

# After the bushfires: Surviving and volunteering

Ruth Webber and Kate Jones analyse the affect of participation in Victorian bushfire recovery programs on volunteers.

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the negative and positive implications for bushfire survivors becoming involved in a range of voluntary activities in the bushfire recovery programs following the 2009 Victorian bushfires. It uses data acquired as part of a study of recovery programs being run by Catholic social welfare agencies in several regions of Victoria. Some volunteers were involved in activities organised by organisations, others volunteered on an informal and ad hoc basis. Volunteering, while having enormous benefits to the volunteer, the recipient and the community, also came at a cost. Many volunteers worked long hours and for many months with the result that there were many instances of burnout and emotional exhaustion. Sustained volunteering involving intensive commitments of time resulted in role conflict between the demands of their family and the demands of volunteering. Volunteers found it difficult to reduce the amount of time spent on their volunteer activity, especially those on recovery committees. They also had difficulty handing over leadership roles to others. As volunteers became exhausted, their ability to make clear judgments was impeded and conflicts sometimes arose. <sup>R</sup>

## Introduction

In January and February 2009 Victoria experienced the worst bushfires in its history, resulting in the deaths of 173 people, mostly as a result of the Kilmore East-Murrindindi fires in the semi-rural areas north of Melbourne. Most occurred on what came to be known as Black Saturday, 7 February 2009. There have been several studies of the emotional and psychological needs of survivors (Bateman, 2010; Giljohann et al 2010).

The Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission report stated that the fires 'resulted in one of the largest recovery efforts seen in Australia' (VBRC 2010, p. 322). Previous studies have shown that after a natural disaster, there is a need for ad hoc volunteers to work in voluntary activities in the aftermath (Villagran, et al. 2006). Volunteers usually come from outside the affected community, but some come from within. This article discusses the consequences for bushfire survivors who became involved in voluntary activities as part of the community recovery process.

Kenny, McNevin and Hogan (2008) have distinguished between voluntary activity and formal volunteering. They defined voluntary activity as '*an activity that: is of benefit to the community; is undertaken without coercion; and is without voluntary reward*' (p. 46). Formal volunteering was defined as one possible type of voluntary activity which shares all the characteristics of voluntary activity but is distinguished by an organised context and designated volunteer positions. Voluntary activity and formal volunteering are both undertaken in the aftermath of natural disasters.

A study on capacity building after the Canberra 2003 fires found that enabling the development of social networks fosters a sense of control over people's lives and helps to develop resilient communities (Winkworth et al., 2009). Bonding between volunteers resulting in long-term friendship has been found to occur after a natural disaster (Allen, 2007). However, volunteering can also have negative consequences. A great deal of attention has been directed to examining stress and burnout (physical, mental and emotional exhaustion) among volunteers after natural disasters (Campbell et al., 2009; Maslach & Leiter, 2006; Pooley, Cohen & O'Connor, 2010). Other researchers have also found less positive outcomes stating that being exposed to the suffering of trauma victims can induce a secondary traumatic stress response in helpers (Simons, Gaher, Jacobs, Meyer & Johnson-Jimenez, 2005). Volunteering involves an intensive commitment of time particularly after a natural disaster, which makes volunteers vulnerable to stress and burnout. Even in non-disaster situations volunteers have been found to experience burnout which consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishments (Byron, Curtis & Lockwood, 2001). It has been reported that volunteers with a high level of commitment to volunteer activities are likely to

experience role conflict between the demands of their family and the demands of volunteering which may add to the risk of burnout (Kulik, 2006).

## Method

The researchers were commissioned by Centacare Catholic Family Services Victoria to conduct research over a three-year period (2010-2012) on the Catholic Bushfire Community Recovery Response, an initiative funded by a bushfire appeal established by the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne. The aim was to a) document and analyse the effectiveness of the strategies used by organisations to respond to the bushfire crisis in the relevant bushfire affected communities, and to identify the gaps in those strategies, and b) develop principles and guidelines that will enable Catholic dioceses to prepare for future natural disasters. The services and programs that comprised the Catholic Bushfire Community Recovery Response were directed to communities affected by the Kilmore East and Murrindindi Fires which burnt through bushland and small towns north of Melbourne, the Delburn, Churchill and Bunyip Fires in Gippsland, the Long Gully Fire in suburban Bendigo and the Redesdale Fire, 35 kilometres south-east of Bendigo.

## Participants

Purposive criterion and snowball sampling was used to obtain participants for this study. This enabled the researchers to maximise discovery of heterogeneous patterns that occurred and to identify common themes. The criterion was that participants would work for agencies or government organisations that were involved in the recovery or planning for recovery after the Victoria bushfires. It was intended that various levels of workers would be included i.e. policy advisors, senior managers, middle managers and workers on the ground. The selection process was also opportunistic in that the researchers made use of new leads to obtain new interviewees in organisations which were involved in community recovery.

It was intended that each participant would be interviewed up to 3 times over a three-year period. To-date the researchers have interviewed 35 people (15 males and 20 females), and conducted 31 interviews in the first round and 17 in the second round. The participants were selected from a range of sectors, including Catholic welfare agencies (19), local and state government (8), international recovery agencies (2), and others, i.e.; parish, school, clergy, church, medical (6). Some of the earliest interviewees raised the issue of survivors as volunteers. As a result this issue was pursued in subsequent interviews. In some instances the people interviewed about their role in community recovery were also volunteers in their own community. Although they were not targeted because they were volunteers, they provided additional insights.

In addition the research team attended meetings of the project steering committee and met with key people in the organisations for consultation, feedback and advice about the direction of the research. Interviews were progressively transcribed and analysed by the research team.

## Data collection and analysis

Data were collected by the interdisciplinary research team through face-to-face and telephone interviews and analysed. In keeping with the theory-generating approach, early interviews were open and exploratory, evolving over time to facilitate axial and selective coding. For example, initial interviews with staff were replete with references to volunteers and the issues of effective utilisation of volunteers as well as volunteer burnout. Moving from open coding to axial coding, interview questions were adapted to explore staff perceptions of specific volunteer experiences. Responses to these interview questions led to descriptions of types of volunteers, issues of conflicting obligations and difficulties of withdrawing from volunteering. Selective coding led to identification of issues associated with burnout and the value to the volunteer and the community of survivors as volunteers.

The large number of people who volunteered after the fires included both external and internal volunteers. Internal volunteers were local people who lived in fire affected areas. External volunteers were people from all walks of life, but not directly affected by the bushfires. This paper reports only on the experiences of internal volunteers. The type of volunteer activity in which bushfire survivors were engaged covered a wide range of activities, from unstructured and spontaneous offerings of help to neighbours, to participation in the community recovery committees established by local government. Volunteers later became involved in other types of community recovery efforts such as planting gardens, chopping wood and making jam.

## Results

### Informal volunteering

Immediately after the fires, many people from the local community were involved in the recovery process. Often the help provided was informal and there was no formal organisation overseeing these activities. In different communities locals gathered together for support and provided such things as food, drinking water, animal feed, emotional support as well as talking together about their experience. They were also involved in tasks such as shooting injured stock, clearing fallen trees, connecting generators and building fences.

*It was the local ones, ones that were locally based, that the staff and volunteers ... it was communities that were hit so communities were trying to look after each other, grieve together, celebrate together, go through an amazing time, life and death, everything happened in a couple of days. (#1)*

Some activities that were somewhat ad hoc in the early days after the fires, were formalised over time. An example of how a volunteering exercise could move from the informal to the formal among residents is 'Blaze Aid', an initiative to build fences for farmers who had lost them (Wilson, 2009).

### Formal volunteering

Three types of formal volunteering can be identified. The first type of formal volunteering involved locals working for an existing organisation that provided welfare and material aid. For some volunteers working for these organisations, it was a continuation of volunteer work for which they had been engaged prior to the fires. For example, in several fire affected areas the St Vincent de Paul Society supplied material aid to those who had lost property. In other situations existing organisations extended their roles and added new ones as occurred with Centacare Catholic Family Services. Churches already had strong links into the community including visiting and welfare programs, so they extended and adapted them as described by a local government participant: *'I mean, the churches have come on board more since, and have been around, and I know in some of our communities there's people around visiting' (#3)*. Members of these groups focussed their attention on individuals and families in need, often on a one-to-one practical level.

A second type of formal volunteering involved community committees that were for the most part in existence prior to the fires but whose role focussed more on community and social activities – social and sporting events, theatre, the arts. While these community organisations and committees were in existence prior to fires, they often grew in numbers and started to provide a greater range of social events for the community after the fires.

*There was little groups of people before from what I gather, ... they were running meals on a Friday night down at the cricket club and at first they limited it to 60 and there'd be so many coming and someone marked it as a hundred there and every Friday night it is booked out, you've got to put your name down weeks ahead if you want to come. (#9)*

A third type of formal volunteering was as part of committees and groups that were formed after the bushfires and were focussed on communicating and documenting the recovery process and developing strategies to prepare for the future. One of the responsibilities of local government is to establish community recovery committees (Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner, 2001). The make-up of the membership of committees varies both between and within different municipalities but should include the Municipal Recovery Manager, community development workers, councillors, community groups, affected persons, government agencies and non-government agencies as well as volunteers. Local government members played an active role in involving

local people to join these committees or finding ways to assist in developing community emergency plans.

*They are looking at developing their own community emergency plans which is good because we want to leave them feeling a little safe and secure and more confident about the future so that is part of the deal. Also we want them to think about how they could help others and how their experience can be utilized in a positive way. (#10)*

In each region there were other formal structures that coordinated welfare and relief efforts after the fires. For example, the Country Fire Authority; the State Emergency Service and the RSPCA<sup>1</sup> had volunteers from the local community doing a variety of tasks in addition to those normally associated with these organisations (VBRC, 2010).

### Positive outcomes of volunteering

There were many positive outcomes that emerged from both formal and informal volunteering. Volunteers, recipients of the volunteer efforts and the local community all benefitted. For many volunteers there were therapeutic outcomes accompanied by an increased capacity to cope and move forward with a degree of optimism. As one local government worker said in respect to community volunteers: *'It's been a lot of fun, we've had some fun things happen and some laughs. ... There have been just some amazing efforts from people'. (#3)*

Volunteers came together with others in solidarity, to bond with them and to reflect on their bushfire experiences. So while individuals benefited from the work done, the whole community also benefited. The committees and organisations played a significant role in assisting people to strengthen their networks and to talk among themselves.

*That's been great for the community because they've met one another and talked about what they've done and how they feel and particularly for the men cause they'll stand and have a beer and talk about it. (#9)*

A further advantage to the community was that new leaders emerged with new ideas and renewed vigour for new community development projects.

*So some community leaders, some existing and some new leaders emerged, they put up their hand, they made, they rang and starting getting referrals and resources and getting donations and taking donations and more and more whether it was needed or not, and there's all those sorts of issues too, where they became a place for the gifting, the focus, sometimes for themselves and others for the community. (#3)*

There were many comments made about how volunteers were developing leadership qualities which would be useful in the community for years to come. A local government official told us about a member of the community recovery committee who had developed new skills and confidence as a result of volunteering.

<sup>1</sup> Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

*I was just talking to a fellow about they've identified that they want to have a water storage tank in a certain area, how to get it done, ... I suppose as a result he is leading up a project to install these tanks and he's looked into all the bits and pieces and got quotes and is enjoying himself. He's a busy person, young bloke and I can see he is going to be such a great local community leader into the future and one day hopefully he will run for council and be a councillor because his levels of civic participation have gone up so much and he's a credible, decent young fellow and it is great to be involved in that personal development side of things. (#10)*

The analysis revealed that volunteer efforts by community members had the effect of linking them back into the community and establishing closer links with their neighbours or those who live in their community. Participants noted that this was beneficial to three groups; the community, the volunteers and those receiving assistance.

*I think that has a dual response and a lot of people, their notion of gift and gifting has changed, has come to the fore a bit. So I feel if they provide an opportunity for other community members to become reconnected or connected for the first time with some of those organisations, that might then develop a longer term relationship from that experience because it becomes an important part of their life at that time; that relationship might link in, and might provide a response to a need then or some time in the future. So I would see that as something that might expand. I think the communities have changed, I think there is still a much stronger sense of community and valuing of neighbours and the importance of life and what is important even though*

*people are trying to establish their new normal and getting on with things, there's a lot more tolerance and understanding from the way people talk. (#3)*

### Negative consequences

While the positive outcomes of volunteering were extensive there were also some negative consequences of local people becoming involved in volunteering. Volunteering, while having enormous benefits to the community came at cost. Some formal volunteer experiences resulted in heightened conflict and tension between those involved. This seemed to occur more frequently in recovery committees and in local recreational and community organisations rather than welfare agencies. Most community organisations appeared to work well with members cooperating. *'We tend to make collective decisions at public meetings. We're not very factionalised here so I guess we've avoided some of the things that we've heard have been going on in other areas' (#10)*. However, there were a number of instances where considerable friction between members of committees emerged: *'There's a lot of conflict going on in the three committees' (#2)*.

The source of the conflict was multifaceted and in some instances was already present prior to the fires; in others it was created by competing needs or by leadership tensions. In some cases a pre-existing voluntary community organisation was quite small and had members who had been actively involved for some time. After the fires local people became more active in the community and joined these organisations, sometimes taking on roles previously held by long-standing members as well as suggesting significant



Emergency response volunteers.

changes to the way the organisation was structured. This created tension between the old members and new members. Some interviewees also reported on cleavages and disagreements amongst community members about how the recovery process should take place and what the community needed. *'In some recovery community meetings you have people yelling at each other, people crying, tension' (#8)*. Factions formed and caused unpleasantness between community members who previously had been amicable.

*No one deals with the conflicts within the group that need to be dealt with in terms of different points of view, and they are at loggerheads with one another. Some community recovery committees are imploding because they wanted to kill each other, almost fisticuffs in one meeting. (#9)*

To put this in perspective, one participant observed that all communities have their tensions and that emergency situations do not cause them but they may escalate as a result of the trauma: *'Look I think there was tension in the town before the bushfire, I think it is one of those towns. Lots of towns, communities are like that, no community is perfectly, finely balanced.'* (#6)

Over commitment impacted on the volunteers' health and put strain on the family. Many volunteers put large amounts of physical and emotional energy into these volunteer activities at a time when there were numerous other demands on their physical and emotional resources. This resulted in them being worn out and in some cases doubly traumatised as they listened to others' stories of loss and grief. This was variously described by the workers as 'burnout', 'vicarious trauma' and 'exhaustion'.

*I think the volunteers that were doing it day in and day out, definitely in my viewpoint have got vicarious trauma so you have to think about that as well. (#8)*

*The ones who have given a lot to recovery are exhausted and the ones who have given a lot to the community and they are needing now to give it to themselves (#2)*

Another negative outcome of volunteers working long hours in their community was that the time they spend on these activities took them from their own farms, properties, jobs, businesses and families, all of which had also been affected by the fires.

*There's people out there working 80 hours a week on volunteer services for the bushfire for their community and are still trying to run their B&B or have their business to run and have to put food on the table so you are seeing that switch now between "I've given my heart and soul to this recovery process for 14 to 15 months now, yet I come back to my block and look out the back and my property is a mess" and "my relationships are a mess" so I think in terms of resilience it depends on who you talk to. (#2)*

Some volunteers recognised the personal cost it was having and reduced the time they were putting into these activities; others found it harder to withdraw or to pull back.

*Since then I think a lot of people, in terms of the people involved in the community recovery committees or relief centres or things like that, you can sense a lot of burn out and a lot of people are starting to shift away from spending so much time in the groups. (#2)*

Some volunteers who were still involved 12-18 months after the fires appeared to be burnt-out and over-committed, and to lose some of their edge and the ability to make sound decisions. It was noted that people who had been working as volunteers in various capacities over a long period of time sometimes did not make the best decisions, and this had a flow-on effect on the recovery programs that had been put in place.

*One of the things we've noticed now is that the people who have sat on these committees and been very hard workers in these groups, they have become tired, it also affects their decision making process so sometimes the common sense doesn't prevail due to their tiredness and I suppose it is no different to a footballer when they are towards the end of the game and their skill level tends to drop, likewise it happens with individuals where, as strong and healthy as they can be, it does take its toll on the individuals and common sense doesn't always prevail. (#7)*

### Handing over - withdrawing

There did not seem to be any easy way for people who had been spending large amounts of time and effort on volunteering to ease back or to hand over to new comers. Further, it was claimed by several participants that people's health or wellbeing was being affected by the demands upon them. Often volunteers did not recognise the toll it was taking on their own wellbeing, and one worker claimed that they did not take kindly to suggestions that they should pull back on their volunteer efforts. One manager noted that the only solution was to wait until they came to their own realisation and then help them to find ways to withdraw that maintain the service but do not detract from their achievement.

*They want to contribute, want to help, got things they can give but then they go into this adrenalin driven position where everyone around them is concerned that they are working so hard and about to fall over and the reality is that you can't stop someone in their tracks and take away the power you've given them, no one is going to give it up until they fall over and the best you can do is sit on the side and go: "We'll wait till you fall, pick you up along the way and fluff you up" and hopefully they'll be able to be restored. (#5)*

## Discussion

Having processes for handing over or taking turns in leadership roles seemed to be a critical factor in minimizing conflict and avoiding burnout. The researchers asked the participants who raised the issue of burnout and over-commitment if they saw a solution to these problems. One participant suggested that in future natural disasters, those involved in setting recovery and community committees might have in their guidelines a rotating membership and responsibilities and to avoid having the same people on several committees. However, it was noted that getting people to recognise their own limitations would not be easy.

*I don't think there is a real solution but there are things you can do along the way that will benefit people and one of those things is suggesting that you have an interchange bench on the committee, where you have a person who steps out and someone who hasn't been on the committee that they step in and have their fresh minds and thoughts. They can do that, give the people time off who are in the committee or group and try not to get them to double up so they are not acting in committees that have got similar roles because it just wears them out and becomes a mundane operation for them where they've already presented their case to one meeting, then they go to the next and present the same case again and they become oblivious to the importance of that so not to spread themselves too wide or thin and to try and target more individuals to be active in those groups. (#7)*

The internal volunteers, people who had experienced the bushfires themselves and then went on to become involved in the recovery as volunteers as well as participants and clients, share some of the qualities and experiences of all volunteers. However they are also in a special category because they of their dual role as both helpers and helped. This is an area which would repay further research.

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