

Mobilising Communities of Volunteers

'Communities of Volunteers' is a concept developed by Volunteering Qld to address the current trends and issues that are affecting voluntary participation and volunteer action in local communities. Its focus is on strengthening communities through innovative volunteer models, sharing resources and the use of technology to coordinate and mobilise local volunteers across agencies and all sectors of the community including immediate response to natural disasters and threats.

Volunteering as we once knew it is subtly, but significantly changing. Not only are new models of volunteer engagement emerging to overtake interest in traditional volunteering, but new forms of responding to worthwhile causes and activities are evolving. To many across the community and in government, both in Australia and internationally, the existence of these spontaneous, social action response networks are so amorphous that the potential they represent is largely untapped.

Yet, enabled by increasingly sophisticated technology, the notion of these 'communities' readily exists and in the volunteering sector, could be brought together to provide the next generation in volunteer recruitment and mobilisation.

To understand how these 'Communities of Volunteers' could strengthen communities it is necessary to understand how the characteristics of 'Communities of Volunteers', could be evolved, and lastly, how they could be mobilised across sectors and agencies.

Characteristics of 'Communities of Volunteers'

- Geographically formed within defined community areas
- Encompasses both traditional and informal volunteering
- Encompasses current and potential volunteers
- Cross sector participation
- Cross agency participation
- Volunteers have a 'portfolio of interests' approach to volunteering that is not necessarily linked to any single agency
- Community strengthening outcomes rather than service delivery focus
- Linked by common knowledge and experiences including training and accreditation (see next page)

Just as 'Google Earth' provides a map of the communities we live in, 'Communities of Volunteers' could provide a map of the volunteer capacity local areas have available to them. It could also facilitate connection with these volunteers. Sophisticated technology would be required, making 'Google Earth' an apt comparison.

Geographic Focus

Significantly, unlike communities of interest, 'Communities of Volunteers' should be geographically formed within defined community areas. Why? Because the key to strengthening local communities lies in knowing who, within the community, has the skills, knowledge and desire to make a difference.

Rural and remote communities already do this well. It is not unusual for the same volunteer to be engaged as an SES firefighter, on the board of the local school and fundraising for the soccer club. Larger communities however do not have the connectivity and intimacy that small communities experience. Individual agencies know who their volunteers are, but they do not know who is the skilled volunteers at another organisation who might be interested in engaging with them on a project or some other basis.

Mobilising 'Communities of Volunteers'

The notion of neighbourhoods or communities coming together in response to an issue is not an unfamiliar one. But the speed and methods communities are using to do this now are fundamentally different to the 'bush telegraph' that might have been used in the past.



Position Paper

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The emergence of 'flash or smart mobs' is just one example of how technology has changed the way people mobilise around an issue or concept they care about (see wikipedia.com.au for definitions). The use of wireless devices such as mobile phones and personal digital assistants means that quick responses (ideal in emergency situations such as environmental disasters) and direct links (cutting out middle man delays) are possible.

Training and Accreditation

The key to ensuring effective 'Communities of Volunteers' lies not just in knowing what skills, knowledge and desires a volunteer has in a geographic area; but also in their readiness to engage effectively with minimum delays.

If volunteers within 'Communities of Volunteers' had core knowledge about volunteering the drain on community organisations to train and induct short-term volunteers (a constant concern from community groups) would be minimised. Such core training could be provided through the registering process by a central agency such as Volunteering Qld.

Additionally, agency specific training might be necessary. Community organisations could rethink their approach to volunteer training to accommodate these new volunteer models. For example, SES may develop a team of 'reserve' volunteers who commit to 4 days training annually and are listed as a 'reserve' group should a major emergency arise.

Similarly, common accreditation areas could be mapped within the 'Communities of Volunteers'.

Example



Emergency Service volunteers

Joe Bloggs is a regular bus driver with the Early Childhood Outdoor Play Group. He has undergone basic volunteer training as a result of registering as a volunteer in Happyville's Community of Volunteers. As a community volunteer, Joe has also registered as a Rural Bushfire Reserve member following his annual in service training with the State Emergency Service and is available in an emergency.

He expressed interest in working outdoors and with children. He can apply for a Blue Card as a community volunteer. He is also a published author and is passionate about literacy. He has no more time available face to face, but would be available to contribute virtually to projects. As a member of the 'Communities of Volunteers' Joe Bloggs has recently been contacted by the Storytime Reading Group to produce a monthly newsletter for parents of young children. He has accepted.

Recently acquiring a caravan to travel around Australia now that he has retired, Joe Bloggs has since updated his profile to advise that he will be in Tennent Creek for 4 weeks in June. He will soon be contacted by the local writers' group to give a presentation to members on how to get their work published. Joe Bloggs is an example of your average volunteer within Australia's 'Communities of Volunteers'.

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