



The Positive mental health in young adult emergency services personnel project

Rationale and overview

The Beyond Blue study showed that the average age of volunteer fire and emergency service personnel in Australia is approximately 55 years (Beyond Blue 2018). To ensure that the volunteer force can be maintained into the future, it is necessary to understand how to best support younger volunteer mental health.

This project tackled mental health outcomes in young adult emergency service volunteers (aged 16–25 years) to minimise the short- and long-term impacts of exposure to stress and trauma, as well as providing guidance on how to maintain and promote positive mental health and wellbeing more generally in brigades, groups and units.

When:

June 2020 - March 2021

Who:

Research lead: Dr Amanda Taylor (Uni Adelaide) as part of the CRC's Tactical Research Fund program.

Collaboration partners:

- AFAC
- University of Adelaide,
- University of Western Australia
- Flinders University
- University of British Columbia
- Hospital Research Foundation
- Military and Emergency Services Health Australia
- key emergency services
- Young Volunteers Advisory Committee (set up by the project)

Timing and methodology

There were 5 phases

1. A rapid systematic review of existing research literature on mental health in young adult (16–25 years) emergency service volunteers.
2. An analysis of existing data from previous surveys with age aggregated data and a focus on mental health and wellbeing in the emergency services
3. A survey completed by 192 young ES vols, from all states and territories and 62% from regional or rural locations.
4. An environmental scan of existing programs to support mental health and manage psychosocial risks and hazards in emergency service agencies and 12 semi-structured interviews with emergency service agency representatives.



5. Five focus groups to understand the perceived facilitators and barriers to engaging in mental health supports, the differences in support needs for younger versus older volunteers, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the volunteer experience.

How the data was used

Data collected was synthesised with existing practice frameworks for supporting mental health in emergency services personnel, to produce a Wellbeing Framework and implementation guide for Young Fire and ES Volunteer Mental Health. This Framework was reviewed/user tested with eight ES agency representatives from across Australia.

Findings from the online survey and focus groups were used to produce the Care4Guide (see below), which was co-designed with a young adult cohort through the project's Young Volunteers Advisory Committee.

Main research findings

The volunteer role experience

Stressful impacts -

- Exposure to potentially traumatising events is common.
- Difficult to balance multiple roles (for example, work, study and volunteering).

Positive impacts –

- Sense that their volunteer role is good for their wellbeing (i.e. contributing to the community)

Mental health outcomes

Common to have elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and post trauma symptoms. This corroborates the Beyond Blue (2018) finding that there were higher levels of probable post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in young adult volunteers (8.8 per cent) compared to older volunteers (4.7 per cent)

The rapid review also found risk factors include:

- exposure to childhood trauma
- low self-worth, low levels of education and social support
- regular consumption of alcohol, greater perceived work stress and not accessing psychological support following exposure to a potentially traumatising event

Protective factors include

- high individual resilience and conscientiousness
- high levels of perceived social support from friends.

Agency representatives acknowledged:

- the importance of supporting mental health was acknowledged and prioritised up to the highest level across agencies (right up to the executive level)
- variation across brigades, groups, and units of how this support was reflected in operational workplace or volunteer role culture



- predominantly reactive rather than proactive approaches to the identified risk of mental health concerns.
- Currently no specific mental health strategy or supports specifically targeted to young adult volunteers or personnel.

Young volunteers acknowledged:

- Stigma remained present within many brigades, groups and units, particularly for older volunteers and personnel.
- Operational debriefing was perceived as the most useful source of agency support, followed by employee assistance programs, peer support and online programs.
- The most utilised support was from family and friends, followed by general practitioners.
- Social media, although commonly used, was perceived to be a less useful mental health support.
- Operational debriefings were valued but could be enhanced by including information on mental health-related responses to incidents and provision of support options (including the process of normalisation)
- Psychological safety was highlighted as an important discussion point with volunteer peers and colleagues regarding mental health

Resources developed

The project supported a series of resources developed to help young volunteers and agencies including:

[A main report](#)

Which has:

- Information and outcomes from the project
- A Young Volunteer Wellbeing Framework - a best-practice guide for agencies to support practices already in place or provide options to shift practices to promote and maintain the mental health of young volunteers.
- Agency Implementation Guide - to implement the Young Volunteer Wellbeing Framework. Includes indicators intended as examples of possible practices organisations may implement with their own actions to meet relevant goals within the framework.
- Glossary of key terms (Chapter 12)

[A Care4Guide](#) is a self-completed guide to positive mental health and wellbeing as a young fire and emergency service volunteer.

It comes in three formats: [a PDF](#), [online interactive](#) and a [web installer module](#) (for embedding the Interactive version within external systems, including agency websites)

Also has:

- [Videos/animation](#)
- [Fact sheets](#)
- [Posters](#)
- [Social media assets](#)