



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY SERVICES  
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## Submission Cover Sheet

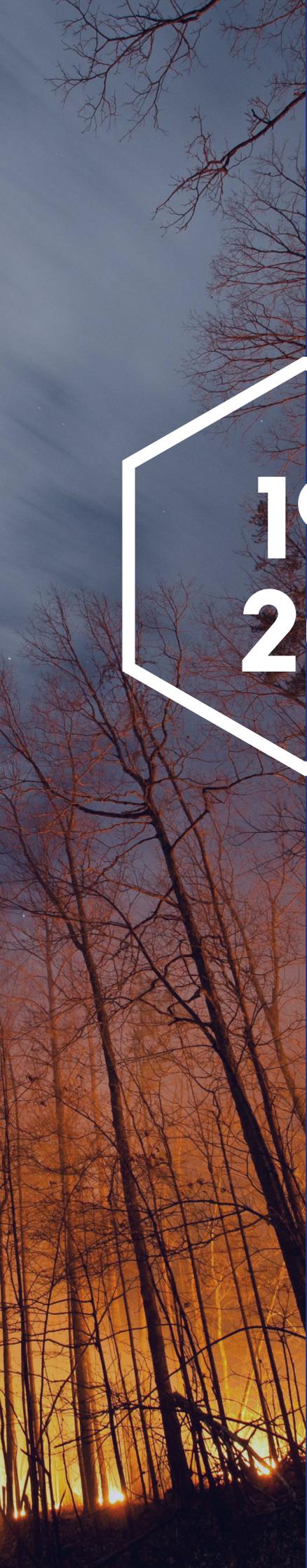
Review of ACT emergency services  
responses to the 2019-20 bushfire season

**Submission Number: 14**

**ACT Volunteer Brigades Association**

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JULY 20 



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# Bushfire Season Inquiry Submission

BY 

ACT Volunteer Brigades Association  
The Peak Body Representing Volunteer Firefighters in the  
Australian Capital Territory





**CONTRIBUTION OF ACT  
VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS  
IN THE 19/20 FIRE SEASON.**

**2112 DAYS AT  
FIRES INTERSTATE.**

**884 DAYS AT  
FIRES IN THE ACT.**

**2996 DAYS  
FIREFIGHTING IN  
TOTAL.**

**IN EXCESS OF 53,000  
VOLUNTEER HOURS\*  
CONTRIBUTED.**

**MORE THAN \$3.51M\*\*  
CONTRIBUTION TO THE  
LOCAL ECONOMY.**

\*BASED ON AN 18HR AVERAGE SHIFT INCLUSIVE OF TRAVEL  
TIME AND OVERNIGHT DEPLOYMENT.

\*\*BASED ON \$65P/H AVERAGE INCLUSIVE OF  
SUPERANNUATION, OVERTIME, AND BENEFITS.

FIGURES BASED UPON RFS HQ DATA.

## WORK WITHIN OTHER JURISDICTIONS

It's important to highlight the experience gained by ACTRFS volunteers when operating in other jurisdictions.

ACTRFS has provided multiple deployments across Queensland and New South Wales together with strike teams in the past 12 months.

When operating in other jurisdictions, ACTRFS volunteers are recognised for their high level of experience and skills. This extends to being given significant responsibility for managing operations, including as 'Divisional Commanders' and 'Sector Leaders' with responsibility for crews, heavy plant and aviation assets. In these roles, ACTRFS volunteers have been given total operational control, including the making of real-time tactical decisions to manage the incident.

The above experiences are in stark contrast to when ACTRFS operating within their own jurisdiction; where the volunteers are often seen as a resource to be shifted around, with little thought of the knowledge, skills, welfare, and external life of volunteers.

## CAPABILITY

In an effective organisation, there is a clear capability requirement which informs all other activities.

For the ACTRFS, there must be clear linkages between the 'Emergencies Act', the 'Strategic Bushfire Management Plan', subsidiary plans, and the work program of the ACTRFS to ensure the service can deliver the capability when required.

As events of the 2019/2020 season proceeded, it became clear to the brigades that something different was happening within the headquarters of the agency. This was evident in the stark contrast between 'deployed' and 'at home' firefighting responsibility and trust.

Welfare capability was also lacking. The Fire and Rescue Welfare & Catering Pod was often deployed for Fire and Rescue Crews but no such catering capability exists for RFS personnel.

Chiefly RFS crews rely on catering from community organisations or pay for/bring meals themselves. The same rule applies for the washing of volunteer uniforms; until recently volunteers were forced to bring their dirty PPE knowingly contaminated with carcinogens home to wash in their families' washing machines. This costs members even more time and leaves them further out of pocket.

## TRAINING

An effective firefighting capability depends on having people with the right competencies and experience to fill specific roles in crews rather than merely raw numbers.

For example; 'strike team leaders' need to be experienced officers. 'Crew leaders' require competencies in advanced firefighting and crew leading, 'Drivers' require competencies in advanced firefighting and four-wheel-driving, crews should also have at least one qualified chainsaw operator on board.

Some members or brigades have unfortunately ended up becoming frustrated with the process and have sought training from external providers at their own expense.

The ACTRFS doesn't have a clear pathway that builds the skills and competencies of volunteers from recruit to experienced officer with Level 2 incident management skills.

Availability of training is haphazard, with limited opportunities.

There is no planning to take into account the cohort at each stage of their career and future training needs. This is an area in which Fire & Rescue excel.

Volunteers have been asking for this structured approach to training for years. Volunteers have shown a commitment to training through extensive time put into preparing for and delivering training.

The ACTRFS needs to be open to spending funds on alternate training providers to bring in new ideas and a higher level of training to reinvigorate and support the training delivery.

## RESPECT

There were behaviours and language from ESA that demonstrated a lack of respect for the experience and skills of volunteers. This was particularly apparent of volunteer officers with accumulated centuries of skills.

This lack of respect was demonstrated both directly, through specific language and interactions, as well as indirectly through failure to recognize them in planning and operations.

In some case, a lack of respect was demonstrated on the fire ground with the potential to impact on operations.

A lack of respect also existed to the other circumstances of members, including their jobs, businesses or families.

## COMMUNICATION

The 2019/2020 made it clear that the Incident Management Team had no understanding of the capabilities of volunteers or how to handle them effectively.

As a result, there was poor communication and understanding with volunteers about requirements, final crewing arrangements, and taskings. Volunteers lost valuable time and were poorly used on the fireground, while Brigade officers spent extended hours attempting to coordinate members' availability across multiple and overlapping requests.

There were multiple cases of volunteers being notified that they would be required but then cancelled after employment or family arrangements had been made.

Volunteers are a distinct component of the service with different needs and attributes to paid personnel. Every hour dedicated to firefighting is an hour not available for work, family and other activities.

There has clearly been a rift between volunteer RFS workforce and the ESA HQ. A more effective method of liaison between RFS and ESA HQ in time of emergency should be investigated.

Planning, crewing requirements, and changes need to be more clearly communicated to crews and brigades.

During the season, requests for crews tended to be ad-hoc. This meant that processes at the Brigade level were ever-changing.

Requests for crews also often contradicted previous advice from HQ.

There was no clear communication on the outcome of responses to requests. People who had nominated for shifts had no clear view of whether they would be required or not, with a consequent impact on work and family. In some cases, people had direct confirmation that they would be required only to be told with only a few hours' notice that they would not be needed, and after alternative employment arrangements had been made.

## SHIFTS AND FATIGUE MANAGEMENT

Volunteers were expected to work over extended shifts that breached the relevant SOPs on fatigue management. This led to an increased risk of accidents, injury, and death, particularly for drivers.

While volunteers accept the need for extended shifts on first response to a fire, there were many occasions when this occurred during multi-day fires and in strike teams into NSW.

Of particular concern were strike teams to NSW, which could mean volunteers were spending 18 hours or more away from home.

Fatigue management doesn't take into account the need to refuel and refill vehicles, return vehicles to sheds and then drive home.

While volunteers worked extended shifts and in some cases were asked to remain during handovers, other agencies (i.e. with paid personnel) managed crew changes within the required timeframes.

This suggests that fatigue issues weren't adequately managed as part of the planning in the IMT with contingency plans put in place.

The limited capabilities available increased the risk of extended shifts.

The ACTRFS has historically provided few opportunities for driver training. As a result, most crews only had one qualified driver, and there was little opportunity to provide relief.

## MORALE

Throughout the season morale was poor across volunteers.

If the ACT Government and ESA are committed to a volunteer-based firefighting service, there needs to be clear commitments to;

- Improved and regular training that builds capabilities,

- Better communication with Brigades,

- Inclusion of senior volunteers in planning and decision-making,

- Recognition of the distinct roles that volunteers can perform, and

- Adequate recognition of the efforts of volunteers, their families and employers.

## **FUTURE OF THE RFS**

There needs to be a clear expression from the ACT Government and ESA as to whether they value a volunteer-based ACTRFS as the primary rural firefighting agency in the ACT. This needs to be backed by a clear commitment to resourcing, managing, planning and building the capability required to fulfil that role.

If the ACT Government and ESA see a different role for ACTRFS volunteers, that must be clearly communicated to members so that they can make decisions about where to devote their time and energy.

Without an explicit expression, the ACTRFS is slowly fading away with its primary roles being assumed by other agencies.

Without the ACTRFS volunteers, the ACT Government will need to fund a lot more paid ACT Park's seasonal firefighters.

## **VOLUNTEER RECOGNITION**

There has been minimal attempt to recognise the efforts of volunteers.

An event was held to recognise the contribution of ADF members.

The community day was poorly advertised and poorly attended, as our employer, the ESA should be making an effort to recognise the contributions of volunteers.

In addition, employers have made significant sacrifices to release members for firefighting and other activities across the season. Again, there has been no attempt to recognise this impact and thank them directly.

Canberra Citizen of the Year 2020 awards were seen as tokenistic. Awards arrived without members names on them and unsigned by the Chief Minister. Many were bent, ripped and wet after arriving in the mail.

No criteria or announcement has been made about the ACT Emergency Medal, even though it is awarded at the discretion of the Minister/Cabinet. Precedence suggests that it would be awarded under a declaration of a 'State of Emergency'.

## ALTERNATIVE ROLES

ACTRFS volunteers have a range of skills in addition to firefighting and other operational skills.

Despite introducing a flexible membership model to take advantage of these skills and allow members to undertake other roles, ESA did not effectively use this and instead preferred other services.

The ACTRFS includes members with a range of skills who prefer not to or are unable to undertake direct operational roles. Although the ACTRFS introduced a flexible membership model to identify these members, they were not effectively used.

For example, SES and ADF personnel were preferred for door-knocking in potentially impacted suburbs and for other community education activities despite ACTRFS members being available.

There was some limited use of ACTRFS members in some of these activities, but their involvement was inadequate and poorly coordinated.

SES members were preferred for driving vehicles to provide relief for crews returning for shifts

In many cases, these members had no prior experience driving a heavy bushfire tanker under challenging conditions at night. In at least two cases, this led to the potential for accident and injury to members.

The inclusion of “return journey drivers” in many cases simply added to delays, disrupted the debriefing and release processes, and added to delays and fatigue levels at multiple levels.

The ACTRFS had multiple members with the relevant driving qualification who were available for this role but were never called on.

On at least one occasion and as a result of that team member not being tasked to an RFS unit for the evening, an RFS member self-activated on a CFU capability in Gordon. It was noted that the units had minimal experience but were very well resourced. Toward the end of the day, the group was merged with trainee urban firefighters. It may be useful for RFS volunteers to augment these teams on an ad-hoc as/is where/is basis and where RFS members are not tasked where there are more members than RFS roles for the day.

## AIIMS

It's not clear whether AIIMS was effectively implemented.

Volunteers faced changing taskings from the IAPs provided; in some cases, there was no tasking and no liaison with other agencies.

As a result, volunteers spent extended periods of time doing nothing, shifts were over-resourced for the incident, but volunteers were not released.

AIIMS seemed to have been superseded by centralised decision-making, with tactical decisions taken out of the hands of officers on the ground.

The accumulated experience and skills of senior volunteers and officers were not used in any decision-making.

Volunteers received IAPs on initial tasking but these often changed on the ground, in the future the use of regularly updated digital IAP's may be better.

In at least one case, significant work allocated to volunteers in the IAP was reallocated instead to PCS crews.

The IAP's were often incomplete or contained the previous days' crews. In other cases, there was no clear tasking provided.

Volunteers had to wait around for someone to usually "find" something for them to do. As a result, volunteers spent hours sitting around and when used doing minor activities.

There were multiple layers of tasking, some overlaying others on the same job.

In several cases, volunteers were tasked to strike teams into NSW with the local agencies having no awareness that strike teams were being provided. Again, this resulted in long days of travel with hours spent sitting around.

The IMT appeared to operate on a highly centralised decision-making model.

Officers on the ground had no delegated ability to make tactical decisions.

Officers on the ground had no delegated authority to release crews when shifts were clearly over-resourced.

Officers on the ground were often delayed waiting for a direction/decision from the IMT that should have been immediate.

## AIIMS (CONTINUED)

IMT shift changes appeared to coincide with crew shift changes. As a result, there was no continuity of knowledge about events across the change. For example, issues around vehicles and fatigue management didn't continue to a new IMT shift.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- There should always be a volunteer liaison officer or volunteer welfare officer in the IMT while there are volunteers deployed, this individual should be the chief volunteer welfare advisor and should have an ability to act.
- Fatigue requirements should be better managed, starting from when a member leaves home to when the member returns home. This needs to be managed by the IMT and 'the establishment'.
- Adequate catering and welfare resources should be purchased by the ESA for use by the RFS.
- Fatigue management should be rigidly enforced, remembering volunteer commitments. Including;
  - Average Member Home to Station Time.
  - Average Member Preparation Time.
  - Transport Time to Fire.
  - Firefighting including Adequate Breaks.
  - Transport Time from Fire.
  - Average Member Cleaning Time.
  - Average Member Station to Home Time.
    - A possible solution could be an RFID time management system linked to members ID cards.
      - This could track when a member enters a facility, gets on a vehicle, has their meal, returns to the station and departs the facility.
- The RFS should ensure enhanced professional development for staff and volunteers.
- The RFS should take steps to prevent the constant turnover of staff and to mitigate the damage of constant staff change. "Lack of career RFS staff".
- Mobile Data Terminals are relied upon, and should be updated.
- The service is professional and as such should be treated in the same way, this includes adequate cleaning of trucks, uniform and stations, welfare, catering, time management, adequate uniform issue. ·
- The RFS must to develop a career path for current and prospective members.
- For incidents of this scale, a review process fully independent of the ACT Government should take place.

## FORMAL CORRESPONDENCE WITH NO FORMAL WRITTEN RESPONSE

Attachment A

*VBA Letter to Minister Gentleman*  
30 December 2019

Attachment B

*VBA Letter to Commissioner Whelan*  
30 December 2019

Attachment C

*VBA Letter to Commissioner Whelan*  
15 January 2020