

The critical need to support Victoria's spontaneous volunteers

*Volunteering Victoria, the state peak body for volunteering is calling for **the development and implementation of a well-resourced spontaneous volunteering¹ strategy and coordinated responses**, informed by best practice models. A strategy and operational plan to coordinate and support community members who are motivated to give their time is crucial to harnessing the collective power of community-led volunteer responses in times of social crises.*

The pandemic and recent natural disasters have greatly tested the capacity of communities to come together for the collective good and wellbeing of its members. Emergency Management Victoria's (EMV) [Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management](#) describes community resilience as “the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses and systems to survive, adapt and thrive no matter what kind of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience”². This includes the multiple crises facing society including climate change, poverty, mental health, unemployment, extreme acts, and disease. Communities face a long path to recovery following the pandemic, and climate change modelling predicts continued and increased extreme heat and natural disasters, such as the current flooding emergency in Victoria.

Volunteers make an enormous contribution in preparation for, during, and after crises. They are at the forefront of delivering essential community responses and services, reflected in volunteer-led responses to bushfire recovery and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this contribution requires extensive planning and co-ordination to ensure the safety and support of volunteers, the public they seek to assist, and the emergency management workforce³.



“Volunteers have been key in COVID-19 community responses, providing urgent services and community aid. Volunteers in this setting make an enormous contribution, but they are often unsupported despite being exposed to difficult situations and potential trauma. There is a need for increased support, coordination, and mental health first aid for these volunteers.”

– Volunteering Victoria member

1 ‘Spontaneous volunteering’ refers to those people who are motivated to help out in the aftermath of a disaster or emergency and want to assist with relief and recovery efforts. These are distinct from emergency management volunteers who are recruited, trained, and managed by emergency management organisations.

2 [Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management](#). Emergency Management Victoria. 2017.

3 The growing interest in spontaneous volunteering is well documented through Emergency Management literature and volunteering statistics. Organisations can also get ISO 22319 accreditation in Community resilience for planning the involvement of spontaneous volunteers

The Inspector-General for Emergency Management's [Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian fire season](#) found that there is "no system in place or defined lead agency to plan for and coordinate spontaneous volunteers"⁴. Published in October 2021, the State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) [Roles and Responsibilities document](#) nominated EMV and Bushfire Recovery Victoria as recovery lead agencies for coordination of spontaneous volunteers, with the Australian Red Cross and Volunteering Victoria designated as recovery support agencies. However, there is currently no resourcing attached to the plan to enable Volunteering Victoria to fulfill this key role. It is also important to note that while volunteers offer critical support in preparedness and relief, the SEMP Roles and Responsibilities document currently fails to account for this core function.

Volunteering Victoria acknowledges the extensive program of work being undertaken by the government to build community resilience and improve responses to natural disasters and other community shocks. However, with the recent discontinuation of [weVolunteer](#), the community recovery volunteering program funded initially through COVID-19 rapid response funding, there is currently no alternative to support spontaneous volunteer coordination. Without coordination and resourcing for spontaneous volunteering, community responses to natural disasters will be hindered, place increased pressure on paid staff and reduce capacity for the delivery of essential community recovery programs.



"During a crisis everyone wants a quick and well-coordinated volunteer response, yet funding only comes in the aftermath of disasters. There needs to be strategic thinking and funding in 'blue skies' to plan for volunteer involvement and to ensure readiness when a crisis hits."

– Mark Pearce, CEO, Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Victoria makes the following recommendations to support spontaneous volunteering and community recovery in Victoria:

1. The development of a Spontaneous Volunteering Strategy in partnership with Volunteering Victoria and other relevant agencies providing planning and coordination for all volunteering roles involved in community recovery, with the exception of first responder volunteers.
2. Government investment in scoping and research on best practice approaches to spontaneous volunteer co-ordination.
3. Sustainable investment in the capacity building of place-based organisations (local government and Volunteer Support Services) to enable them to engage and activate volunteers in response to community need.
4. Funding for Volunteering Victoria to engage in the work and responsibilities associated with being a recovery support agency as part of the SEMP.

Place-based approaches driven by local community needs are essential to promoting resilient, thriving communities, and empowering communities during times of crisis. Resourcing the coordination and support of spontaneous volunteers is critical to enabling our communities to respond and recover from the unprecedented social crises they are and will continue to increasingly face.

Timeline of Victoria's Spontaneous Volunteering Response

2009

Black Saturday fires

2012

Victorian Emergency Management Reform

Following the Royal Commission into the Black Saturday fires the reform found that “following the 2009 bushfires, more than 22,000 spontaneous volunteers offered their help online or by phone, but only a small number were used.” It highlighted “deployed staff and trained volunteers were re-directed to manage these unsolicited volunteers and donations”.

2015

HelpOUT funded

The program included a spontaneous volunteer co-ordination and matching portal and the Managers of Spontaneous Emergency Volunteers (MSEV) initiative. The program aimed to better coordinate and support the management of spontaneous volunteer offers, freeing up other resources in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.

2018

HelpOUT funding cut

2019–2020

Black Summer bushfires

2020 ongoing

COVID-19 pandemic

2020

weVolunteer program funded

The program was funded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to promote community resilience and recovery through volunteering. This included strengthening the supply of skilled and available volunteers to support community recovery in Victoria and supporting volunteer-involving organisations to access a pool of credentialed volunteers across all regions of Victoria.

2021

Inquiry into the 2019–2020 Victorian Fire Season Phase 2 Report

The inquiry led by the Inspector General for Emergency Management found that there is “no system in place or defined lead agency to plan for and coordinate spontaneous volunteers”.

May 2022

weVolunteer funding cut

October 2022

Victorian flood crisis

Climate modelling predicts continued and worsening extreme heat and natural disasters. The need for sustained planning, coordination, and support of spontaneous volunteers has never been greater.