

Helping Volunteers Transition to Retirement

BACKGROUND

Volunteerism is common practice among citizens in Australia and 100,000 Victorians are emergency service volunteers. Many people volunteer because of the positive effects that it can have on one's life and health. Volunteering opens a person up to many opportunities, such as ways to help their community, meet new people, share their skills and learn new ones. Volunteering has been shown to increase life satisfaction and social support (Benefits of Volunteering, 2019). and to decrease stress and loneliness (Casiday et al., 2008) thus having a significant impact on mental, and in some cases physical health.

In the study *The Effects of Volunteering on the Physical and Mental Health of Older People* by Terry Lum and Elizabeth Lightfoot, the correlations between volunteering and health among older people were compared. In this study, volunteers in the older age demographic have higher levels of self-reported health and lower levels of depression. Based on this connection, Lum and Lightfoot theorized that volunteering may increase an older person's social and psychological resources necessary to cope with the onset of medical conditions. The benefits of volunteering are far reaching, and its positive psychological impacts can have lasting effects on an individual's wellbeing, help them cope with physical ailments later in life and even decrease mortality (Casiday, et al., 2008; Lum, et al., 2005).

The process of retirement can be difficult, as many people are unprepared for the change retirement brings. Emergency service volunteers in Victoria often have a two-fold experience with retiring, first when they retire from their paying day-job and a second experience when they decide to leave their emergency service volunteer role.

This study undertaken for the Emergency Services Foundation by students from Worcester Polytech Institute, Alexis Nichols, Jacqueline Novak, and Olivia Gedgaudas set out to understand how emergency service volunteers could be better supported as they transition to retirement.

FINDINGS

To reach a conclusion 39 interviews with 9 agency managers, 4 experts and 26 emergency service volunteers in Victoria were undertaken. Four themes emerged in the course of our interviews with Victorian emergency service volunteers to understand their perspectives and experience of transition to retirement.

Volunteer Motivations

1. Volunteers Reported Similar Motivations for Beginning and Continuing Volunteer Work

When interviewing active and retired volunteers we asked them why they began to volunteer and why they continue to volunteer. Overwhelmingly the most common answer was to give back to their community and help others. A volunteer explained by saying, "When you compare volunteering to working, volunteering has more of an impact because we are giving back. We are giving back to society,



and we are really excited about what we do. When you see the gratitude people give you, it makes you feel really good.” Many volunteers expressed their increased interest in helping the community after the Black Saturday bushfires that burned across their home state of Victoria in 2009. For example, one of the volunteers we interviewed told us a story about how she provided psychological first aid (PFA) to victims of the 2009 fires. During the time, she provided PFA to a family whose home burnt down. The happiness and warmth she found in just listening and talking to them was astounding. The joy she got from helping those who needed it most is why she volunteered.

When speaking to another volunteer, he talked about how seeing the difference he can make in someone’s life and how much you can do for someone is why he volunteers. This theme of making a difference and helping others was shown throughout every interview with volunteers.

Others started to volunteer because their family was a part of it. We spoke to a volunteer that mentioned his father was a founding volunteer within his agency and because of his father, he joined when he was sixteen. He is now 73 and has volunteered for 57 years. The tradition continued when that volunteer's son joined and then later his two granddaughters.

Due to the fact that our interviews were within the older demographic of volunteers, a common answer for why they continue to volunteer was to stay busy and keep their mind and body active. Many volunteers explained that being involved with their agency gave them something to fill their days with because they had already retired from their paying jobs. When retired from their paying jobs, they relied on volunteering to keep them active, both physically and mentally.

Others explained that giving back to society gave them a sense of importance and pride. Many volunteers emphasized that they do not do the work for the praise, but the affirmation from the communities and individuals they serve helps to motivate them to keep pushing forward during the harder times, that can innately come with volunteering in emergency services. They expressed that the difficult times they witness are outweighed by helping friends and neighbors.

One story that had a significant impact on one CFA volunteer firefighter's experience was when he was leaving a community after disastrous bushfires, and the townspeople left their homes to stand outside and clap for the entire brigade. He said these moments motivate him to continue volunteering his time to fight fires because the impact you make and the reassurance that you are doing something both good and necessary.

Differing Views about Retirement

2. Some Volunteers Resist Retirement

Volunteering is an important and valued commitment in volunteers’ lives. Emergency service work is exhilarating and honorable. A 20-year retiring volunteer described it as an experience similar to a dedicated sports player saying, “when you’ve done it [volunteer] for 20 years, it's a ridiculous thing, it



gets in your blood.” Giving up lifelong commitments that bring so much pride and joy into one’s life is scary and intimidating for these volunteers, which is why some volunteers resist retirement.

Nancy Carbone explained that retiring firefighters have described leaving the firehouse as “a death-like experience” because of the loss of connections and purpose. Agency managers told us they have seen volunteers resist retirement due to the fear of losing the camaraderie and want to maintain physical roles within their organizations for too long. Many volunteers had stories of older volunteers within their organizations that have had 40+ years of experience in the emergency services and are not willing to give it up yet.

Others worry that their peers won’t have anything to consume their time or stimulate their mind during retirement, so they keep holding on and finding other ways to keep themselves in their agencies. This fear of losing status or identity and losing relationships were found to be common reasons why volunteers resist retirement.

3. Men and Women Have Different Retirement Perspective

Our study revealed that men and women undergo different experiences as they approach retirement and once, they leave their active roles within their organizations. An AV manager specifically said that many of the male volunteers associate their identity with the uniform, so taking it off may make them lose a sense of who they are. An SES manager stated that women seem to be generally happier than men throughout their entire life, while men lose a lot of self-esteem because of how tied to their job they are and how much they associate it with their identity.

A significant story came from a volunteer when we asked their opinion on the difference between male and female experiences when approaching retirement. First, they mentioned they believe that women, in general, are more adaptable and in tune with themselves so they can discuss things and have more perceptions of their own needs. In contrast, they told us that they have some concern about how a particular member of their unit will cope with retirement after his 40 years of service. This man has made SES as an organization, and his unit in particular, his social circle and responding to emergencies has become his passion. They believe this man’s dedication and drive will leave him to remain in the unit longer than he possibly should - which could be dangerous. Finally, they mentioned men rarely admit to needing help and hold onto too much pride, whereas women are more willing to ask and seek out help. On behalf of this volunteer and the many volunteers who struggle with similar commitment to their position and a strong sense of pride, they were glad conversations and hopefully progression was being held in this area.

King told us an interesting pattern he has witnessed through his alumni program. Often women get better at socializing or networking as they get older, and retirement has a less detrimental impact on their wellbeing. In contrast, men lose motivation or friends and disconnect. These patterns are important because there is a diminishing effect. Men are proud and often do not want to ask for help, but it was widely suggested that creating accessible programs and providing adequate support to ensure networking and socializing between men, and women, who have retired will hopefully lessen the negative consequences of retiring.

4. Some Older Volunteers Feel Pushed Out of Their Agency

Another common theme among volunteers, noticed by managers and experts, is the divide between old and new volunteers. Bendrups, explained how new volunteers can often lack the corporate knowledge of how the Victoria emergency services sector works as a whole. These new volunteers often think that times have changed and leave older volunteers feeling pushed out of their agency. Instead of pushing them out, she believes that the older should mentor the newer. By doing this, all volunteers would have an understanding of how the sector works as a whole, along with a better understanding of how to approach different situations, as older volunteers have more experience that they can pass onto the next generation.

When speaking with a volunteer, they explained the ageism that took place within their unit where the new generation of volunteers would push out the older generation. They would do this in subtle ways, such as eye rolling when someone speaks or whispering about other people. This volunteer's 25+ years in service was not taken into account or respected by the younger volunteers. Due to this treatment, this volunteer and a few more of their colleagues lost the joy their volunteering once brought them, resigned from their positions, and are no longer active volunteers. Their agency then failed to have conversations with these lifelong volunteers as to why they stepped down after 25+ years of dedication and service. They also spoke about how this situation did not just occur within their unit, but it happened more widely in the sector. In the words of our volunteer, human resources and lack of support from the management team "left a sour taste in their mouths".

Another example of how older volunteers can be pushed out of their position was shown through our CFA managers. Often captain roles will be filled by men who have had experience within the brigade and have the natural leader in them. These leaders are voted in by their brigade members every 2 years and in many cases older captains especially do not want to give us their leadership role. One CFA manager explained this situation and said "often, the older men within leadership roles do not want to relinquish that role... the fear losing that status and position in life... and that can result in them being pushed out in a really awful way." The process of being suddenly and unexpectedly pushed out can lead to affecting your mental health causing that older volunteer's transition to retirement to be seen as negative. This can also cause tension within the brigade because there can feel like there is a divide.

Different Opportunities During the Transition to Retirement

5. Some Agencies Have an Informal Approach to Keeping Volunteers Engaged in Less Active Roles

When interviewing agency managers, we asked about the roles their agency had that are non-responsive and less physical. We learned that older volunteers or those that are physically unable to be a responsive member can provide administration support such as communications, radio, logistics, support units, transportation of equipment, education and more. This allows older volunteers to remain within their agency when they are no longer physically able to respond to emergencies directly. In some cases, managers told us volunteers never actually fully retire, so these less-physical roles provide ways that volunteers can maintain that community connection without hindering active response teams.

We heard an example of this lifelong commitment when speaking to a retired brigade captain leader, he told us how he has taken a step back in his role, but can never picture a time he will step back from the job completely. His father had a connection with his fire brigade until he died and he imagines his future will look the same. Since stepping down as captain and no longer physically responding to fires, he has maintained radio responsibilities, as well as assists with stocking equipment and supplies. He assured us that he will always be able to find a role within his brigade, and if more agencies had these opportunities volunteers who wished to remain committed to their organizations, could.

Many volunteers felt they would need to retire when they became physically unfit. Although many older volunteers we spoke to held non-physical positions, some seemed to not know these non-responsive roles exist or some agencies do not provide these non-active roles. A volunteer told us how saddened she was that she was leaving the organization entirely because there were no non-physical roles within her agency. She told us “I want to get out of the physical component, when it’s 3 o’clock in the morning and my pager is going off, but I don’t necessarily want to leave.”

There is a clear inconsistency within agencies, there are many opportunities for older volunteers in some cases, but in others they must leave their agencies completely when they feel that they can no longer respond to emergency calls. The value in these less physical roles is they allow volunteers to willingly step down from higher positions, instead of eventually being forced out.

6. Older Volunteer's Knowledge Could be Utilized through Mentorship Programs

Specifically, when discussing the need for smaller roles in organizations among managers and experts, the idea of utilizing the knowledge of older volunteers through a mentorship program and need for making these programs more uniform and organized was apparent. Paul King, of CFA, mentioned that some brigades currently have their older members mentor their future captains. These older, life-long volunteers have valuable experience, especially within their communities and truly understand the terrain and climate of the area they defend. They know and recognize how to fight emergencies from years of experience and hold a high standard of practice for their organization. From our conversation with Faye Bendrups, the President of the SES Volunteer Association, we heard about her visions for a mentorship program through schooling, where older volunteers could train future emergency service volunteers, in order for that corporate knowledge and experience to be passed down throughout all agencies. Bendrups quoted, “Mentorship programs provide an excellent opportunity for these older volunteers to become teachers and trainers to the next generation of emergency service volunteers. [Mentorship programs are] a great way of recognizing, acknowledging and valuing the work of these older volunteers.” Becoming a mentor or educator is an amazing way for older volunteers to relinquish their physical roles within the agencies while still feeling that their years of commitment and service have value. It is also a way to strengthen agencies by allowing their volunteers to hold a better understanding of how the emergency services work as a whole in Victoria, along with more knowledge of how to respond to emergencies in the area.



Retirement Programming

7. There Is Inconsistent Social and Peer Support for Older Volunteers as They Transition to Retire

We heard that volunteering gives people a strong sense of social connection with colleagues and with the community. Many active volunteers said that they will miss the connection and contact they experience everyday while volunteering with their agency. An AV manager said that volunteers “build lifelong friends.” Other managers mentioned the connections they witness between their volunteers and how it feels much like a family.

Lawrence explained that volunteers rely a lot on the social support that is provided through their colleagues. Working in the emergency services is taxing, and a lot of individuals do not want to bring home those stressors or burdens to their friends or families. Maintaining contact with peers that they can confide in is an important key in improving mental health. Nancy Carbone, another expert, told us that the most utilized programs for retired volunteers were their On-the-Arm Breakfasts and Firehouse Kitchen Talks. Both of these programs allow firefighters to feel at home, reconnect with each other and share their experiences.

Paul King, a CFA manager, worked to create an alumni group that connects retired volunteers. This group consists of members who have 30+ years of commitment to the CFA and social events are held every 3-4 months where members gather and often a guest speaker is brought in. He says these events foster some of the passions and motivations of retired volunteers who can lose morale they once had in their retirement. This program, however great it is, is only available to his division within the CFA. Whilst there has been no formal evaluation of this program there appears to be real benefits of for the mental health of these older, retired firefighters as explained by one volunteer we spoke to who is actually apart of the alumni in the program. He told us that there is a lot of value in the anticipation that comes from guest speakers and the opportunities to reconnect with friends you would not normally be able to communicate with apart from organizational events.

8. No Formal Retirement Programs for Volunteers

During interviews with all managers, they told us that there are no formal retirement programs for volunteers. The managers recognized the need for supporting their older volunteers through retirement but mentioned that there was currently no work being done in this area. A Red Cross Manager said “For their retirement out of the emergency services, we have no program in place, no support.”

Volunteers affirmed that their organizations had no programs and did not foster conversations about retiring from their volunteering. From one volunteer we heard a suggestion she has on how to facilitate retirement conversation. In her organization, every two years a peer support program comes into a unit and educates members how to deal with death or trauma in the field and mental health impacts. She believes that these programs could also foster conversations about the transition to retirement- how to approach it and prepare people for what issues could result from leaving volunteer work. Volunteers and managers alike both thanked us for facilitating these conversations and for

conducting this research, because they saw the value in volunteer transition to retirement to become a more focal issue within their agencies.

9. Mental Health Programs Are Not Offered to Retired Volunteers

All agencies interviewed have some mental health support for their active volunteers. The agencies in Victoria acknowledge that volunteers can be affected by traumatic events. Examples of mental health support throughout the Victorian agencies are CFA's welfare programs and SES's peer support. Through our interview with David Lawrence, we found that providing mental health support to volunteers in the emergency services directly after traumatic events, rather than later when the mental health problems get too much to handle is important in longtime wellbeing. Lawrence explained that early mental health intervention will help emergency service personnel not get to the point where their mental health interferes drastically with their everyday life. What could maybe be resolved in a few counseling sessions could turn into an issue that can affect a person for months or years. When trauma happens, it needs to be dealt with at the time to prevent long-term impacts. Agencies realize this and offer programs to those who reach out for help, but unfortunately emergency service personnel often believe that they are the ones that should be helping others and that they should not be asking for help for themselves. Those that are struggling after a traumatic call and don't ask for help can easily have their mental health worsen over the years and then when they lose their social support of coworkers their mental health can decline even more.

We found that availability of mental health support stops once volunteers take a step back from their agencies and into retirement. Only one agency we spoke to offered their mental health support to retirees. Trauma exposure can leave lasting impacts on overall wellbeing, and sometimes the transition to retirement and no longer being distracted or occupied by the job or work can leave people to dwell. In these cases, the support programs that agencies once provided are no longer available to them. A volunteer has seen the positive impact psychological first aid (PFA), the support RedCross volunteers provides to people after they struggle from emergencies, has on individuals and families. She suggested that "We need PFA help for retiring volunteers - we need support during that transition time to retirement" the process of retiring is intimidating and can leave lasting mental health effects. Leaving the emergency services is taunting and mental health during retirement has been seen to decline. The same levels of support that were once available while volunteers were active within their agencies should be available after retirement.

CONCLUSION

For our study we have concluded that there is much room for improvement across the sector in how volunteers are supported to transition to retirement. This is important because we know volunteering plays such a big part in people's wellbeing so it follows that when they stop volunteering their wellbeing will likely suffer. We also know that the impact of trauma often only becomes apparent after retirement. These people who have dedicated so much of their lives to the community deserve ongoing support in recognition of their service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After hearing the hopes and fears of volunteers, suggestions from experts, and having conversations about the current state of volunteers with agency managers, we concluded that there is much room for improvement in how the wellbeing of volunteers is supported as they transition to retirement. Based on our findings we make five recommendations for agencies in Victoria organized into the following three categories: Pre-Retirement, During the Transition to Retirement and Post-Retirement.

Pre-Retirement

There is a need to prepare volunteers for retirement

Currently, there are no preparatory programs or conversations in place to help volunteers retire from their services. We believe that agencies sector-wide can consider how to better support their older volunteers who are committed to their volunteer work. These conversations and programs could include how to maintain an active mind and body, resources to reach out to if volunteers ever need help and what to expect when making that transition. If volunteers were better prepared with how to occupy their time and minds during retirement, their wellbeing would be less negatively affected once they stop volunteering.

During-the-Transition to Retirement

Agencies need to consider how to keep volunteers engaged through less physical roles

Next, agencies should consider how to implement more less physical roles that volunteers could hold when they can no longer continue their physical roles but still seek involvement and are not ready to leave their agency entirely. These roles could include radio, fundraising, transportation, etc. CFA is an agency that seems to do this well, and older volunteers are able to step back from physically responding to fires but can still support or work within the brigade in other ways. Every agency has jobs that are necessary behind the scenes to keep an emergency response team running smoothly, and older volunteers who want to help could be better utilized. By implementing a formal process outlined in recommendation one the option of stepping down would be easier for all involved.

Utilize the knowledge of older volunteers to train and support emerging leaders within agencies

There are no formal mentorship programs where the experience and wisdom of older volunteers is harnessed. Mentorship programs would benefit both older volunteers' wellbeing, their transition to retirement and the agency as a whole. They will not feel pushed out because they can no



longer respond to emergencies but they will feel honored that their agency sees them as valuable, which will lessen the negative effects on their mental health of having to step away from something that means a lot to them. Younger volunteers will also learn how to maintain good standards of practice and be better prepared to respond to emergencies through mentorship education.

Post-Retirement

Establish alumni programs for retired volunteers

Agencies should consider hosting social support programs and events for the older volunteers within their agency and encourage attendance from both active and retired volunteers. Volunteers have stated they fear missing the camaraderie and connections they formed in the field over years of service. We have heard firsthand that these types of events can be successful, through conversations about Friends of Firefighters breakfasts and Paul King's CFA Alumni events. Facilitating events where they can reconnect and reminisce will ease that fear of losing connection with their role entirely and also provide an opportunity to provide peer support.

Access to mental health support for volunteers after retirement

Agencies should consider how volunteers can have continued access to mental health support. When active, the busy schedules and lifestyles of the job can mask potential mental health issues and once retirement hits, so can mental health concerns. Many agencies said that the programs they offer, like peer and welfare support, are only offered to active volunteers. Offering wellbeing support would be a way to give recognition and appreciation to the roles and sacrifices volunteers made within the agency and community.