Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers

Australian communities have always rallied to respond to threats and help each other in times of disaster and emergency. Planning for volunteers can help direct resources to where and when they are most needed to avoid an unwanted burden on the impacted communities.

Purpose

These guidelines have been designed to assist Local Councils, community groups and those involved in community recovery to plan for spontaneous volunteers following a disaster.

The content draws on the Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook 12, Communities Responding to Disasters: Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers (AIDR 2017).

Context

Experience and research shows the most common response of communities to disaster is to work together through informal and formal networks and groups to overcome challenges, meet local needs and help themselves and those around them. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, there is a strong tendency for people to self-organise into groups that are created ‘on the fly’ to meet self-identified needs. This is often done using social media outside what would be considered normal response and recovery arrangements.

It is not uncommon for 60-90 per cent of disaster survivors to engage in some form of volunteering to help others following the disaster.

‘Converging’ on disaster sites

When disasters occur, it is not only the impacted communities that respond. Many people from outside the community can also converge on a disaster site to offer help. This is often accompanied by a convergence of information and resources, including equipment and donated goods and services. When not appropriately planned for, this convergence can create a significant burden on the impacted communities and trained responders, and may disrupt the work of those assisting the communities.

Challenges for integrating community responses to disaster

There are recognised challenges to integrating community participation and government responses to disaster in ways that build community resilience and improve disaster management capability. This includes the need to manage the risks associated with responses from people who are unfamiliar with disaster situations, and who may not understand what impacted communities do and don’t need. In the immediate post disaster phase, mass offers of help and donated goods can create a burden for impacted communities and the organisations helping them. In some cases, those offering to help may not be physically or emotionally prepared for what they will face in a disaster situation and may become victims themselves.

There is a growing commitment within the broader Australian emergency management community to improve the ways Local Councils and other relevant organisations plan for, support and integrate community
responses. In Australia, and internationally, experience in integrating informal, community responses with the formal emergency management system is growing.

**Types of community response to disasters**

The ways communities in Australian society respond to disasters is diverse, organic and specific to both the community and the type of disaster. Communities exist in many shapes and forms, although generally share common characteristics or interests.

Commonly, community response takes the form of informal volunteering – volunteering that takes place outside the context of a formal organisation.

The most common ways people organise to respond to disasters are:

- **Individuals and informal helping** – this is usually not structured or organised beyond interpersonal social relationships and includes people and households responding to their own disaster risk or impacts. It also includes people informally helping others such as family, friends and neighbours, as well as people taking individual actions to help people they do not know personally, such as making donations to relief funds, or offering to volunteer with existing organisations, and assisting as bystanders to emergency events.

- **Emergent groups** – these are usually people who have weak or no ties to a local community that is disaster impacted. In these groups traditional and social media play a big part in shaping perceptions of what community needs exist and whether they are being met by the formal emergency management system. Although sometimes considered more of a problem than an asset by formal organisations, experience shows self-organised emergent groups can be a valuable form of community response to disaster events.

- **Extending groups and organisations** – these are usually groups with established structures but no prior involvement in disaster management. This includes groups such as sporting clubs, community associations, non-government organisations, professional groups and businesses, including corporate enterprises, that ‘extend’ their activities into new and unexpected areas in response to disasters. Many of these groups have existing volunteers and volunteer management capability as well as skills that can be quickly harnessed when disasters occur.

- **Expanding organisations** – this is a term for organisations whose routine activities are not disaster-related but which have a recognised role in times of disaster that is mobilised through new or temporary structures. Key examples are community welfare, faith-based and environmental organisations such as the Salvation Army, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and Conservation Volunteers Australia.

- **Established organisations** – these are government and non-government organisations that have disaster-related core missions, routine activities and structures. Examples are state and territory fire and emergency service agencies, the Australian Red Cross, Surf Life Saving Australia and St John Ambulance. In more recent years, many state and territory volunteering peak bodies across Australia have also developed routine structures and activities that are disaster-related. These include formal roles in recovery planning, coordinating spontaneous volunteer involvement and communicating with the public about how to offer assistance.

Generally responses affiliated with the formal emergency response system are undertaken through established and expanding organisations whilst unaffiliated community responses occur through individual and informal helping, emergent groups and extending groups.
**Spontaneous Volunteering**

Spontaneous volunteering is an important area of community response to disasters. The term refers to people or groups who are unaffiliated with the emergency management system putting their hands up to help when a disaster happens.

People are motivated to help for a range of reasons and the need is often stronger for people who feel a connection to the impacted community. They may have friends or family who were impacted, or they may feel empathy through having experienced a disaster themselves in the past. Volunteering can also be an important way for people to make sense of a disaster, coping with its psychological impacts themselves, and regaining a sense of control that they may feel had been lost.

Two important external factors that shape people’s motivations for volunteering are:

- the scale and impact of the event, and
- the amount and type of media coverage a disaster event receives, including across social media.

Coverage by traditional and social media can influence and distort perceptions that community needs are not being met, particularly amongst those who do not have strong ties to the impacted communities. This reinforces the importance of clear and consistent public communication from knowledgeable and trusted sources about what is already being done to help communities that are impacted, and what communities do and don’t need at particular times.

![Figure 1: A framework for understanding societal responses to disaster (Adapted from Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook 12, Communities Responding to Disasters: Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers (AIDR 2017))](image)
When and how do people offer to help?

People generally offer help in the days and weeks immediately following a disaster event, and offers then drop off significantly over time. This can leave a gap between when people are motivated to help and when people actually need help—often in the longer-term; weeks, months and years afterwards.

Large-scale and highly visible disasters, particularly in areas of high population, can lead to a massive influx of offers to help. Without opportunities for people to help being planned for and made available, this influx can create a large burden for both responders and communities and present a missed opportunity in the weeks and months afterwards.

Where opportunities to offer help are not clearly available and communicated, people will seek to help any way they can. They may contact emergency services, non-government relief organisations, volunteering peak bodies, local governments and community groups in the impacted communities. However, not all people motivated to help want to do so via organised responses and management systems. Given the compelling need to help, some people have little regard or patience for slower-moving and more hierarchical formal systems and will seek out more direct ways to assist; in some cases, avoiding organised responses.

Where managed opportunities to assist are not found or not wanted, people may seek out informal opportunities. Some may seek out emergent groups on social media or contact individuals and households in the impacted communities directly. When people cannot find ways to assist that fit with their circumstances and their motivations, some will create their own avenues, increasingly via social media, and particularly when they perceive a need that appears is not being met by formal organisations.

Principles that support spontaneous volunteering

The national Spontaneous Volunteer Strategy was developed to recognise the inevitability of spontaneous volunteerism in disaster management and to help harness its value and contribution to disaster resilience.

The objectives of the National Strategy include:

- the effective and efficient coordination of spontaneous volunteers in the immediate post disaster phase of an emergency
- supporting the empowerment and disaster resilience of individuals and communities
- facilitating positive experiences for volunteers, who may continue to volunteer in the emergency management sector or in other valuable community endeavours.

Based on a set of principles adapted from the Australian Government’s Spontaneous Volunteer Management Resource Kit, the National Strategy provides broad guidance on what should be taken into account when considering the coordination and management of spontaneous volunteers. The National Strategy includes policy considerations and suggested actions as a guide for agencies involved in the effective engagement, coordination and management of spontaneous volunteers following a disaster.
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<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Summary of suggested actions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Empowered individuals and communities</td>
<td>People affected are the first priority.</td>
<td>• Consider the management of spontaneous volunteers in recovery plans and budgets.</td>
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<td>Spontaneous volunteering aids recovery and resilience.</td>
<td>• Identify suitable post disaster activities in advance.</td>
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<td>Jurisdictions will take considered policy positions about engaging</td>
<td>• Involve existing community groups in pre-event recovery planning and exercising.</td>
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<td>spontaneous volunteers.</td>
<td>• Review existing legislation that addresses risk and liability for spontaneous volunteers.</td>
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<td>Effective and efficient coordination of spontaneous volunteers</td>
<td>Processes will need to engage volunteers and support agencies.</td>
<td>• Develop scalable processes that reflect the motivations of spontaneous volunteers.</td>
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<td>Standard volunteer management processes apply in emergencies.</td>
<td>• Provide information about how the needs of people affected by the disaster are being met.</td>
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<td>Spontaneous volunteering is included in existing recovery arrangements.</td>
<td>• Register spontaneous volunteers and monitor their safety and wellbeing.</td>
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<td>Satisfied volunteers who may continue to volunteer in the emergency</td>
<td>Everyone has a right to help and be valued.</td>
<td>• Integrate arrangements for spontaneous volunteers into existing emergency management plans.</td>
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<td>management sector</td>
<td>The time when help is offered may not coincide with the need for volunteers.</td>
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<td>Effective, timely and consistent communication is essential.</td>
<td>• Recognise the inevitable nature of spontaneous volunteering.</td>
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<td>• Provide training and guidelines for individuals and emergent groups who may spontaneously volunteer.</td>
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<td>• Promote future volunteering opportunities and ensure effective follow-up and referral.</td>
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<td>• Develop communication plans and key messages including the use of social media in recovery.</td>
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Source: Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook 12, Communities Responding to Disasters: Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers (AIDR 2017).
Strategies for supporting and coordinating spontaneous volunteers

Disaster and emergency management is more effective when community responses are anticipated, planned for and integrated within the formal system.

The more involved the affected community is in the response, relief and recovery efforts the more effective their recovery will be.

While they will invariably be contributing to recovery efforts, members of the affected community may or may not identify as spontaneous volunteers.

It is imperative that operational plans and personnel effectively engage with and involve the affected community.

Volunteers will have a range of motivations for volunteering, just as organisations will have a range of motivations and potential constraints upon how they respond.

There is no single ‘best practice’ approach to supporting and coordinating spontaneous volunteers. Local Councils and other relevant organisations will need to develop plans that are appropriate for their specific organisation, the disaster context, and the types of volunteering that may occur.

Strategies for supporting and coordinating spontaneous volunteers should be considered as part of the Local Recovery Plan

In NSW the NSW State Emergency Service (NSW SES) enables the mobilisation of communities during disasters through the coordination of spontaneous volunteers. This capability ensures spontaneous volunteers are supported to undertake tasks safely, and are participating in roles which are contributing to the community’s preparedness, response or recovery. NSW SES Spontaneous Volunteer Coordinators can be utilised as part of an incident management team or recovery coordination team. Join the NSW SES as a spontaneous volunteer or one of their many volunteering options by registering at: www.ses.nsw.gov.au.

During disasters, the NSW SES also works closely with local community groups including emergent groups, to recognise existing community capability and networks. This process facilitates effective community involvement which can lead to enhanced recovery outcomes. Following disasters, the NSW SES works with local residents to increase community capability through the establishment of Community Action Teams and partnerships with businesses.

There are a range of other organised volunteer groups who operate across Australia and in NSW providing volunteer services to assist disaster affected people with clean up activities and fencing repairs. These include:

- BlazeAid
- Team Rubicon Australia, and
- Samaritan’s Purse
There are five levels of strategy commonly used by organisations to support or coordinate spontaneous volunteers:

1. Public communication
2. Collaboration
3. Channeling and brokering
4. Support and capacity building
5. Direct management.

While Local Councils and other relevant organisations are encouraged to consider and plan for their relationships with spontaneous volunteers well in advance of any disaster, there will be some decisions to be made specifically in relation to the type, location and impact of the disaster that has occurred.

Many Local Councils and other relevant organisations will develop plans and activities that operate across multiple strategic levels. However, the minimum levels recommended in this guideline for all organisations and groups are:

- public communication, and
- collaboration.

1. Public Communication

Broadly communicating with the public about spontaneous volunteering and other forms of offering assistance, in line with local agreements.

**Before a disaster**

- Develop a communication policy and plan in relation to spontaneous volunteering that can be tailored for specific disasters as required, including consistent key messages and communication mediums.
- Anticipate that people will create and share their own disaster information via social media. Consider and plan for how you will engage with and monitor social media sources and information.

**During**

- Receive and, where appropriate, relay information about the location, type and scale of the disaster, and whether there are likely to be volunteering opportunities.
- Ensure key stakeholders including MPs and the media have access to information pertaining to spontaneous volunteering in line with local arrangements and agreements.
- Identify and engage with significant social media sources of disaster information.

**After**

- In the recovery phase, continue to receive, adapt as necessary, and relay information about the Local Council or other relevant organisation’s position on spontaneous volunteering; and communicate more broadly on other forms of offering assistance that align with the needs of the impacted community and local volunteering arrangements and processes.
2. Collaboration

Participating in networks and building relationships that facilitate coordinated and cooperative strategies for spontaneous volunteers amongst organisations and groups, appropriate to each organisation or group’s goals, motivations, roles and position. This should include establishing relationships with groups not usually included in emergency management, for example, groups that understand the needs of different segments of the community.

Before a disaster

- Identify and establish relationships that will support a coordinated response to spontaneous volunteering in line with the organisation’s goals and desired outcomes, and agreed management of volunteer processes and responsibilities.
- Agree on roles, responsibilities and processes for referring volunteers and requests for assistance, and the identification and mitigation of risks.

During

- Stand up arrangements for collaboration including communication with stakeholders and partners.
- Monitor information relating to the emergency including community impacts and requests for assistance.

After

- Work with stakeholders and partners to ensure consistent, timely information and referrals and to help manage volunteer and community expectations.
- Monitor and adapt pre-existing arrangements and processes as required to reflect new and/or evolving issues relating to spontaneous volunteers.
- Provide advice and support to expanding and emerging groups working to support the impacted community.
- Participate in event debriefs and after-action reviews to evaluate processes and identify opportunities for improvement.

For some Local Councils and other relevant organisations, these levels may represent the full extent of their strategy. For others that can expand their strategies further, there are three broad levels of strategy in addition to public communication and collaboration which they may consider.

These are:

- channeling and brokering
- support and capacity building, and
- direct management.

Some Local Councils and other relevant organisations may adopt more than one of these, choosing, for example, to channel or broker interactions with some types of spontaneous volunteers, while directly managing or supporting other types of volunteers.

For further information refer to the Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook 12, Communities Responding to Disasters: Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers (AIDR 2017) at

www.aidr.org.au
**Information and communications**

In preparing to work with spontaneous volunteers it is important to consider how information will be collected and managed. For example, it will be important to consider where and how offers of spontaneous volunteering are likely to be received. This could include people turning up to an evacuation centre or recovery centre, those offering their help via social media sites, or via volunteering agencies. In many cases, offers of help can result in a large volume of phone calls over several days or weeks that may tie up or divert resources away from a Local Council or other relevant organisation’s primary response and recovery activities.

The development of a comprehensive communication plan will help to ensure that messaging will reflect any decisions about when and how to engage with spontaneous volunteers and will encourage consistent content that is shared through appropriate and effective channels. A communication plan should include information about how offers from volunteers and requests for assistance from the community will be managed:

- What information will be needed to effectively match offers of help with those who need assistance?
- What capacity is there to refer volunteers to other organisations, where their help may be better utilised?
- How will information be shared between organisations and volunteers?
- How can the privacy of all stakeholders be assured?

The advent of social media has resulted in substantial changes in the way spontaneous volunteering occurs and is managed. It represents an unprecedented opportunity to communicate with large numbers of volunteers, in real-time. Recent examples have seen hundreds and, in some cases thousands of people mobilised through Facebook and Twitter. Organisations that may be approached by people wishing to volunteer will need to have a strategy to utilise social media as a critical way of communicating with potential volunteers.

Practical considerations for communication include the development of clear, consistent messages for use when volunteers will be engaged and when they will not, information about how and when to volunteer, scripts for call takers, volunteer registration templates, checklists and rosters.

For further information refer to the Spontaneous Volunteer Management Resource Kit

Template
Download the Sample Generic Messages for Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers template

Guideline
Read more about Communicating in Recovery
More information

To obtain an electronic copy of this guideline and templates, visit:
www.emergency.nsw.gov.au

To obtain a copy of the NSW Recovery Plan, visit:
www.emergency.nsw.gov.au

To obtain a copy of the Australian Disaster Resilience Community Recovery Handbook 12, Communities Responding to Disasters: Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers (AIDR 2017), visit:
www.aidr.org.au

To obtain a copy of the National Principles of Disaster Recovery, visit:
www.aidr.org.au

Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers templates

Sample Generic Messages for Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers