



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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VESEP grants

A reminder that applications for this year's Volunteer Emergency Services Equipment Program close on 31 May 2022 and are due to your District ACFO by this date.

You can access the VFBV VESEP Help Pack from the VFBV website or by calling the office. The help pack is full of info, tips and ideas to assist you put together your VESEP application.

VOL WEEK

National Volunteer Week will be celebrated between the 16th and 22nd May. On behalf of VFBV we pass on our deep gratitude, respect and appreciation to all CFA volunteers for the work you do in your communities 24/7.

During the pandemic CFA volunteers have maintained their world class service delivery, adapted community education activities to ensure they continue uninterrupted, and dealt with a fire season that brought fire, storm and floods also.

You have stood by your communities through thick and thin and without fuss. Hold your heads high. Thank you and well done for your incredible dedication and service to the people of Victoria and beyond.

VOLUNTEER TRAINERS

Want to help your fellow volunteers and contribute to CFA training by becoming a formal trainer and assessor? VFBV is continuing to pursue improvements to CFA's Trainer and Assessor program, that has already achieved approval for new investment in training qualifications, professional development opportunities, access to workwear and PPC, and better access to teaching aids like tablets, computers and learning materials.

VFBV encourages members who are interested in becoming TAs to look on the Training page on Members Online or search 'VTA' on Members Online to find out more information and access nomination forms. Alternatively, your local Coordinator Learning Development at District will be able to assist and can explain the endorsement process.

VFBV AFFILIATION FOR 2022/23

Thank you for members' continued strong show of support!

More than 93% of Brigades demonstrated strong support for VFBV's important work representing and advocating for all CFA volunteers. Thank-you to all brigades and groups who affiliated last year.

In the coming weeks VFBV will be posting out the 2022/23 renewal notices for your Brigade/Group's VFBV Affiliation and Welfare Fund subscriptions. These will be mailed out to Brigade and Group secretaries with a due date of 30 June 2022.

Those brigades that pay their VFBV affiliations before 30 June will automatically be entered into a draw to win one of four equipment prizes valued at approximately \$4,000. The prizes have for the third year running been donated by GAAM Emergency Products and Powder-safe and we sincerely thank them for their continued generous support.

We also strongly encourage

As we put another fire season behind us, this would typically be the time of year that many brigades move into their planning and recovery stages.

With all brigade officer positions being two-year terms, 50 percent of brigades will have had or will hold their elections over the coming weeks in preparation for current terms expiring on June 30. For many of those 606 brigades, this will be a period of reflection on the previous two years, as well as discussions on the hopes and aspirations of the brigades and its members for the next two as current leaders and prospective leaders consider their roles.

For many, and with the fire danger period behind us, it is also a chance for brigades to enjoy the reduced tempo that this time of year often brings, and which typically allows brigades, groups and members to rest up and recover from the fire season just gone, while juggling the normal day-to-day incidents that keep us busy all year long.

It is with this in mind that I urge brigade and group management teams to consider spending some time considering a long-term reengagement strategy for members who

TIME WELL SPENT

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

may have been left behind over the last couple of tumultuous years of reform, change and the pandemic.

While the pandemic in particular has made training and getting together really difficult and no doubt has impacted on the morale and cohesion of brigades and groups, for many the effects of the pandemic are still very much in play.

While public COVID restrictions are being wound down, there are many still under immense pressure dealing with the knock-on effects, such as those frontline workers still involved in areas under crisis like our health system and other sectors experiencing high absenteeism due to vaccine mandates and isolation restrictions. Employers and self employed are also grappling with these same pressures.

There are also members continuing to care for high-risk individuals or family members who need to continue exercising self-discipline for their own risk settings.

In other words, brigades will need to plan long-term and be patient in order to strike a good balance between supporting members who continue to have life pressures, but also looking to ensure those members remain connected and engaged with CFA and the brigade in general to avoid them being left behind or worse, stepping away altogether.

I've had many a conversation with a volunteer expressing to me they are looking to hang up their overalls. My advice has always been the same, in that you need to do what is best for you but that I urge you not to make a hasty decision during a crisis, as things can change quickly, and you don't want to look back and regret it.

Rushing people to return before they are ready risks being the straw that breaks the camels back. But conversely - leaving it too late risks these members being further disenfranchised or disconnected from CFA and their brigade and potentially losing interest in ever wanting to return. This is a complex problem and will require many wise heads.

Given how hard and long it takes to train new members, and the importance of retaining experience and knowledge gleaned sometimes over many decades - there is great value in reaching out to members one-on-one and building an understanding of where they're at and exploring options to reengage them at an appropriate pace.

Give yourself some time and space to allow your emotions to subside. The same for those impacted by vaccine mandates. While vaccination still remains the most effective means to protect you and your family, forced vaccinations hopefully won't be here forever.

We are not alone in this regard. National bodies across the volunteer sector have all reported a sharp disruption to volunteerism during the

COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in a report on volunteer involving organisations across Victoria, Volunteering Victoria reported a 50.2% decline in the volunteering participation rate, with a net decline of almost 64.1% in volunteering hours during the first few months of the pandemic.

For those who have needed to take a bit of a break from their CFA duties over the last little while, I would urge you to keep your brigade informed as to where you're at, as a shared understanding and keeping the lines of communication open usually works wonders and helps the brigade or group forward plan upcoming training and addressing any capability gaps caused by your absence.

And with National Volunteer Week being held between the 16th and 22nd May, this is a great opportunity to reflect on why we volunteer in the first place. This year's theme is 'Better Together' which sums up CFA nicely.

In the 3V's final report 'Uncovering the hidden value' which VFBV contributed to via the reference group, readers would recall that the value of emergency management volunteering was expressed through three concurrent layers.

These were emergency management value (the value of the contributions made by volunteers to the direct outcomes achieved before, during and after emergencies); the community strengthening value (the broader value that volunteers make that strengthen their communities and building community resilience); and the volunteer personal value which describes the value of volunteering to volunteers themselves.

All up, Lateral Economics estimated a conservative indicative annual value of between \$1.9 to \$2.5 billion dollars of public value generated by Victoria's 100,000 emergency management volunteers, of which CFA volunteers make up more than half.

And to give you context of the incredible economic force that volunteers are, a group of academics from John Hopkins University, USA published a report in 2011 that sought to measure the economic value of volunteer work globally.

They found that nearly one billion people throughout the world volunteer, and they coined the term 'Volunteer land' to describe that if all those volunteers were comprised a single country - it would be the second most populous country in the world, with a total economic value of their volunteering US\$1.348 trillion making their volunteer contribution the seventh largest economy in the world.

However, it is that final layer I mentioned earlier (the volunteer personal value) that often gets overlooked in our discussions amongst each other. From a volunteer perspective, this is understandable. Using the VFBV Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency

survey as a guide, we know more than 90% of CFA volunteers state the reason for joining is to help the community they live in, or the sense of fulfilment they get from supporting their community in a meaningful way. This explains why we don't frequently talk about what are the direct benefits to volunteers from their volunteering, as it's not in our DNA to think of ourselves.

It goes without saying, that CFA volunteers are critical to Victoria's emergency management arrangements, and they are the single largest collective of professionally trained and experienced first responders protecting lives and property across the State.

However, with many re-evaluating their lives and reflecting on what's important to them or not, it perhaps is a good time to put it on the table and ensure the full spectrum of the value of volunteers is understood and discussed, especially amongst volunteers themselves.

Supporting this theory is Andrew Haldane, who as the Chief Economist of the Bank of England, gave a lecture to the Society of Business Economists in London in 2014 called 'In giving, how much do we receive?'

He claimed that the global 'volunteer army' would be larger even still if individuals had greater self-awareness of the private benefits of volunteering. He went on to state that research has shown that people tend systematically to underestimate the positive effect for them of giving to others. He quotes an experiment where people were randomly assigned \$20 to spend, either on themselves or others. Those who were told to spend it on others subsequently reported significantly higher subjective wellbeing, than those who spent it on themselves.

So, what is the personal value from volunteering? The 3V's report attributed personal value amongst emergency management volunteers as: a sense of satisfaction from helping their local community; improvements to their own mental wellbeing particularly through purpose and social belonging; and improvements to their own skills and human capital.

More broadly, the UK government for example reports the perceived benefits from volunteers as reported directly by them as: enjoyment; a sense of personal achievement; making a difference; meeting new people; broadening their life experience; meeting different people from different backgrounds; improved mental wellbeing; increasing their confidence; learning new skills and experience; feeling less isolated; improving their physical health and improving their employment prospects from the increased skills learned while volunteering.

So, if for whatever reason you have stepped away from your CFA activities over the last little while, use this time to reflect on what's important to you and consider reconnecting. No doubt, if you joined CFA to help others and your community, that is likely still a high motivator for you.



And from a VFBV perspective, we will continue contributing to the change management journey of ensuring CFA is the best it can be.

While all change takes time, important progress is being made to ensure CFA's focus is on its frontline service delivery and the people who deliver those services to form not only Victoria's largest emergency service, but Victoria's largest volunteer and community based service dedicated to serving the community from the community.

Backing up the evidence from VFBV's annual survey, the UK's National Council for Voluntary Organisations published its national survey in 2019 on the volunteer experience called 'Time Well Spent' which is instructive reading for anyone operating within a management role of a volunteer agency, brigade or organisation.

Not only did it find that those who give more frequently, benefit more from the experience, but an overwhelming 93% of volunteers ranked 'enjoyment' as the highest of perceived benefits. This should act as a warning for CFA and other formal volunteering organisations where bureaucracy and administration is often quoted as strangling all the 'fun' out of the experience.

And while first responders would never describe attending emergency incidents as 'fun', the overall enjoyment and satisfaction from being part of an organisation that makes such as incredible difference to people's lives and their perceived individual ability to contribute to that work and feel trained and supported in the services they provide should not be overlooked.

Researchers refer to the 'tipping point' of negative experiences that include: too much of their time being taken up; being out of pocket; feeling pressured by the organisation to do more; feeling unappreciated and being in conflict with others as significant contributors to dissatisfaction.

As I have often remarked during this reform journey, CFA volunteers will never walk away from helping their communities.

However, if they feel their time is being wasted or could be better spent elsewhere, or they are being taken for granted or exploited - they will leave CFA and find another worthy organisation within their communities where they can make a difference. CFA must be an organisation of choice that appeals both to today's volunteer, as well as tomorrow's. We shouldn't stop until it is.