



Inquiry into Unpaid Work

The ACT State Emergency Services
Volunteers Association (SESVA)

May 2024



Contents

Inquiry into Unpaid Work	0
Acknowledgements	2
Acknowledgement of Country	2
About the ACTSESVA	2
Background	3
Terms of Reference	3
Our Submission.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Assessment of work value – what we do	7
Equity of funding and resource allocation	8
Diversity and Physical and Mental Health of Volunteers	9
Recommendations	10
Acronyms	11

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the ACT SES and RFS volunteers their diversities and abilities. The volunteers skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering emergency service response to the Canberra community and in making Canberra a better place to live.

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the ACT and recognise any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

About the ACTSESVA

The ACT State Emergency Service Volunteers Association (**ACTSESVA**) provides an important function by representing the ACTSES volunteers that work tirelessly during the Territory's natural and human disasters.

Through the Association the SES volunteers are given a voice on improving and implementing changes within the service. In a nutshell the ACTSESVA takes care of Volunteers so they can continue taking care of the broader community.

The ACTSESVA website is primarily to provide information about ACT SESVA's activities. It is designed to assist in promoting effective conduct and communications between the ACTSESVA Board and its members

Background

The ACT Government's *Inquiry into Unpaid Work* commenced on 3 April 2024. The closing date for submissions is 17 May 2024 with the reporting date yet to be confirmed.¹

Terms of Reference

The Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality will inquire into and report on matters relating to the economic and wellbeing-related impact of unpaid work in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), with particular reference to:

1. the economic contribution of unpaid work including but not limited to:
 - a. parental and familial work;
 - b. unpaid caring work;
 - c. unpaid placements and traineeships; and
 - d. volunteering;
2. how non-paid work is captured under the ACT Government's wellbeing framework;
3. the dynamic between unpaid and paid work, including:
 - a. how participation in one affects the other;
 - b. whether opportunities for both are equitable; and
 - c. demographic differences between participants in unpaid and paid work;
4. opportunities to support and recognise unpaid work in the ACT, including through the ACT Government's:
 - a. enterprise arrangements;
 - b. economic development; and
 - c. economic policies;
5. challenges faced by unpaid workers in the ACT, including those faced by individuals and communities as they relate to:
 - a. people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background;
 - b. people with a disability;
 - c. trans- and gender diverse people;
 - d. women;
 - e. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and
 - f. people living on a low income; and
6. any other related matters.

¹ Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, *Inquiry into Unpaid Work* at <<https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/in-committees/committees/egee/inquiry-into-unpaid-work#tab2424485-1id>>

Our Submission

Our submission focuses on the significant contribution the volunteer members of the ACTSES make to the community; for instance in the just passed Storm Season for the Service, the ACTSES received 2,316 requests for assistance over the period. This was a 55 % increase in assistance to the community against last year's High Risk Weather Season (HRWS). The major severe weather event of the Season occurred on 8 December which saw a WhoG response, initially lead and coordinated by ACTSES. During this time Volunteers (including RFS) responded to 1079 requests for assistance, which equated to over 13,000 volunteer hours.

The impact of such increases in hours required to be given up by volunteers in support of the community has a corresponding impact in the volunteer's family and work life putting stresses on recruitment and retention of volunteers. The seemingly continued impact of climate change is an unknown affecting the strategic planning and implementation of recruitment and retention strategy.

Additionally, a lack of equity and forward planning in funding for resources and facilities for volunteers (both SES and RFS) seems to be occurring in the ACT Government and its public service agencies. A focus to paid Emergency Services, while understandable in the context of wider public safety, doesn't excuse the fact that a lack of proper and equitable funding to volunteer services is required to ensure that the community continues to receive the first-class professional (but unpaid) service of ACTSES Volunteers.

Introduction

'In Australia, over 44,000 State Emergency Services (SES) volunteers are the first responders to emergencies in their communities. The SES Volunteers provide assistance to many emergency situations including flood, storm, bush search and rescue and give relief to those impacted. Each year, SES volunteers donate over two million hours of their time to help others in need and make a huge difference in their communities.'²

In the ACT there are currently around 330 volunteer members spread across six operational units and one operations support unit with facilities distributed across the ACT.³ In the 2023/2024 period over 58,000 hours of volunteer time was spent supporting the ACT community in this way^{4 5 6}:

- Admin: 1016 Hours
- Community: 1954 Hours
- Meeting: 1482 Hours
- Operations: 7608 Hours
- Training: 24,408 Hours
- Duty Officers⁷: 20,408 Hours
- Other: 1338 Hours

While most volunteer hours are (and will always likely be) dedicated to training, there has been increased dedication required to Operational and Community activities in the past few years. Additionally, the Administration burden to managing volunteers continues to grow on the volunteer leadership (volunteers themselves) and a trend towards a public service thinking manner with volunteers is occurring.

A half-day strategy meeting was held with the ACTSES Unit Commanders and the ESA SES Staff in December 2023. During the strategy meeting it was highlighted the significant growth in commitment needed from volunteers and the projected growth into the near future (out to 2030). While this was a strategy meeting the key issue highlighted at the meeting was at present there is an absence of recognition of funding to that increase in ESA and JACS.

² See [Australian SES – Emergency Services Resources](https://www.ses.org.au) (https://www.ses.org.au) for details of all State and Territory SES.

³ Numbers for volunteers fluctuate over the year as people leave the service, move away from the ACT, or simply take a break from the service for family and work reasons.

⁴ In 2022/23 there were over 66,000 hours of volunteer time committed to all activity (notably this was during the COVID crisis)

⁵ Note: This is **recorded** time in systems set up to record volunteer hours. Additional time should be considered in areas where access to a time recorder is not available – particularly for such areas as Administration and Meetings.

⁶ To note during the recently passed Storm Season (September 23 – March 24) a 55% increase was recorded in Volunteer assistance to the community against last year's High Risk Weather Season (HRWS). A major severe weather event of the Season occurred on 8 December which saw a WhoG response, initially lead and coordinated by ACTSES - responding to 1079 requests for assistance, which equated to over 13,000 volunteer hours.

⁷ Duty Officers are volunteers required to be a contact point for their unit in the event of an Emergency (24/7 - 365). The role is shared around unit leadership positions,

The increase in hours required to be contributed by volunteers is, in the opinion of the ACTSESVA, not sustainable over the longer term and clear strategic thinking of suitable models for funding, recruiting, and retaining of volunteers needs to be recognised by the government and its agencies – JACS and ESA.

The rest of this submission will cover the following points:

- Assessment of work value – what we do
- Equity in funding and resource allocation
- Diversity and Physical and Mental Health of Volunteers
- Recommendations

Assessment of work value - what we do

Under the Australian Capital Territory Emergency Act 2004 the ACTSES has as its main function to undertake planning and response operations for storms and floods. The SES also has the following additional functions:

- (a) to undertake civil defence planning and civil defence operations.
- (b) to undertake assistance operations to support other entities in the exercise of their functions under this Act; Example assisting police officers, fire and rescue service members or ambulance service members in dealing with any incident or emergency.
- (c) to undertake assistance operations to support other entities in relation to searches; Example assisting Airservices Australia with a search and rescue service operation under the Air Services Act 1995 (Cwlth).
- (d) to provide support for community organisations to the extent that the chief officer (SES) considers would assist the training of members of the service.
- (e) to undertake any other operation that the chief officer (SES) considers would benefit the community; and
- (f) to undertake an operation prescribed by regulation

Most of the operational commitments of the SES volunteers are to dealing with storms and their impact on the community.

The second most significant commitment of SES volunteers in the ACT is to assisting Police in searches (missing person and forensic searches); the SES provides the trained workforce with the required skill to allow the Police to focus on the broader operational picture.

During significant bushfire events the SES are used as a logistics support group (operating as transport, Staging Area staff, and logistics officers and scribes in the Incident Management Centre) helping their RFS focus on the operational aspects of the fire as well as being available for community door knocks in vulnerable areas.⁸

Additionally during the COVID medical crisis hit the ACT the SES took up roles in food distribution for vulnerable people as well as support for schools in preparing for student return to classrooms.

Finally, the SES are used often in community education campaigns around emergencies of storms and fires likely to impact the ACT.

⁸ This type of assistance is correspondingly returned during significant storm events whereby RFS assists the SES with pumping and chainsaw related jobs.

Additionally there are reports (and informal volunteer chatter) that in recent times that ACTSES may be being used in inappropriate ways in place of services that should be provided by ACT Government employees.⁹

All these activities require volunteers to give their unpaid time to ensuring these aims are met, but unpaid should not correlate with under resourced allocation of funds. Nor should the idea that SES volunteers are an extension of the public service and the manner of working with volunteers is a structured boss employee relationship with associated deadlines and responsibilities to do as one is told as decisions are made for you. The successful way to work with volunteers is to do just that, work with them, and not think you can operate in a system of volunteers working to some regimented structure.

Equity of funding and resource allocation

The funding of SES volunteers varies across States and Territory (States generally have a mix of State and Local Council funding). In the ACT the funding of the SES is linked into funding of the ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate (JACS) of the ACT Public Service – specifically under the Security and Emergency Management Division (SEMD) which contains the operational service unit the Emergency Services Authority (ESA).

Specific understanding of the financial complexity of this structure is outside of the ACTSESVA boards knowledge.¹⁰ What we do understand though is in the allocation of any monies for volunteers we (and the RFS) are the very poor cousins in a sometime generous allocation to other services – particularly in relation to facilities and services. Information provided to Unit Commanders by ESA staff is that the SES budget had only increased 1.3% to 1.8% **in the last decade** at the same time as growth in volunteer numbers and need for volunteer commitment has been sought by the Government and the community.

Some may argue that the paid professional services (as opposed to the unpaid professional services like the SES and RFS) should be well funded and serviced. The view of the ACTSESVA is that is not the issue. The issue, over the past years, seems always to be insufficient attention or even understanding of what such volunteer services need or what an adequate funding of volunteers should look like to achieve the community's needs.

In part it is the belief of the ACTSESVA that perhaps this relates to the complexity of the structure of ESA sitting within a Section of a Directorate (JACS) with the body of JACS having little or no knowledge of volunteers, what they do or how they need to communicate and engage with volunteers. Recent engagement with volunteers around the Joint Emergency Service Centre (JESC) with JACS facilities has highlight the complete absence of any support to volunteers or understanding of the

⁹⁹ [Accusations Housing ACT inappropriately using emergency line to request property repairs | Riotact \(the-riotact.com\)](#)

¹⁰ Note: Access to a detailed ESA budget is not readily available to volunteers or the ACTSESVA – the ESA does not seem to provide details publicly of how it is spending money and does not provide an annual report (Annual Reporting being the responsibility of JACS since 2006). Public documents such as ACT Government Budget papers are insufficiently detailed to the level where we would see ACTSES information and insufficient detail of ACTSES expenditure could be found in JACS Annual reporting.

impact of decisions made or even considered, and without adequate consultation (effectively zero) or a basic explanation of the reasons for decisions that have been made. In the view of the ACTSESVA the treatment of the volunteers in this process was not only disrespectful but also completely at odds with the public service code of conduct.¹¹

Recent discussions with the ACTSES Chief Officer highlighted that barely 7 percent of the budgeting is allocated to the volunteer area (RFS and SES) and even that must be a fight for that small crumb. Such inadequate funding means the areas such as administrative support tools for supporting volunteers or understanding the challenges such as those defined in the terms of reference number five above are not developed.¹²

The clear planning to facilities and management of such for SES seems to be a stop start affair with a clear absence of engagement with volunteers noted from recent interactions. There are some positive signs in relation to some facilities such as the new Mitchell complex, but a wider review of SES facilities and suitability is required to ensure the service has a future focus to growth and demand – just like the ACTF&R and ACTAS .

Adequate, sustainable and consistent funding of all emergency services should be the primary aim of the process and while our volunteers are not expecting payment for their work they do have an expectation that such adequate and fair allocation of funding is applied in the system and it is not at the mercy of how strong your union or political influence is.

Diversity and Physical and Mental Health of Volunteers

The ACTSESVA are unable to talk much to the numbers related to the diversity of SES volunteers as that information is not currently available to us.¹³ Speaking informally though the ACTSESVA have noted a change in the makeup of volunteers in the last few years consistent with the changing diversity of the ACT. Units are free to select the candidates for recruitment that best fit in with the culture and local community and seem to, on the whole, do a good job of recruitment.¹⁴

Physical and mental health of volunteers is generally well supported in the ACTSES. There is a well-developed and supported Peer Support group (staffed by Volunteers with ESA support and oversight) Chaplaincy support, and EAP support available to volunteers. Additionally, a new 'Fit For Role' (FFR) programme is being gradually rolled out for SES volunteers. The FFR is designed to test volunteers

¹¹ The ACT Government has a Volunteer Charter – an agreement between ESA and the volunteers of ESA (SES, RFS, CFU and Mapping) on how engagement is supposed to work. None of the charter process were or are being followed in relation to the JESC.

¹² In recent discussions between Chief Officers of the ACTSES and ACTRFS and the Presidents of the ACTSESVA and VBA the Chief Officers informed the Presidents that attempts to put up business cases for funds for volunteers had been rejected. The Chief Officers were unable to provide information around the business cases to the Presidents.

¹³ ESA Volunteer Support currently lack the ability to track such matters – they would like to but funding is not currently available to them for a Volunteer Support System. This seems judging by the terms of reference an issue across the volunteer sector with inadequate support systems available for use.

¹⁴ Note there have been units that have recruited hearing impaired members and worked successfully in integrating them into the unit but that has been done at a unit level with personal connections between people and has not been a wider service strategy.

against specific criteria related to a work activity so as to determine where, if anywhere, a volunteer needs support to ensure they can undertake that role safely and without injury.

Some form of financial support to allowing volunteers to maintain a level of fitness such as the government provided to RFS volunteers in a previous ACT Government budget would be of interest to the ACTSESVA – a system not unlike the support provided to paid staff under enterprise bargaining arrangements.

While we believe it to be the case that ACTSES volunteers are suitably covered by compensation arrangements of the ACT Government for physical injury it is unclear whether the same compensation arrangements cover psychological injury.¹⁵ Such psychological impacts would most likely occur to volunteer SES persons doing missing person searches (and SES volunteer have found deceased persons and been involved in the recovery of such persons in the ACT).

Recommendations

Our recommendations are as follows:

1. as per the ACTRFS submission conduct an independent analysis of the government funding levels for all ACT emergency first responders across the police, ambulance , fire and **volunteer services** to provide better empirical evidence for decision-making, including in respect of funding and to ensure adequate, sustainable and consistent funding is applied to all services.¹⁶
2. as per the ACTRFS submission, clarify the worker's compensatory rights and processes for volunteers in respect of both physical and psychological illness and injury to ensure it is adequate to volunteer needs.
3. improve the engagement of and communication with volunteers in accordance with the Volunteer Charter and ensure all areas of Government are aware of and act in the spirit and intent of the charter.
4. support the development of systems to undertake a deeper analysis of the terms of reference items.
5. ensure adequate infrastructure planning (short, medium and long term) is undertaken for all volunteer facilities and associated infrastructure.
6. as per the ACTRFS submission follow the lead of Tasmania, Queensland, and the Northern Territory other Australian jurisdictions by providing presumptive compensation in respect of PTSD for volunteer first responders.

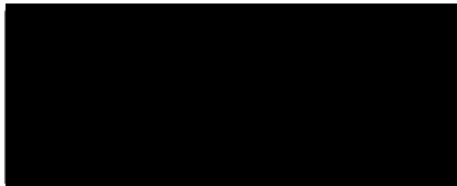
¹⁵ To Note the ACTSESVA has undertaken insurance arrangements for the volunteers for both ACTSES operational, training and SESVA related events – more to ensure the sometime drawn out compensation process does not unfairly impact our volunteers.

¹⁶ Note This point is similar and consistent with the point made in the Volunteering ACT submission to ACT environments Bushfire preparedness Feb 24. Our emphasis stresses the all emergency preparedness.

Acronyms

Acronym	
ACTRFS	ACT Rural Fire Service
ACTSESVA	ACT State Emergency Services Volunteer Association
ESA	ACT Emergency Services Agency
JACS	ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate
PSO	Peer Support Officer
SES	ACT State Emergency Service
VBA	The ACT Volunteer Brigades Association

For & on Behalf of the ACT State Emergency Service Volunteers Association Inc



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