Section 3: Draft Communication Strategy

The communication strategy was developed in response to the research report (section 5) and consultations (section 1), which demonstrated the need for clear and consistent messages to be relayed to potential spontaneous volunteers during emergencies. In emergencies, effective communication is vital.

The strategy is aimed at assisting jurisdictions, municipalities and organisations to develop clear and consistent messages. This section provides examples of types of messages that can be used at each stage of an emergency.

The strategy is useful for both those who do and do not wish to use spontaneous volunteers. The strategy was designed to work with the framework, but it can also be used as a stand-alone document. For best results in implementing the strategy, also read Section 4: The draft implementation plan.

Contents

Aim

The aim of the communication strategy is to assist in the effective management of spontaneous volunteers through the delivery of clear and consistent messages.

Context

The success of the emergency response can depend on people understanding their roles, responsibilities and chain of command. Spontaneous volunteers often arrive without the necessary equipment to perform a role or to keep themselves and others safe: they can be a distraction to agencies involved in response and recovery efforts. Their credentials cannot be proven and they may lack the necessary training and experience to perform the roles they aspire to. For these reasons they may not be used and this leaves them dissatisfied, disappointed and angry with disaster managers.[1]

This dissatisfaction was echoed in the primary research undertaken as part of the project into the motivations and expectations of spontaneous volunteers.

'I felt underutilised, ignored and frustrated that my skills/time etc could have been put to use. I still feel that way, particularly when the media report on the continuing cleanup effort and the lack of progress to date.'

'I felt that applying to [the agency] was a waste of time. I was ready to do whatever was needed, and my offer was just noted, then ignored. I still feel very angry that even now, there is still so much to do in the affected areas, but I still have not been asked to do anything.'

'I was frustrated and angry that I had to wait for better organisation. In future I would go independently.'[2]

An effective communication strategy will help with the management of spontaneous volunteers. Clear, consistent messages stating whether spontaneous volunteers are being used and, if so, the process for registering offers of help will alleviate public frustration in the aftermath of an emergency while decreasing the pressure put on the agencies involved.
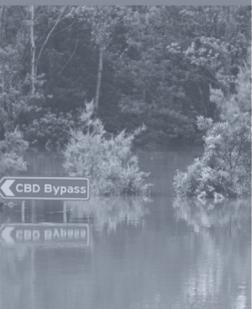
'I was politely informed that my offer had been noted, at the present all the help needed was at hand. Therefore I was at ease. The universe did not need my support right then so that's OK.'[3]

Principles

The communication strategy is based on the following principles:

- The people affected by any emergency are the first priority.
- Spontaneous volunteering is valuable and aids community recovery.
- Spontaneous volunteers can be effectively managed through intelligent communication:
  - Coordinated messages should be pre-agreed at all levels.
  - Messages given to the public should be consistent regardless of their source.
  - Messages given should reflect the changing nature of disaster response and recovery and be consistent with the National Principles for Disaster Recovery.
  - There will never be a general call for spontaneous volunteers. There may be a call for spontaneous volunteers with specific skill sets if required.
  - Alternatives to spontaneous volunteering will be suggested, in order to be consistent with these principles, if no opportunities arise (e.g. holding a fundraiser and donating the money).

---

[1] Australian Red Cross, 'Literature review: spontaneous volunteering in disasters', 2007.

[2] A. Cottrell, 'A survey of spontaneous volunteers', 2010 (in section 5 of this kit).

[3] A. Cottrell, 'A survey of spontaneous volunteers', 2010.

Assumptions

The communication strategy is based on the following assumptions:
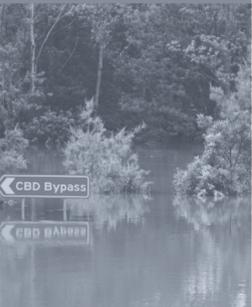
- There is a pre-agreed way in which spontaneous volunteers can register, if required.
- There are connections between the agency coordinating volunteer registrations, if required, and response and recovery agencies within the jurisdiction.
- There are good relationships between government/agencies and the media.
- Management tools have been developed as part of the project to assist agencies and groups outside of existing emergency management arrangements.
- Jurisdictions and agencies not using spontaneous volunteers will advise community members that they are not required.

Key messages

The messages given need to reflect the changing nature of any emergency. Broad messages have therefore been developed for each of four stages of an emergency. These have been identified as:

- **Emerging:** Immediately after an emergency, when little is known about the extent of the impact or the needs of the community, and when the story begins to feature in the media.
- **Initial response:** 12 to 24 hours after the emergency has occurred.
- **Ongoing response:** Includes ongoing response and community recovery. This is likely to be the longest communication stage.
- **Stand down:** Spontaneous volunteers are no longer required.

Stage	Broad message on spontaneous volunteering	Rationale
1. Emerging	The Emergency Services are responding to the emergency. Please assist them by staying away. Community support is appreciated. More information will be available within the next few hours. Please wait for more information.	A holding message designed to take the heat out of the situation: • If no message is given people will go to the affected site or start contacting agencies, particularly those involved in the response. • The message acknowledges the invaluable support that community members give each other, but is not a call for action.
2. Initial response	The emergency has been contained. The damage is extensive. The needs of the community are being assessed. Donations of money are the best form of help (goods are not required). Specialist volunteers may be needed in the near future. See the website … Please offer your assistance through your normal volunteer channels.	An updated holding message which acknowledges that specific skills may be needed even if they have not currently been identified: • There is usually an emergency appeal. • Many people are already affiliated with a volunteering organisation or peak body. Encouraging the public to contact these organisations and offer their help diverts them away from the agencies involved in response and recovery. It also gives people an outlet for their desire to help.
3. Ongoing response	Money and some services have been offered. The needs of the community are being addressed. Thank you for your interest and support. Volunteers with specialist skills are encouraged to register on the website. Please go online to see the range of skills needed. Please assist the Emergency Services/recovery effort by continuing to stay away.	The message could be updated daily: • It is important to thank those who are keen to help. • It reassures the public that the needs of those affected by the emergency are being or have been met. • It is specific about what help is required and is a reality check on the likelihood of utilisation if individuals don't have these skills.
4. Stand down	Money and services have continued to be offered. Thank you for your interest and support. The immediate needs of the community have now been met. Volunteers will be involved in the recovery effort for months to come, but additional volunteer resources are not needed at this time. If you are interested in volunteering for future emergencies …	• It is important to thank those who are keen to help or have helped. • The message reassures the public that the needs of those affected by the emergency are being or have been met. • The recovery phase continues over an extended period of time. • The message seeks to strengthen agencies through new volunteer recruitment.

Sample generic messages

The following tables provide sample generic messages for a range of stakeholders. Key stakeholders were identified as:

- people affected by an emergency
- the public, including:
  - potential spontaneous volunteers
  - spontaneous volunteers
- media
- government
- agencies involved with both response and recovery
- peak bodies.

These messages can be tailored to meet the needs of the jurisdiction, municipality or agency. The messages assume that there is a pre-agreed way in which spontaneous volunteers can register, if required. They also assume that offers of help meet, or exceed, demand.

Pre-emergency messages

These might include:

- a public awareness–raising campaign delivered through the media, social networking sites and jurisdiction, municipal and agency websites
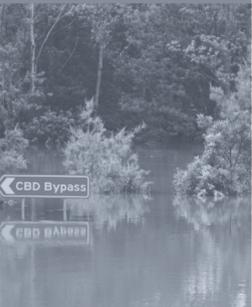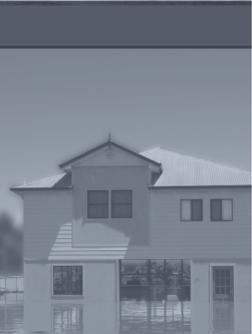- internal communication within organisations involved in the response to and recovery from an emergency.

Target audience	Suggested message content	Rationale
The public	We know that people's hearts open at times of disaster and they want to help by volunteering. If you want to be able to help next time there's an emergency, you need to attend training now—don't wait for an emergency to volunteer. There are plans in place to respond to any type of emergency, anywhere in the country. Trained personnel, including volunteers, implement these plans by responding to the emergency and aiding the recovery of affected communities. If you are interested in being involved …	• Assuring the public that plans are in place to respond to emergencies. • Strengthening agencies through new volunteer recruitment.
Staff and volunteers working within existing emergency management plans	A plan has been developed for the management of people who want to volunteer in emergencies. This can be found at … As part of the plan, messages for each stage of an emergency have been drafted. These will be circulated to all staff and volunteers in an emergency to ensure that everyone is clear on the jurisdiction's/municipality's/organisation's [delete as applicable] response to offers of help.	• Promoting clear and consistent communication.

Ministerial messages

Stages	Suggested message content	Rationale
1. Emerging	• Trained emergency services personnel are responding to the event. • The needs of the affected communities have yet to be identified. • The public can best assist by staying away from the affected area and not calling agencies to offer their help. There is no call for volunteers at this time.	A holding message designed to take the heat out of the situation: • If no message is given, people will go to the affected site or start contacting agencies, particularly those involved in the response. • There is no call to action.
2. Initial response	• We are working with affected communities to identify their needs. Please continue to stay away. • Specialist skills may be required. These will be advertised on … • The best way the public can help is by donating money or raising funds through an approved activity for the emergency appeal. See the website … for how to do this.	An updated holding message which acknowledges that specific skills may be needed, even if they have not currently been identified: • There is usually an emergency appeal.
3. Ongoing response	• Thank you for your offers of help and your patience while the needs of the affected community/communities continue to be assessed. • Specialist skills are now required. These are advertised on … • Please continue to support those affected by donating money or raising funds through an approved activity for the emergency appeal. See the website … for how to do this.	• It is important to thank those who are keen to help. • The message reassures the public that the needs of those affected by the emergency are being met. • It is specific about what help is required and states that only individuals who have specialist skills may be used.
4. Stand down	• Thank you for your offer of help [this may be a media announcement, letter or email from the relevant minister]. • There is no longer an immediate need for volunteers. • [The coordinating agency] now has more offers of help than can be used. • If you are interested in volunteering with an agency in the future, please contact …	• It is important to thank those who are keen to help or have helped. • The message reassures the public that the needs of those affected by the emergency are being met. • The message seeks to strengthen agencies through new volunteer recruitment.

Messages from the state/territory strategic agency to the media

Stages	Suggested message content	Rationale
1. Emerging	Our hearts go out to those affected by the disaster. The Emergency Services are currently responding to the situation. Please assist them by staying away; the danger has not yet passed. Community support is appreciated. We are assessing the situation and will give more details as soon as possible.	A holding message designed to discourage the public from travelling to the affected area to try to help: • If no message is given, people will go to the affected site or start contacting agencies, particularly those involved in the response. • The message acknowledges the invaluable support that community members give each other, but is not a call for action.
2. Initial response	Our priority remains those affected by the disaster and we are working with affected communities to assess their needs. To ensure a coordinated response to offers of help from the public, a website is being set up. This will give updates on any specialist skills that may be required and will give details of how you can offer your help if you have these skills. The best way people can help is to donate or raise money for the emergency appeal.	An updated holding message acknowledging public support and that specific skills may be required even if they have not currently been identified: • There is usually an emergency appeal.
3. Ongoing response	Thank you to all those who have generously donated money or have offered to donate their time. Our priority remains those affected by the disaster and we are working with the communities to aid their recovery. Members of the public who are interested in helping and have specialist skills are encouraged to go to [website] to view the range of skills required; these currently include carpenters and landscape gardeners. Details of how to offer your help are also on the website. If you would like to help, but do not have the skills currently required, donating or raising money through an approved activity are the best ways to help those affected. See the website for how to do this. Please do not travel to the affected areas to see what you can do. Those who are currently helping affected people need to focus on their work, not be diverted away to manage offers of help.	The message could be updated daily: • It is important to thank those who are keen to help. • It is specific about what help is required and is a reality check on the likelihood of utilisation if individuals do not have these skills.
4. Stand down	Thank you to all those who have generously donated money or have offered to donate their time. The immediate needs of the community have now been met. However, community recovery is complex and takes place over an extended period of time. Volunteers will be involved in the recovery effort for months to come, but additional volunteers are not needed at this time. If you are interested in volunteering to help in future emergencies ...	• It is important to thank those who are keen to help or have helped. • The message reassures the public that the needs of those affected by the emergency are being met, and acknowledges that the recovery phase continues over an extended period of time. • The message seeks to strengthen agencies through new volunteer recruitment.

Messages from the coordinating agency to potential spontaneous volunteers

Stages	Suggested message content	Rationale
2. Initial response	*Message to potential spontaneous volunteers who turn up at the disaster site to offer their help.* The emergency has been contained. The damage is extensive. The needs of the community are our first priority and are being assessed. The staff and volunteers currently being used have a high level of skill and training. Further volunteers are not required at this time. Donating money is the best form of help you can give (goods are not required). Specialist volunteers may be required in the near future. See the website … Please offer your assistance through your normal volunteer channels.	A holding message which acknowledges that specific skills may be needed even if they have not currently been identified: • Affected people are the first priority. • There is usually an emergency appeal. • Many people are already affiliated with a volunteering organisation or peak body. Encouraging the public to contact these organisations and offer their help diverts them away from the agencies involved in response and recovery. It also gives people an outlet for their desire to help.
3. Ongoing response	*Message that could be given at time of registration.* We have had an overwhelming response to this emergency. As a result, your offer of help will be registered but may not be taken up. If you are needed, you may be asked to provide proof of a police check, working with children check, licences and registration if appropriate. This is the only place you need to register your interest for being a volunteer in this emergency. Any agency that requires additional resources will source them through [coordinating agency]. If an agency has a specific requirement, your details will be provided to them and they will contact you directly. If you are not contacted, this means that we do not require additional help at this time. Thank you for your registration and patience.	• Provides a reality check for potential volunteers on likelihood of use. • Diverts calls away from agencies involved in response and recovery.
4. Stand down	Thank you for your offer of help. The agencies involved did not require additional volunteers to help in this emergency. If you would be interested in future volunteer opportunities with these agencies …	• It is important to thank those who are keen to help. • The message seeks to strengthen agencies through new volunteer recruitment.

Messages from agencies, both accepting and not accepting spontaneous volunteers

A recorded phone message that members of the public might hear when they first ring an agency before they speak to an operator.

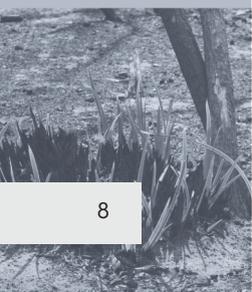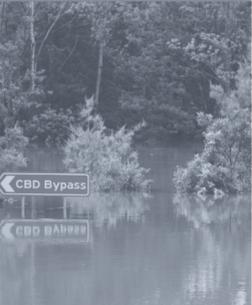| Stages	Suggested message	Rationale
1. Emerging 2. Initial response 3. Ongoing response	Thank you for your call. If you are in immediate danger please hang up and call '000'. If you are calling to volunteer for [name of the emergency], then please call [phone number] or visit [web address]. If you are calling about something else, please hold the line.	• Filtering calls that could distract resources away from the agency's main task in emergency response or recovery. • Promoting a coordinated approach to the registration and management of spontaneous volunteers.

Messages from agencies accepting spontaneous volunteers

Stages	Suggested message	Rationale
1. Emerging 2. Initial response 3. Ongoing response	Thank you very much for your offer of help. To ensure a coordinated response, all interested volunteers for this emergency need to register at …	• Promoting a coordinated approach to the registration and management of spontaneous volunteers. • Minimising agency resources diverted to manage offers of help.
4. Stand down	*Message to members of the public referred to the agency.* Thank you for your help during this emergency. The help you have given has been much appreciated. If you would be interested in volunteering with [the agency] in future emergencies ...	• It is important to thank those who have helped. • The message seeks to strengthen agencies through new volunteer recruitment.

Messages from agencies not accepting spontaneous volunteers

Stages	Suggested message	Rationale
1. Emerging 2. Initial response 3. Ongoing response	Thank you very much for your offer of help. To ensure a coordinated response, all interested volunteers for this emergency need to register at … We are currently fortunate enough to not require additional help at this time. Should this change, we will source volunteers from [the coordinating agency]. If you are interested in volunteering with [agency name] in the future, please go to our website …	• Promoting a coordinated approach to the registration and management of spontaneous volunteers. • Providing the rationale for declining offer of help. • Promoting ongoing volunteering opportunities even if the agency is overwhelmed by the emergency and is unable to process new volunteer applications at the time.
	For persistent offers of help the following message might be appropriate. Due to the nature of the work our volunteers perform, there are certain training and legislative requirements that must be met. As a result, we are unable to process new volunteers for this emergency. If you are interested in volunteering with [agency name] in the future, please register your interest with [the coordinating agency]. To ensure a coordinated response to offers of help, all interested volunteers for this emergency need to register at ...	

Social networking sites

Social networking sites provide a powerful and immediate avenue for the delivery of any message. Delivering a message about spontaneous volunteering that is consistent with messages delivered in the media and by agencies will reinforce the need for people to stay away from affected areas, while updating community members about any specialist skills needed.

In the absence of a message, or if conflicting messages are given, people are more likely to feel there is a need for their help. Feedback from the primary research reflected this scenario:

'I thought people were desperately needed to help sort out donations etc. It was mentioned in the media, interviews etc. But I was not contacted.'

'The media made out volunteers were desperately needed.'[4]

The immediacy of social networking sites means that messages need to be constantly updated, at least daily. The time required may appear a barrier, but it is an investment, and will assist in either seeking relevant and specific assistance or keeping the public away from affected areas and channelling their efforts into more appropriate ways of helping.

---

4   A. Cottrell, 'A survey of spontaneous volunteers', 2010.