

# Exploring the impacts of emergency service volunteering on volunteer families

**Sean Cowlshaw**

School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University, Victoria

**Dr Lynette Evans, Dr Jim McLennan**

School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University, Victoria

## Introduction

Evidence suggests that emergency service work may conflict with family and place pressure on partners and children. For example, irregular shift-work and time away from family have been described as sources of strain on the families of emergency responders (Regehr, Dimitropoulos, Bright, George & Henderson, 2005). **Notwithstanding that the bulk of fire protection to Australian communities is provided by volunteers, almost all the scant evidence available has come from investigating career (employed) emergency services personnel.** This is despite emerging signs that volunteer families may also experience negative outcomes (Cowlshaw & McLennan, 2006), and the fact that volunteers typically volunteer *in addition* to paid work commitments. As such, the experiences and needs of these volunteer families remains uncertain.



## Design

As the first stage of a program of research on volunteer families, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 volunteer managers from Victoria's CFA. These volunteer



managers have duties characterised by personal contact with volunteer firefighters and familiarity with volunteer issues, and interviews were intended to provide an organisational perspective on family issues. Data were analysed for recurring themes using a thematic analysis procedure.

## Findings

The following themes were identified across most interviews:

- Many volunteers consistently prioritise brigade demands ahead of family responsibilities. The experience of being in second place to the fire-brigade often generates resentment from some family members.
- The routine demands of training and attending meetings limits the time available for volunteers to meet both physical and emotional family demands.
- Both generalised fatigue following operational activities and trauma exposure can lead to changes in the volunteers' behaviour (eg. withdrawal) at home. This may be a source of strain on families who are not informed about or equipped to deal with such behaviours.
- There are also positive experiences for some families from having an enhanced social network. This may be advantageous for families who are new to a geographic area or live in

impersonal urban communities.

- Other themes occurred less frequently. For example: families experiencing financial difficulties when the volunteer takes time from work to attend emergencies; and partners experiencing anxiety about the volunteers safety during incidents.

## Future Directions

As a second stage of research, emergency service volunteers **and** their partners will be invited to complete survey questionnaires about their well-being and how emergency service volunteering impacts on families.

**Couples interested in assisting with the research will be invited to obtain questionnaires by either (a) inquiring through a free-call 1800 service (surveys would be posted by mail); or (b) downloading questionnaires from an internet site. Participating would be entirely anonymous and voluntary.**

The anticipated outcomes of the project will include reports to agencies detailing the experiences of families of volunteers, their needs, and ways in which organisations might support families of volunteers more effectively.

**Queries about participating and requests for a summary report of the interview study can be directed to Sean Cowlshaw [s.cowlshaw@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:s.cowlshaw@latrobe.edu.au)**

## References

- Cowlshaw, S., & McLennan, J. (2006). Impacts of fire service volunteering on the families of volunteers: A literature review and research agenda. *Supplement to the Australian Journal on Volunteering*, 11, 46-55.
- Regehr, C., Dimitropoulos, G., Bright, E., George, S., & Henderson, J. (2005). Behind the brotherhood: Rewards and challenges for wives of firefighters. *Family Relations*, 54, 423-435.

## Acknowledgements

Photos taken by (left) Meeka Baily of NSW RFS (RFS) and (above) by NSW SES. Permission for reproduction granted by NSW RFS and NSW SES ([www.ses.nsw.gov.au](http://www.ses.nsw.gov.au)).