire risk reduction activities across the ACT all year round. These activities include weed reduction, clearing of waterways, removing debris and leaf litter, assisting with prescribed burns, monitoring and recording data, and providing valuable advice on environmental management. More details are available in VACT's recent submission to the recent Legislative Assembly inquiry into ACT bushfire preparedness.<sup>4</sup>

- **Emergency Response**

Volunteer involvement in disaster response is well recognised. The ACT Emergency Services Agency (ESA) based within the Justice and Community Safety (JACS) directorate manages emergency services volunteers. This incorporates Rural Fire Service (RFS) and State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers. All these volunteers play key roles not only in disaster response, but also in risk reduction and preparedness activities throughout the year. Data from 2023 indicates that there are 1,566 volunteers with the ESA in the ACT, incorporating 473 RFS volunteers, 385 SES volunteers and 643 Community Fire Unit volunteers.<sup>5</sup>

- **Essential service provision**

For example, there are currently a minimum of 49 organisations known to be providing regular food relief services (i.e. food pantries, meal distributors etc.) in Canberra and the surrounding area, and all 49 have advised us they are able to assist with providing food relief during crises or emergencies. Only a handful of these providers receive any funding, and most are totally reliant on donations, the volunteers who give their time freely, and the wider community to run their operations. Many food relief services in the ACT, including those who provide emergency food relief, are wholly volunteer run. VolunteeringACT lead food security projects in the region and can arrange consultations with key stakeholders.

- **Mental health support, suicide prevention and crisis intervention.**

Mental health and suicide prevention services are especially critical during and after major emergencies. For example, Lifeline Canberra has 300 volunteers working on their crisis support line.<sup>6</sup> The use of this service increased significantly during the height of the COVID pandemic with volunteers contributing to supporting 36,516 callers in 2020-21, compared to 31,172 callers in 2022-23.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the significant contribution of volunteers in the disaster resilience and response space, **support and planning for volunteer involvement is not consistently included in relevant policies and frameworks.** There is a widespread lack of understanding and recognition for the critical work undertaken by the hundreds of ACT volunteers who contribute to disaster-related activities throughout the year. The volunteering ecosystem must be engaged as key stakeholders in the development of this Strategy and JACS must examine and consider the essential role that volunteers play in this space and how this can be better resourced, supported, and recognised.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/in-committees/committees/eccb/Inquiry-into-the-ACT-environments-bushfire-preparedness>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.justice.act.gov.au/annual-report-2022-23>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.lifelinecanberra.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Lifeline-Canberra-22-23-Annual-Report.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid and <https://www.lifelinecanberra.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/202021-Annual-Report-lowRes.pdf>

The heavy reliance on ACT volunteers in disaster preparedness, response and recovery must be met with **adequate investment and resourcing**. Volunteer programs are generally cost-effective to run, can support and enhance other service delivery mechanisms, and provide significant social, cultural, and economic returns on investment. Recent data collected as part of the ACT's 2023 State of Volunteering Survey (due to be published shortly) has shown that for every \$1 invested in volunteering, \$5.40 is returned.<sup>8</sup>

While volunteers offer their time for free, there are costs associated with running volunteer programs and they require adequate funding to ensure their viability. Volunteers require training, onboarding, and ongoing line management to ensure their volunteering experience is ethical, safe, inclusive, and in line with the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.<sup>12</sup> It is vital that programs are run in this way, as this ensures they are sustainable and deliver high quality outcomes. Current levels of funding for volunteer programs/management are inconsistent, inadequate and do not reflect the criticality of the volunteering workforce component of disaster resilience.

For example, while around two thirds of the ESA workforce is comprised of volunteer members, this percentage is not reflected through allocation of funding in the ACT ESA Budget. Emergency volunteers require more specialised training and have higher exposure to risk than most volunteers in other sectors. It follows that there are significant costs associated with operating emergency volunteering programs, including management, ongoing training, support and debriefing, and they require adequate funding to ensure their viability and that emergency volunteer experiences are ethical, safe and inclusive. Further, as outlined above, many food relief services in the ACT receive no government funding and are wholly volunteer run. The lack of tangible and ongoing funding available to support food relief services in the ACT is simply not sustainable and must be highlighted and addressed within the Disaster Resilience Strategy.

A lack of funding for volunteer programs can also impact on volunteer retention and attraction, which is concerning given the increasing need for volunteers in this space and the decline in formal volunteer numbers being experienced across the country.<sup>9</sup>

VolunteeringACT is currently working in partnership with ACT Government via the Community Services Directorate to develop an ACT Volunteering Strategy, aligned with the National Strategy for Volunteering strategic objectives, and to deliver on ACT priorities. Current work involves linking other ACT Government Directorates into the development process, including the Justice and Community Safety Directorate. The ACT Strategy presents further opportunities to establish linkages between volunteer activities relevant to disaster resilience in a coordinated way across our region.

VolunteeringACT would be happy to meet with the Justice and Community Safety Directorate to discuss the issues raised in this letter, coordinate any further discussions with our sector partners and provide any additional information on volunteering you feel may be of assistance.

Yours sincerely,



Jean Giese  
CEO, VolunteeringACT

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<sup>8</sup> ACT State of Volunteering Research 2023 – report due for publication March/April 2024

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/National-Strategy-for-Volunteering-2023-2033.pdf>