

Media Release: 17 August 2018

Giving a voice to the emergency service volunteers

Volunteer interviews reveal what's needed to improve retention rates in WA

When disaster strikes in the regional and suburban communities of Western Australia (WA) we rely heavily on volunteers to execute the emergency response plan. There are over 26,000 emergency service volunteers in WA, but average annual volunteer turnover is around 15 percent across all volunteer services, and it has fluctuated between 12-18 percent since 2006. In the State Emergency Service (SES), this turnover rate is even higher, with 24 percent leaving each year.

Extensive training coupled with high turnover means there's a significant financial and time cost, potentially jeopardising the ongoing delivery of SES services.

The Bushfire and Natural Hazard CRC's Dr Darja Kragt, a Research Fellow at the School of Psychological Sciences, University of Western Australia (UWA), will explore what improvements are needed to better recruit, train and retain volunteers in WA at AFAC18 powered by INTERSCHUTZ next month.

Dr Kragt's presentation, '*Lived Experiences of Emergency Services Volunteers In Western Australia*' will reveal insights from interviews with volunteers in suburban and regional areas of WA, understanding how the 'meaning, identity and emotions shape volunteer experiences at the SES'.

"We focused on volunteers' expectations and stereotypes around SES volunteering prior to joining the service; the meaning that volunteers derive from being a part of a likeminded community; emotional experiences; issues surrounding volunteer recruitment, induction, and training. We find it interesting that volunteers perceive disaster response as a positive experience. But like many of us, they dislike bureaucracy and boring training.

"These insights provide real reasons why volunteers leave the SES and identify areas of the recruitment and the training process that could be improved," said Dr Kragt.

Karen Roberts, Human Resources Director, Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) said state and national trends show a decrease in emergency services volunteering across Australia, which poses a challenge for hazard management agencies.

"We rely on volunteers to build more resilient communities. We train volunteers to be able to prevent, prepare for and respond to natural disasters and emergencies, providing training in first aid, navigation, administration, communications, marine rescue, community engagement, prevention and mitigation incident management, leadership, management and support.

"Since forming in November 2012, DFES has made considerable progress in identifying ways to improve how it recruits, prepares and supports its volunteers.

"These insights are vital to increasing retention across not only WA, but Australia and New Zealand," said Ms Roberts.

Other topics exploring how to expand and work with volunteers across Australia will include:

- Kevin Walsh AFSM, Assistant Commissioner, Queensland Fire and Emergency Services, *QFES Volunteerism Strategy*
- Kerry Laurie, Country Fire Authority, *Brigade viability: using evidenced based data to identify risk and improve service delivery*
- Andrew McCullough, Volunteer Strategist, NSW State Emergency Service, *Creating partnerships to drive volunteer capability*
- James Butterworth, Paramount Projects, *The role of volunteers in community risk assessments - Volunteer marine rescue resource to risk model*
- Dr Tarn Kruger, RMIT University & Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, *Volunteering into the future – disaster events, local governments & communities*
- Charlie Moir ESM, President National SES Volunteers Association and Gordon Hall ESM, President, SES Volunteer Association WA, *Changing lives through volunteering*
- Ken Middleton, Chair, Council of Australian Volunteer Fire Association, *CAVFA working to represent volunteer firefighters across the country*

Leaders including Karen Roberts, Director Human Resources, DFES WA and Craig Spencer, Head of Community Engagement, Bankwest, will continue the discussion on volunteering in 'The State of Volunteering in Australia' panel on Friday 7 September. The panel will explore new and emerging factors influencing emergency management volunteerism.

Dr Kragt will present during AFAC18 powered by INTERSCHUTZ on Thursday 6 September, at the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre.

For more information on the program visit: <http://www.afacconference.com.au/>

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Notes to editors:

- Keynote speakers are available for interviews via the media contacts listed below
- Available for interview on request via media contacts below:
 - Stuart Ellis, CEO, Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authority Council (AFAC)
 - Dr Richard Thornton, CEO, Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre
 - Harvey Stockbridge, Managing Director, Deutsche Messe
- Complimentary media passes are available, apply by sending name, position and publication to jessica@zadroagency.com.au

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Images:

All images of AFAC17 can be found on the [AFAC Flickr page](#) and can be used royalty free.

1. Dr Darja Kragt, a Research Fellow at the School of Psychological Sciences, University of Western Australia (UWA)



2. AFAC17 showfloor



About AFAC18:**5 - 8 September | Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre****Changing lives in a changing world**

Emergency management is not an easy task and is not getting easier. With a growing population moving into new areas, our changing climate, bushfires, floods, cyclones, storms and heatwaves are impacting our lives in new ways. Innovating in the face of disruptions and developing our people to successfully manage organisations of the future is a key challenge. AFAC18 looks at change as the new normal, how collaboration and resilience is driving performance and the innovations in emergency management that are helping our people to weather change.

Held over four action-packed days AFAC18 powered by INTERSCHUTZ will attract delegates and visitors from emergency and security services agencies, all levels of government, non-government organisations, research and education institutions from Australia and worldwide.

The AFAC18 program is co-produced by the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC) and the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC and will this year feature the inaugural Australian Disaster Resilience Conference, which will run concurrently with the AFAC18 program.

AFAC18 powered by INTERSCHUTZ is a joint venture between AFAC and Deutsche Messe, trading in Australia as Hannover Fairs Pty Ltd.

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