

# Emergency Services Foundation

## Support needs of family members of emergency services volunteers

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## Contents

Executive Summary	3
About the study	4
About the Study Participants	5
Feelings about family member volunteering	5
Challenges for family members of Volunteers	6
Awareness of support services available	7
Desired services & support	8
Feedback about services & resources ideas	8
Support for families at different career stages	9
Other themes	10
Recommendations	10
Conclusion	12

## Executive Summary

Family members and partners play a vital role in supporting volunteers to be mentally fit in the 100,000 strong Victorian emergency services volunteer workforce. The Emergency Services Foundation (ESF) engaged Right Management to conduct a study to better understand the support needs of family members of emergency services volunteers.

Study participants overwhelmingly reported being proud that their family member is an emergency services volunteer despite the challenges experienced. Most participants articulated that practical and logistical impacts were the most challenging part of being a family member of an emergency services volunteer. These included being on call, the pager going off and waking up the family, missing important events such as birthdays, and the family member having to pick up the burden of the home duties. The second most common challenge articulated by participants was the emotional and mental health impacts for both the volunteer and for the family member(s). The other commonly mentioned challenge was the respondents concern for their family member's safety when they were called out to do volunteering work. Many expressed concerns relating to the lack of information and communication about their family member's safety.

Most respondents were not aware of support services available to them as a family member of an emergency services volunteer. Of the respondents who were aware of the support services available, half mentioned counselling and half mentioned peer support, with two respondents aware of both support services. Support for families varied depending on the career stage of the volunteer.

**Recommendations** have been developed to directly address each of the key challenges identified by partners and family members of volunteers.

### *Practical / logistical challenges that impact mental health:*

- Create a network for family members of emergency services volunteers
- Provide an opt-in contact list for family members
- Offer a range of practical and financial support options
- Arrange education and awareness for employers of volunteers to ensure employers understand the importance of supporting volunteers and their families
- Review the distribution lists for pager messages; receiving irrelevant messages also impacts the family of volunteers

### *Emotional/mental health specific impacts:*

- Wellbeing expo/s to educate, empower, link, and help build resilience – in Melbourne and regional locations
- Local family/community to build a peer support network for family members
- Improve promotion of mental health support services (EAP) available to family members
- Offer Mental Health literacy training for family members
- Ensure wellbeing checks for volunteers post incident are conducted in a timely manner to reduce stress for family members
- Develop a pamphlet, flyer or booklet targeted at the family member about volunteering and the impacts and supports available for partners and families.

### *Concerns for family members safety*

- Improve timeliness of communication to family members during emergencies.

ESF plans to share the insights from this study sector wide to inform the delivery of potential programs or services to better support family members of Victorian emergency services volunteers.

## About the study

Victoria relies on its ~100,000 emergency service volunteers for its model of emergency management. To do this work effectively volunteers need to be mentally fit. It is well recognised that family and significant others play such a vital role in supporting our volunteers to be mentally fit.

Right Management was engaged to conduct a qualitative study on behalf of the Emergency Services Foundation (ESF) to better understand the support needs of family members of emergency services volunteers. This study aimed to deepen understanding developed from previous studies undertaken by the Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) <https://esf.com.au/our-research/esf-wpi-reports/>.

The study explored:

- How people feel about partner/family member being an emergency services volunteer
- The biggest challenges faced due to their partner/family member being an emergency services volunteer
- Services available to support partners/family members of an emergency services volunteer
- Services or support they would like to see offered to partners/family members
- Types of support for partners/ families at different career stages for example - induction, during service and post service.

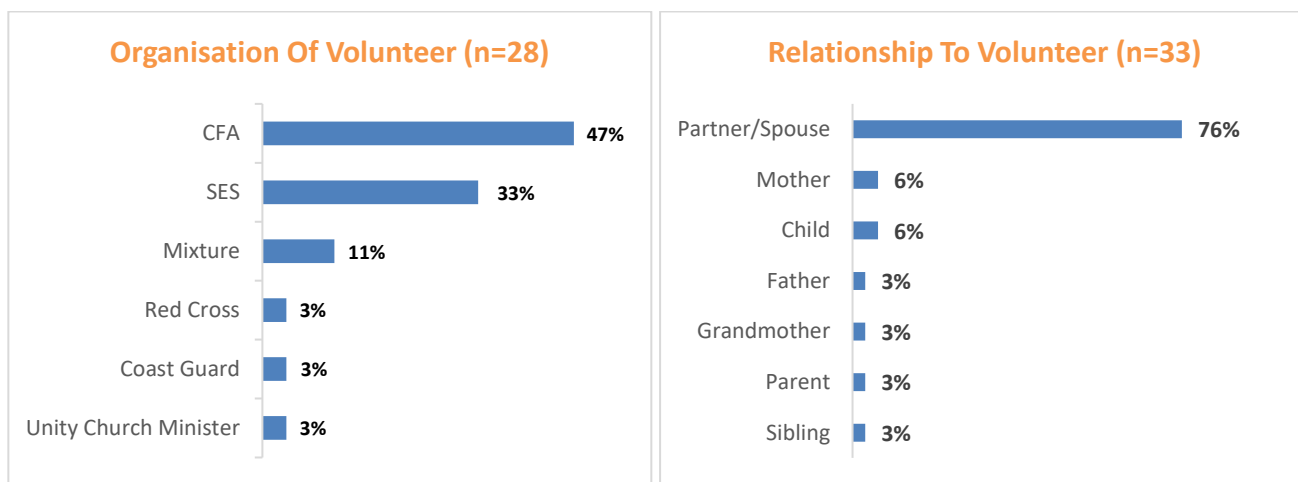
## Study limitations

This was a qualitative research study. The sample of partners and family members of emergency services workers was not a random sample and may not be representative of the experiences of all partners and family members of emergency services volunteers. A disadvantage of snowball sampling is that the sample can be biased to a specific type of respondent. Given the networks through which recruits were selected, it is possible that the study sample was biased to a more active and socially connected partners and family members of volunteers. If it was possible to connect with partners and family members of volunteers outside the ESF network other experiences may have been represented.

We recognise that 28 interviewees are far from a representative sample of the partners and family members of emergency services volunteer population. The strength of qualitative research however is measured by understanding gained over representativeness, and saturation of themes is the measure of robust and valid understanding. The opportunity for in depth discussions generated powerful insights into the challenges and support needs of the partners and family members. The researchers believe that saturation was achieved because whilst each member's experience and journey were unique, common themes emerged, and towards the end of the study were iterated without new themes arising.

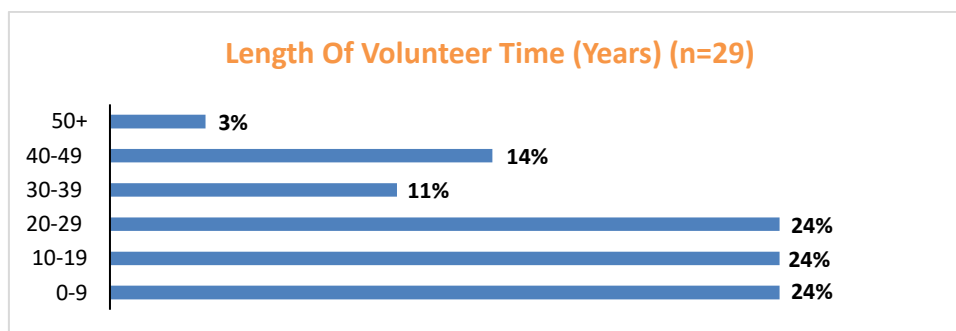
## About the Study Participants

A total of 28 individuals participated in the study, 24 females and 4 males. Most study participants had partners and family members that were volunteers with the CFA or SES, with individuals volunteering with Red Cross, Coast Guard or Unity Church, and some volunteering with more than one organisation.



Around three quarters of study participants were spouses/partners of the emergency services volunteer, but a range of family relationships were also represented, such as parent, child, and grandparent. Some study participants had several family members who volunteer so more than one role was reported.

Most volunteers whose partners and family members were interviewed were long term volunteers, and more than three quarters of volunteers had been volunteering for more than 10 years.



## Feelings about family member volunteering

Most study participants reported being proud that their family member is an emergency services volunteer despite the challenges experienced.

Most responses were positive with many participants articulating they felt it was good for their family member and that they were giving back to the community.

There were three participants who responded with negative feelings in relation to their family member volunteering and one who was neutral.

There were varied experiences shared in relation to the sense of community and connection to others. Some experienced a sense of community and informal networks with other family members of volunteers. Others felt more isolated and were interested in a formally organised network for family members of emergency services volunteers.

Some sample quotes:

*"Fantastic, she enjoys it and I support her 100%"*

*"It's great, honorable and I'm proud. He gets a great sense of purpose that he's giving back to the community and feels proud of himself."*

*"Very proud and very happy to support them gives them great life skills and they are part of something important and part of a team."*

*"All the volunteers are amazing. Australia is such a big country without volunteers we would go to the ground. Hold all of them extremely high regard."*

*"I feel proud, but it can also be frustrating"*

*"Fine, I accept it, it makes him who he is."*

*"Fine, he gets a lot out of it"*

*"Would be nice if he could tone it down"*

## Challenges for family members of volunteers

Study participants reported experiencing consistent challenges as a family member of an emergency services volunteer. These challenges can be captured by the three main themes outlined below.

**Practical / logistical challenges that impact family member wellbeing:** Two thirds of study participants articulated that the most challenging part of being a family member of an emergency services volunteer was the practical and logistical impacts. These included their family member being on call, the pager going off and waking up the family, missing important events such as birthdays, and the family member having to pick up the burden of the home duties in the absence of their partner. They did however acknowledge that this is what their family member signed up for by becoming an emergency services volunteer.

Another practical and logistical challenge raised by several respondents, was the challenge of juggling paid work and volunteering, and that support, understanding and flexibility offered by employers can vary. One respondent was concerned for the safety of their family member when they were called out to a nighttime emergency and the potential for fatigue when driving to work the next day. Another respondent indicated their spouse is a business owner so when he volunteers, he loses income. He also chooses to continue to pay his apprentices whilst he is volunteering, which is an additional cost incurred, therefore there is a financial impact because of his volunteering. Partners and family members worry about these issues which can have a negative impact on their own sense of wellbeing and mental health.

**Emotional and mental health impacts:** The second most common challenge that was articulated by participants (10) was the emotional and mental health impacts for both the volunteer and for the family member(s). Many respondents reported concerns for the mental health impacts of volunteering on their family member and being concerned and unsure how to best support them. Many participants advised that the negative impact on their family members mental health had a negative flow on effect on their mental health and in some cases their relationship. The impact on mental health for the volunteers ranged from shutting down and anger, PTSD and in most extreme instances suicidal ideation. This contributes to worry and concern for family members and in some instances conflict and relationship problems.

Emergencies such as car accidents can involve an individual known to the volunteer, especially in regional locations. This has a significant impact on the mental health of the volunteer and their family members that are supporting them. One respondent talked about their partner being called to three fatalities in a short time frame including a neighbor's fatality, all of which had a significant impact on that volunteer and their partner and family.

One respondent advised that wellbeing checks for volunteers seem to be somewhat perfunctory, consisting of a quick phone call a few days after the incident. Another felt that her family member isn't very open, responding in a way they think they should respond, rather than how they truly feel. The person conducting the check doesn't thoroughly explore the situation, so the check doesn't really provide the level of support required. Concern about the quality and timeliness of the support that the volunteer is receiving leads to stress for the partner and family members.

**Concern for their family members safety:** The other commonly mentioned challenge was the respondents concern for family members when they were called out to do volunteering work; many expressed a concern relating to the lack of information and communication about their family members safety which makes this experience very stressful for them.

## Awareness of support services available

Around half of those interviewed were aware of support services available to them as a family member of an emergency services volunteer, and around half were aware. Of the respondents who were aware of the support services available, half mentioned counselling and half mentioned peer support, with two respondents aware of both support services.

One family member wasn't aware of support but said she was comfortable that she could access information about available support services if she needed to. Another expressed that they felt there could be more support available.

Just over half of the respondents who were aware of the support services available had utilised one or more of these services. Many responded they would utilise the services if they felt they needed to. All respondents who had utilised some form of support service, reported they found the support useful. One respondent who was only aware of peer support did indicate they would **prefer to access support services which are more independent and anonymous** rather than relying on peer support alone.

## Desired services & support

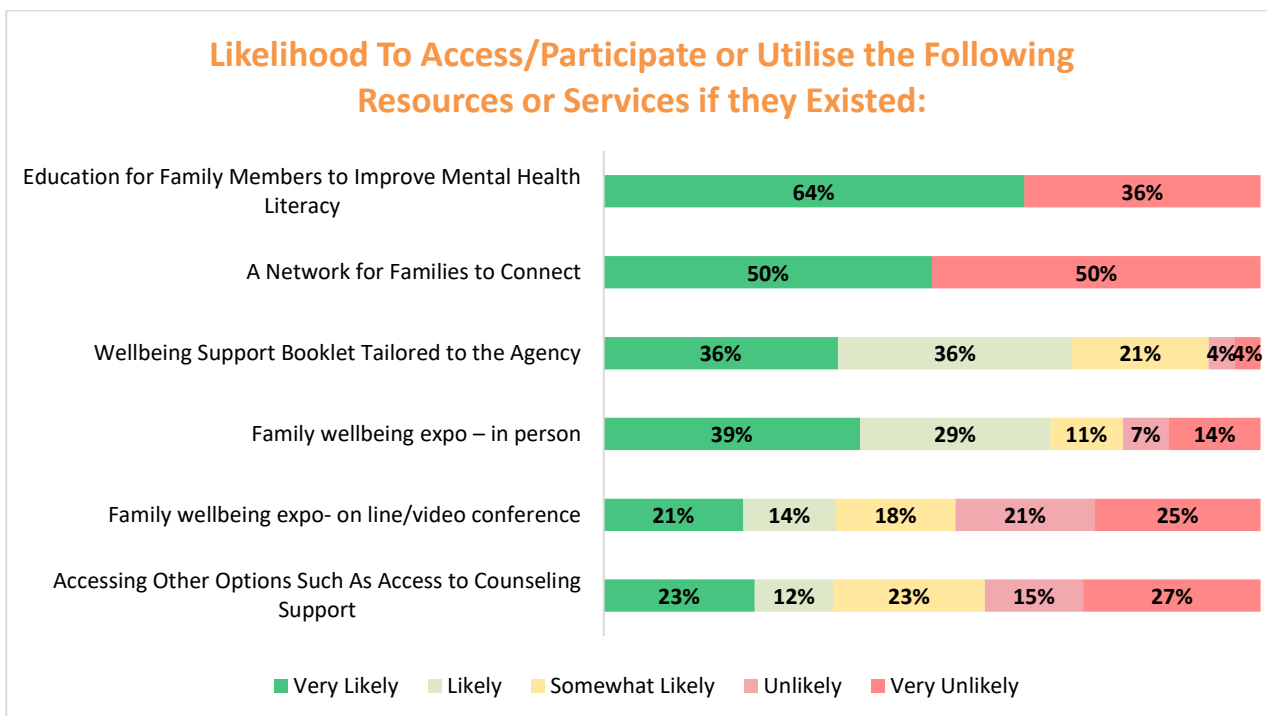
Study participants were asked for their ideas about what support would be useful and valuable to family members. Over half (15) provided suggestions for services and support they would like to see offered, with many proposing multiple ideas. Categorised by theme, these are:

- **Practical support** such as hands-on assistance with domestic demands when volunteer is away, and financial support e.g., compensation for use of own vehicle whilst volunteering
- **Strengthened connection and community** which could include a family social day and/or peer support
- **Mental health support** such as counselling services, information to access EAP, and mental health training to enable them to better support their volunteering family member.

Almost half of survey participants did not offer any suggestions. This was because they were not sure what to suggest, did not personally require support, or felt that everything they need is already available. Many of those unsure of what to suggest indicated they would be open to taking up services and support if the need arose e.g., if they felt counselling would be beneficial if they were impacted following their family member attending in a traumatic incident. The four who said that all necessary services and support are already available were all family members of longstanding volunteers, 3 CFA and 1 SES, all with volunteering tenure of 6 years to over 50 years.

## Feedback on ESF services & resources ideas

Study participants were asked to rate how likely they would be to access/ participate in a range of possible support types under consideration by ESF.





## Education for family members to improve mental health literacy

When participants were asked whether they would be interested in education to improve their mental health literacy, the response was largely in favour with around two thirds indicating they would take up this option, and one third reporting that they would not.

## A network for family members to connect

Around half of the participants reported that they would attend a network to connect with other family members or volunteers, and half said they would not. In many cases, those who were not interested went on to elaborate and reinforce the reason they would not take up this option was because they already feel connected to an informal network through their family members' depot/ work centre.

Some sample quotes:

*"There is a very strong informal community within the CFA, it's like a family. When parents passed away Ballarat Brigade were a marvellous support."*

*"The CFA are a close-knit community who support each other and drop round to the house so feel supported this way"*

## Family wellbeing expo to educate, empower, link, and help build resilience – in person

Around two thirds of participants said that they would be likely or very likely to attend an in-person wellbeing expo. For those who said that would be unlikely or very unlikely to attend, in many instances, the cited reason was a perception such an event would be held in Melbourne, or a location distanced too far away from their regional location. This indicates that holding several smaller-scale expos in considered locations across Victoria would maximise accessibility, inclusion and therefore attendance and participation.

## Family wellbeing expo to educate, empower, link, and help build resilience – online/video conference

When we asked participants if they would attend a wellbeing expo online rather than in person, the number who responded as likely or very likely to attend dropped by almost 50% (10) and a greater number (13) responded they would be unlikely or very unlikely to attend. A common theme amongst those who advised they would not attend online, was lack of access, resistance, or discomfort with digital technology.

## Wellbeing support pamphlet/booklet tailored to the Agency

Participants expressed a similar level of interest in the wellbeing support pamphlet/booklet to the in-person expo; 20 responded that they would be interested in reading such a resource, and only a very small number of participants (2) shared that they would be unlikely or very unlikely to read it.

## Support for families at different career stages

Over two thirds of survey participants stated that different support is required at different career stages and the first year/induction was the most identified stage needing the most support. Themes amongst those that elaborated on this point include:

**First year:** Greater support required such as resources to build awareness of available services for volunteer and family member, and information around volunteering commitments to help the family member understand what to expect.

**During service:** Additional support such as counselling is required after the realities of volunteering become apparent or following a trauma, and the ongoing opportunity to provide confidential feedback via a website or app.

**Post-service:** If a volunteer has been very involved with their local agency, but can no longer respond to incidents and emergencies, the volunteer and their family can lose this connection, which can impact mental health. To maintain that network and connection, one agency has an older volunteer who does some cleaning to remain involved and provide other duties post service.

## Other themes

Several themes emerged which are beyond the scope of the study:

### Organisational politics & resourcing

There was frustration expressed by some regarding how agency issues such as organisational politics and under- resourcing impacted volunteer wellbeing which in turn impacts family members.

### Fire events

Fires, including Black Saturday 2009 and the 2019 fires, were mentioned by many as significantly challenging and traumatic events where the mental impact on the volunteer impacted more broadly on family members.

### Recognition of family member contribution

Other observations related to the level of appreciation/recognition of the contribution made by the family member and some expressed feeling overlooked.

## Recommendations

The study participants varied in age, gender, location, the service that their partners or family member volunteered for, and their personal experiences and there is no one size fits all type of support that will suit everyone. However, the recommendations presented below aim to address the predominant challenges discussed by study participants.

THEME	RECOMMENDATION
<p><b>Practical / logistical challenges that impact wellbeing</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Consider how a network for family members of emergency services volunteers could be implemented.</b> This is in place in some instances, usually informally. Ensuring this is offered more broadly and consistently will enable local practical support for example, sharing meals and babysitting. Many respondents prefer local support and local groups. This could also provide positive mental health support benefits in terms of peer support and lessening feelings of isolation.</li> <li>• <b>Offer an opt-in contact list for family members</b> of volunteers who wish to share their contact details - for a network of family members.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Investigate offering a range of practical and financial support options</b> for example, discounted registration fees, cleaners, vouchers for home delivered meals/uber eats etc. to go towards the logistical and financial challenges of being a family member of a volunteer. It is recommended that this would be a sector wide approach rather than agency by agency.</li> <li>• Consider a <b>review of the distribution lists for pager messages</b> to ensure only those who are required to read the message are contacted. One respondent mentioned that 80% of the messages they receive are not relevant to them, and this unnecessary disruption is not only annoying but impacts the mental health and wellbeing of family members.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Emotional / mental health related impacts</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further to the recommendation to offer a network for family members, it is recommended that <b>wellbeing expo/s</b> are held to educate, empower, link, and help build resilience. We note that some said that they would be unable to attend if such an event was held in Melbourne due to distance from their regional location, so several regional events could also be considered.</li> <li>• <b>Local family/community days</b> are recommended as an opportunity to build a peer support network for family members, especially where networks are not strong. We recommend not branding them as “mental health initiatives” but instead as family/community days and these events could deepen connections and provide emotional support for family members.</li> <li>• <b>Improve promotion of mental health support services (EAP)</b> available to family members of emergency services of volunteers. Ongoing awareness and education will ensure family members are aware of services and can utilise them when needed.</li> <li>• <b>Offer mental health literacy training for family members of emergency services volunteers.</b> This will build awareness on how to best support their family member. This would include education and practical tips on identifying signs of mental health issues, how to have conversations about issues and how to suggest seeing a professional, and how to respond to mental health emergencies. We note that this type of training is currently provided through ESF’s Mental Health Matters program.</li> <li>• Ensure post-incident <b>wellbeing checks for volunteers</b> are conducted in a more timely manner i.e., within 24 hours of the incident. Conduct a more in-depth wellbeing check and where possible conduct the check face to face rather than over the phone, to ensure the quality of the emotional support and a referral to appropriate services as and when required is made. Concern about the timeliness and quality of wellbeing checks delivered to the volunteers impacts the wellbeing of family members.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a <b>flyer/pamphlet/booklet targeted at family members</b>, to be supplied to each volunteer upon commencement, outlining the work commitments of volunteers, and the support channels available to the family member.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Concerns for family members safety</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Improve timeliness of communication to family members during emergencies</b> when partners are volunteering by implementing a group / central (opt in) communication channel (for example WhatsApp). This would enable the quick and effective dissemination of information to all family members in relation to the safety of volunteers who have been called out to an emergency.</li> </ul> <p>N.B. A common theme of low digital literacy was evident within the participant cohort, so it is highly recommended that an IT point-of-contact is nominated within each group to assist those requiring support with the technical set-up.</p>

## Conclusion

Being a family member of an emergency services volunteer can be an invisible and selfless role. The decision to volunteer will invariably present challenges and require sacrifices to be made by partners and family members in order for the role to be fulfilled.

Whilst most family members feel proud of the emergency services volunteer, the family member experience can range from bearing the practical burden of sole parenting and domestic duties for extended durations, dealing with worry and uncertainty, through to the emotional challenges of navigating the impact of traumatic incidents on their partner, and the resulting mental health impact on the volunteer potentially leading to a strain on the relationship. Therefore, the recommendations address the range of themes and common experiences consistently shared by participants, whilst accommodating preferences of a range of individuals with unique needs.

ESF plans to share the insights from this study to sector wide and to inform the delivery of potential programs or services at agency or sector level to better support family members of Victorian emergency services volunteers.