Lived Experiences of Emergency Services Volunteers in Western Australia

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LIVED EXPERIENCES OF EMERGENCY SERVICES VOLUNTEERS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

EXPERIENCES OF SES VOLUNTEERS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Why do individuals volunteer with emergency services? What motivates them to join and remain with the service? What makes volunteers happy? We conducted in-depth interviewees with 70 State Emergency Services volunteers in both metropolitan and regional Western Australia to answer these and many other questions about volunteer experiences. Despite the importance of emergency services volunteers, little research have investigated the meaning, expectations, and emotional experiences among them. We used thematic analysis to make sense of the interview transcripts. Our preliminary findings suggest that volunteering meaning is derived from being a part of a likeminded community of volunteers and broader community of people who rely on SES in the face of emergency. Positive volunteering experiences relate to being able to help others and overcome personal barriers, such as fear. Organisational bureaucracy and boring training were a source of disappointment, especially for those who joined expecting excitement and adventures. Recruitment of new volunteers was identified as an area of concern for all units interviewed, with poorly administered training as a leading cause of turnover. Some units reported quite innovative practices that lead to better retention and recruitment, for example, reinventing the training the unit's hierarchical structure.

Note: The data analysis is ongoing and findings should be treated as preliminary.

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INTRODUCTION

When a natural disaster strikes or an emergency arises, Western Australia (WA)'s regional and metropolitan communities rely on the assistance provided by State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers. In WA, the SES comprises around 2000 volunteers, but the annual turnover rate is roughly 25%. Because SES volunteers require extensive training in disaster and emergency management, their early turnover comes with a significant financial and time cost, potentially jeopardizing the ongoing delivery of SES services.

Little is known, however, about precisely why people volunteer with emergency services what keeps them engaged in volunteering in the longer term, and how current HR practices at the unit and organisation (i.e. DFES) impact the retention of volunteers. Although some quantitative surveys have been administered over the years by the services and researchers, there is a dearth of research that 'gives voice' to volunteers. In other words, qualitative research allows to explore meaning, attitudes, and experiences in more depth, while not being constrained by the existing frames of reference.

Therefore, we conducted semi-structured interviews with SES volunteers in metropolitan, regional, and remote locations across WA. Throughout these interviews, we ultimately sought to understand how meaning, identity, and emotions shape volunteer experiences in the SES. The findings from the interviews also broaden and deepen our understanding of the reasons why volunteers leave emergency services and offers insight into the strategies and practices that would help to engage them for longer.

Please note that the results reported here should be interpreted with caution, because the analysis is ongoing at the time of writing (July 2018) and thus findings are preliminary and subject to change.

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METHODS

The purpose of the study was to develop a deeper and broader understanding of the current SES volunteers' experiences related to recruitment, retention, wellbeing, and diversity. The research study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Western Australia (approval number RA/4/20/1028). All interviewees have provided informed consent to participate.

SAMPLE RECRUITMENT AND CHARACTERISTICS

In theory, all current SES volunteers in Western Australia were eligible to participate in the interviews conducted for this study. However, due to certain limitations, including budget restrictions and demand for extensive travel, a convenience sampling approach was chosen. First, in consultation with volunteer managers from the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, a list of SES units that would be approached for participation in the interviews was compiled. The factors considered in this selection process included unit's location and number of volunteers. It was endeavoured to recruit volunteers from at least one unit in each geographical region and balance the number of small, medium, and large size units in the sample. Through this process, 32 out of 65 currently active SES units were selected.

Second, contact information for the unit manager of the selected units was obtained using WA SES association webpage, DFES volunteer database, or by approaching unit managers in the same geographical region. Some contact details were also obtained from the research sign up forms distributed at the WAFES conference. Contact information could not be obtained for 3 units. All other unit managers (n=29) were approached with invitation to participate in the interviews either via a phone or e-mail. Of these, several never replied despite multiple contact attempts (n=7). Several unit managers indicated that they were not interested or not available for the interviews (n=5). Interviews were scheduled and conducted in the remaining units.

Overall, 70 volunteers and unit managers from 17 different units were interviewed. 10 of these were located in the regional or remote area of WA (59%) with volunteers from 9 out of 12 regions interviewed. 25 interviewees were female (36%), which is representative of the proportion of female volunteers in WA SES overall (37%). Age of interviewees was not recorded to ensure their confidentiality. Interviewees occupied a broad range of volunteer roles in their respective units, including unit managers (n=8), training managers, communication managers, team managers, logistics managers, and so on.

DATA COLLECTION

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all interviewees in a face-to-face mode by one of the authors. Half of the interviews were conducted one-on-one, and the other were conducted in a group setting with two to eight volunteers in a group (average 4 interviewees per group). In some cases, a mixed approach was used, where the first part of the interview was conducted in a group, and then one of these interviewees were spoken to in private, one-on-one setting.

Questions included in the interviews addressed volunteers' background, recruitment, induction and training, expectations, emotional experiences, wellbeing, retention, and unit characteristics. The questions addressed both interviewee's personal

experiences with the service (i.e. "How did you find out about the SES volunteering opportunity?") and their view of the current practices (i.e. "How do you recruit new volunteers for your unit?"). Questions representative of each section are included in Table 1.

Interview section	Sample question(s)
Background	What is your current role with SES? When did you join? How long have you been with the service? Have you had other roles in the service?
Recruitment	What attracted you to become an SES volunteer?
Induction and training	What was your first day with the SES like? What happened?
Expectations	What did you expect as an SES volunteer, when you joined? How would you describe an 'ideal' SES volunteer? What does it take to be an SES volunteer?
Emotional experiences	What was the most exciting experience you had as an SES volunteer? How did you feel?
Wellbeing	What do you enjoy about volunteering at SES? What makes you happy?
Retention	How long do you intend to volunteer with SES? Why do you think some people leave SES?
Unit characteristics	Do you feel included in your unit? Does your unit have strong relationships with other parties: community, local government, DFES, others?

TABLE 1: SAMPLE QUESTIONS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed. Thematic analysis was used as a data analysis approach. The qualitative coding was performed using free software package RQDA[1].

First, a number of higher-order (i.e. broader) themes were identified by the authors who conducted the interviews, using interview sections as a guide. The themes were identified as discussion points that frequently appeared in most interviewees. These themes were structured at two different levels of analysis: individual experiences, such as volunteering meaning and identity; and unit-level Human Resource (HR) practices, such as recruitment.

Second, a team of research assistants who were not involved in the prior data collection were asked to code the transcripts for these higher-order themes. Each theme was then re-coded into lower-order (i.e. more nuanced) themes. These higher-order and lower-order themes and sample quotes from the interviewees are presented in the Results section.

RESULTS

INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES
Volunteering meaning/identity

When asked why they volunteer with SES, the interviewees often referred to community at the centre of their motivation for being a volunteer. The community was conceptualized in two different ways: 1) with reference to a more general community of people in the town, state, or country; 2) with reference to a small community of SES volunteers (i.e., unit). Being able to help and assist other people in the face of emergency was the primary driver of joining the SES. Interviewees found it empowering and rewarding. This motivation became more meaningful to them as they received a recognition for their efforts from the members of their communities.

> I guess [I joined to] to help out, give back to the community, the possibility of saving someone's life and all that sort of stuff.

> It is a privilege to be able to go and help people. Particularly when, you know, a **lot of the time […] you look at situations and feel helpless. So, to** actually be able to go and do something […] But to be able to just go and be a friendly face and to fix that problem, **[…] but** to be able to do something to help. That's actually a really good feeling.

> What I probably find the most special, but it's probably the most meaningful is when you go and help find someone or whatever and then their family, they write you a letter saying how thankful and grateful and all that sort of stuff. It makes you feel quite good.

The second way in which the notion of community featured in the sense of meaning that volunteers derived from their service was the immediate group of other volunteers in their unit. The interviews commonly referred to these people as their 'family'. **Being part of a group that is united by a common purpose was found** empowering. Interestingly, as we discuss in the next section, some interviewees discussed how their initial motivation to join SES was related to the ability to be able to help the larger community, but the reason they continue to volunteer is the connection with other individuals in their unit.

> [Being a volunteer means] to [be a] member of the community and just sort of, just do your part generally. You come in, you work with your team. They're got your back, you've got their back. You go out and you sort of, you see some terrible stuff. But you also see some really great stuff.

> It's camaraderie. **You're** all, you're all in it for the same reason. You want to give back to the community, and it's just a great team to be with. Everyone looks out for everyone.

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Emotional experiences

Paradoxically, when describing the most exciting and positive experiences they have had as an SES volunteer, out interviewees frequently referred to particularly hard and gruesome callouts. This is paradoxical, because typically exposure to events such as flooding, search and rescue, or storm damage is not thought of as **'exciting' or 'positive', but rather** is considered as traumatic. However, in the case of emergency volunteers, it seems that the positive aspect of such experience stems from the ability to be in control and being able to help those in need.

> *Ah, driving a flood boat down the main street of Carnarvon. Yeah, that was quite exciting. [...] not very often you get to drive down the main street of Carnarvon in a massive flood, plus we had, I was on the Carnarvon boat and it hadn't been maintained properly, and we had both engines shut down on us in the middle of a flood, so that was an experience.*

> *And just so many different experiences. Body, you know, many, many different body recoveries. Which are, which are horrible but they always give you that sense of closure [...] to rescues.*

Another type of positive SES volunteer experience mentioned was related to overcoming personal barriers, such as fear of heights. The interviewees found this as memorable and exciting, because it allowed them to become better, overcome their fears, and gain confidence in their abilities both inside and outside of the service.

> *I hate heights. I get nervous and my hands shake and all that. So, the first time I did it, didn't want to do it, couldn't go over the edge. And then did another course where I had to set up rope systems and all that, blew that one away. It was all good, got top marks on that. But I had to fix the whole thing, I couldn't go over the edge. So, I worked on that. They, really, really got into that to the point where it actually really blew the unit manager and everyone who saw me the first time, who thought I wouldn't be able to do it. They were just blown away by the level of enthusiasm I showed.*

Related to the discussion of the important role that unit plays in volunteers' motivation, some interviewees reported being part of the team as a course of a positive affect. This is particularly intensified, when attending callouts that always require volunteers to work together as a team.

> *I love working as part of a team. So, that, I guess that meant a lot to me. And it was if, if you're out on a job and you don't know what to do, people are often very, very willing to show you and teach you and help you, so. I guess it was quite exhilarating really.*

Finally, training was mentioned by some interviewees as the most exciting and positive experience they have had as a volunteer. However, with training they referred to specialized training usually conducted over the weekend and is **described as being quite intensive. 'Normal' training that volunteers have to attend**

every week was not a source of particularly positive emotion [see section on training for more details].

> *[My exciting experience was] Vertical team leader course. It was, that's a fantastic experience. That wasn't my team leader course, but that was the one I assisted on the following year. And it's that group of people just going through an absolute hell, 15 hour days for 5 days. You know, you end up. You either break or you don't. But those, those sorts of things. They're just, you just don't get to do that in an accounting job. But, yeah so, going on that course.*

We also inquired about most disappointing or negative experiences volunteers have had. Some of these were related to callouts, understandably, particularly when the outcome of the callout was not as intended. For example, when a missing person was found deceased. However, more frequently, volunteers mentioned being disappointed when after being deployed, they were not able to do their part. Frequently, this has to do with the procedures and rules put in place by those in paid roles.

> *Searches are probably one of the worst. Generally because we will show up [...] Then they make you wait, we'll wait hours for the police to sort themselves out with what they want us to do. Whereas we could just get in and quickly search an area, and rule that out. That's one of the hardest things with it all, is when you go on searches, is waiting. Hurry up and wait. Get there and wait. Could be stinking hot and we've driven hours, we just want to get going, get into it and they'll make us wait while they sort out a plan and other things. That's probably the most disappointing things.*

Often interviewees reported administrative hassles and organizational procedures as a source of negative experience. With regard to administration, volunteers did not feel that it should be such a big part of their role. There was also negative evaluation of the recent changes in the training administration and availability [see training section for more details]. Many volunteers reported feeling misunderstood and undervalued buy their governing organization. They considered DFES to be extremely focused on firefighting, and felt that SES as a service was left out and neglected.

> *I think sometimes the, sometimes the processes can be frustrating. I think, I think we get a lot of admin stuff put onto volunteers, and volunteers don't necessarily want to do that and stuff, you know.*

> *I find that DFES itself is very fire orientated. Even the name. You know, the Department of Fire and Emergency Service. Is fire not an emergency service, or you know. I find, and I think that's because the hierarchy of the organisation mostly comes up from career firefighting.*

> *DFES changing a lot of things and making our life hard is a bit disappointing, but we slowly get our way around that.*

> *Why do we go to do a job, spend 4 hours on someone's roof at 2 o'clock in the morning, and come back and do an hours paperwork?*

Other negative experiences reported by interviewees were related to personal relationships between the members of their unit. Interviewees hinted at the existence of power struggles in their units that lead to negative feelings and atmosphere. Even if the interviewees were not personally involved in these situations, it made a negative impression on them. In some instances, although rarely, there were reports of more serious consequences of these power struggles such as bullying and abuse. One interviewee discussed being forced to resign from the unit due to sustained bullying from fellow unit members.

> *I think it's disappointing when you see people get caught up on details of things that don't really matter in the big picture. And then that causes kind of animosity between them.*

> *You know I thought, you know, joining there was you know, fun. But after being there for 5 years, I think you know, some of the volunteers, I think they run me down.*

Expectations

In line with psychological contract perspective[2], we were interested to investigate the expectations that volunteers might have had when joining the service, how these initial expectations changed over the course of volunteering, and how these **expectations towards one's volunteering role impacted the expectations current** volunteers had towards the new members joining. There were several types of initial expectations reported by interviewees. One was the expectation of a highly adventurous and exciting role that involved high-risk rescues and frequent callouts.

> *When I joined, I expected it was going to be like a full-on, every two days I'd get a call out and I've got to go out and I've got to do stuff.*

> *Jumping off a cliff and doing fun, crazy things. It's not quite like that, but it's still fun. Yeah, obviously a lot more serious than that sort of thing.*

Other interviewees reported that they expected to contribute to the community, which was frequently also their primary motivation to join, as discussed earlier. Interestingly, these interviewees did not seem to have more specific expectations about what 'helping the community' would actually involve. Because these initial expectations were fairly vague, the interviewees reported some changes in the expectations, which also led to a different meaning derived from the volunteering role.

> *I joined up to contribute and ended up getting way more out of it than I thought I would. So, two things. Firstly just the camaraderie amongst members. Really, really decent bunch of people. And generally you know, all with good motivation, they want to contribute to you know, so there is quite a lot of. You kind of feel like a bit like a family in a way. And secondly the opportunity to push myself in terms of training.*

Some reported having no expectations at all when joining. Finally, some other interviewees, although a fairly small group overall, had a clear idea what volunteering with SES would be like.

> *So, [I expected] the experience and just meeting people that's got the same ideas of, because it takes a different type of person to volunteer their own time to go and help someone they don't even know.*

HR PRACTICES
Recruitment

Unsurprisingly, majority of our interviewees discussed recruitment as a pressing concern for their units. Almost all units indicated the need for more members to meet the demands of the callouts for the assistance, especially during the normal work hours (i.e. weekdays 9 to 5pm). Some interviewees also indicated that their units seem to lack individuals with specific skills and abilities, frequently related to physical fitness requirements.

> *We would love to have more. We would love to get more people come in and volunteer. And every year we're trying to get, get people to come in and volunteer.*

> *The more feet on the ground on a big search, the better so. The more chance you've got of finding the person faster.*

> *[We need] Someone who can go climb up a mountain and carry someone down. There's not many of our members that are actually capable of doing that sort of stuff.*

Despite a persistent 'urban myth' that units in the Perth metropolitan area have a long waitlists of individuals eager to join, majority of the units interviewed in this location also indicated not having enough volunteers. It was frequently observed that number of volunteers 'on the books' is much larger than volunteers who actually show up on the training night and to the callouts. Thus, from administrative point of view, units might have plenty of volunteers, however, in reality, only about half or less are actually 'active'.

However, despite the urgent need for more volunteers, we found that many of the units did not have a clear recruitment strategy or a plan. They engaged in recruitment activities somewhat haphazardously. For example, only larger units in the metropolitan area had a dedicated recruitment officer role. In the regional areas, only one of the interviewed units had a clear social media strategy in order to draw attention to the unit's activities. However, despite having an online presence and popularity, the attraction of new members was still heavily dependent on the personalized strategies, or 'word of mouth'.

> *We promote our, our unit very heavily. It's got a huge reputation in town, very positive. Because we've got Facebook and every time we do training, up go the professional photos and the stories. Every time we have an*

operation, people read it. We've got a local rag, we always have 2 full pages in there with pictures and carrying someone out of a gorge, or doing a cliff rescue. We promote all that very, very heavily. Despite, with all those things, but still the best recruitment. So, that's an awareness thing. Yeah, we know who SES, we see what they do. So, it's good stock. But the best recruitment tool is word of mouth. And it goes back, in my opinion, word of mouth. Me talking to you, with that background, will have more chance of you joining than any other mode.

Training

As discussed above, in the interviewees, training was a source many and frequent negative reactions and evaluations. Currently, the SES training model is centralized, with training pathways prescribed by the DFES through an online system. Training is administered at the unit level by a volunteer in a training officer role, however, more specialized training is delivered by DFES trainers. All parts of the current training system were criticized by the volunteers. First, the training pathways training online system was described as too complex to navigate and understand, especially for individual with limited computer literacy. It was also described as too time consuming for training managers and as lacking flexibility that often prohibits volunteers to fully integrate into the unit and attend callouts.

But there is also things like, if I don't do certain [training], I can't participate on my pathway. Now, I've done my land search in the day time during the day. And I've done my night sort of things as SES, I'm no in the operations rooms. I want to take it easy, but I can't proceed on my pathway because I haven't done storm damage or I haven't done this. And that's wrong.

Nowadays if I deliver a training course for 2 days, it takes me 4 days to do the administration. So it's 6 days. Why?

The training night conducted in the units were fairly well perceived as an opportunity to learn new skills or refresh some of the ones that are not frequently used. However, it was criticized for being somewhat boring and repetitive. It was also suggested that being a training manager requires a special skillset and often those who occupy this role in the units are not experienced enough to train others.

I think what happens is, we come along to training sometimes and there is not enough there to keep us interested.

I was for a little while, I was the training manager. But the actual training was okay, but our group is so small that I didn't have the experience. I could train someone, but I didn't have the experience to train them. […] I couldn't show them anything, because I didn't know what it was. Like, I mean. Alright let's use roofing, I don't have roofing training. I wouldn't, I wouldn't, I'm not confident enough to be able to show you, to train someone.

Despite generally low evaluation of the regular training nights, it was interesting to observe that some units have taken active steps in improving their training. This not

only increased the quality and fidelity of the training, but also served as a retention tool, as will be discussed in the next section.

> *[The unit encourages] members who have a skill to run a training night, a Monday night. And devise this training program of their own. And you know, pick it up and run with it. And there's been some very imaginative training nights, with these youngish guys coming out and you know doing. What was one they had to do? The recently, they, I mean it was all fake and it was quite a common version that you get in leadership courses and so forth. But they had to rescue an injured person from across a bottomless chasm. So, the rescue team was on one side and the injured person was on the other and they had to work out a way of getting them across, you know. And so one of the young guys came up with that and ran it, and everybody got excited.*

The specialized training that is frequently delivered over the weekend by DFES trainers was criticized due to limited availability and also as not particularly suitable for SES volunteers.

> *But it's really hard to schedule in real training, because if there's not enough of us they [DFES] won't run it.*

> *Which I find a bit, you know, I find that a lot of the training is very orientated towards firefighting. I've recently done some courses on sector commander and level one incident controller in the aims net set up, and both those courses were basically about firefighting. And they just changed the assessment at the end for SES volunteers. But you know, the whole course was just yeah. Not really what we do.*

Finally, recognition of the training and skills outside of DFES was also mentioned as a persistent issue. This also prevented many of the volunteers to attend training that would require taking some leave at their place of employment.

> *That's the same is if I've got a chainsaw ticket. That's not recognised by DFES. If I get one by DFES, that's not recognised by Work Cover.*

> *No businesses want to release [and employee] for training that is not recognised outside of DFES.*

Retention

Retention of volunteers was identified as the second most pressing concern (after recruitment) for their unit by the majority of interviewees. When asked why volunteers left their units, the interviewees mentioned a number of different reasons. Some of these reasons were external and non-preventable by the units. For example, **changes in individual's circumstances, such as work and/or family life that meant** they were not able to attend the training nights or callouts anymore, relocation, and so on. However, other reasons were more internal and related to the quality of training (as discussed above) or the rare callouts.

> *I think sometimes people can get bored. Particularly when you've been around for a while and you're covering [in training] the same stuff again*

and again.

Absence of callouts and resulting low motivation to volunteer was intertwined with the expectations volunteers had when joining the service. Those volunteers who **were expecting a lot of 'action' were particularly discouraged with the need to** undertake an extensive training first and lack of callouts. To overcome this issue and promote the engagement of volunteers, some units tried to make training nights more attractive and fun by involving more members in the process of designing and setting up the training nights.

> *When we first came [training] was always the same stuff. Like, the same people teaching, the same things happening and that. So, we're trying to just upscale it so it's interesting again for everyone. So, the older members find new things and not just doing the same thing over and over again [...]. We've all got different ideas now, so we're trying to switch the training up so to speak. To keep it yeah, exciting and fun and to keep members keen and get new members that don't come in and go oh, that was boring, see you later, not going to come back, so yeah.*

Another noteworthy retention strategy adopted by one regional unit was to design a job role for each member of the unit (see quote for example). This strategy achieved several positive outcomes: 1) reduced the workload of the few members in the leadership positions; 2) improved the retention of regular volunteers, as they **now had an area of unit's operations to be responsible for; 3) improved the overall** morale of the unit; and 4) addressed the recruitment issue by attracting more new volunteers to the unit.

> *But last year [...] the executive committee decided to reorganize the unit. Partly because we had to, because of legal requirements to do with being an incorporated body. But there were other reasons too. And we took several months to do it, it was really only the middle of this year it was done. And the end result was this flow chart. But one of the important things that came out of it, was that we put out a questionnaire to everybody about what they would like to expand their skills into. And then we developed the flow chart, giving almost everybody in the unit an actual job. Rather than as it had been in the past, the half dozen members of the committee doing everything in terms of admin. So, and the result of that surprisingly was an absolute flood of new recruits.*

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