

# FIRE NOTE

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## RECRUITING AND RETAINING WOMEN FIRE SERVICE VOLUNTEERS

Early research conducted by the Bushfire CRC's Volunteerism Project, revealed that the volunteer membership of most agencies is predominantly male, Australian born, and aging rapidly - over the period 2001-2006, the median age of Country Fire Authority of Victoria (CFA) volunteers increased from 40 to 46 (Birch and McLennan, 2006). McLennan (2004) reported that, across the fire agencies, women made up between 12 percent and 24 percent of the volunteer membership; and most served in support rather than operational roles.

As noted in earlier publications (Beatson and McLennan 2005 and McLennan et al 2007a), increasing women's participation rates should confer several advantages on Australia's fire agencies. By drawing on a wider range of recruits, including women, fire agencies can tap into a larger pool of young, fit and healthy volunteers. This may help lower the median age of volunteers and have positive impacts not

only upon service delivery, firefighter health and safety, but also upon the public image of the fire services. With modern equipment women are more able to take on operational roles and their under-representation owes more to traditional gender-based stereotypes than to real limitations.

This *Fire Note* draws upon studies 1-4, described below, conducted by the Volunteerism Project in conjunction with four volunteer-based fire services. The studies looked at issues involved in both recruitment and retention of women volunteers.

### BUSHFIRE CRC RESEARCH

1. The New South Wales Grain Belt Community Survey studied communities in 29 small-to-medium sized population centres across central and western NSW. This survey was sent to all households serviced by the local post offices in each community (10,791).

The survey was designed to focus on people's attitudes toward, and knowledge of, the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS). A total of 1028 (10%) questionnaires were returned from respondents who were not at that time, and had never been, members of the NSW RFS (Birch and McLennan 2007).

2. The CFA New Volunteers Survey was posted to all volunteers who had joined the CFA between April and September 2005. From a total of 1223 questionnaires posted to these volunteers, 391 were returned yielding a 32 percent response rate. The questionnaire included items assessing reasons for volunteering, the method of joining, and volunteers' perceptions of their local brigade (McLennan et al 2007b).

3 & 4. The South Australia Country Fire Service (CFS) and the ACT Rural Fire Service (RFS) surveys were sent to all women volunteers in each agency. Of the 1150 CFS

### SUMMARY

Women are under-represented in Australia's volunteer fire services.

The Bushfire CRC Volunteerism team investigated why this is so and what could be done about it.



questionnaires, 442 were returned, yielding a 38 percent response rate. Thirty-one of the 56 women members of the ACT RFS returned their questionnaires, a 55 percent return rate.

Both surveys included items assessing issues previously identified by Beatson and McLennan (2005) as potential barriers to the recruitment and retention of women in fire services.

The questionnaire asked about perceptions of fire service roles and demands, the local brigade climate, training and leadership opportunities, gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment, and difficulties with personal protective clothing and equipment (McLennan, Birch and King 2006).

## RESEARCH OUTCOMES

The findings from these studies point to several key factors deterring women from volunteering for, and discouraging them from staying with, fire brigades.

### Recruitment

Among the factors that discourage women from volunteering are: limited knowledge of the roles available to women in the fire services, concerns about the physical demands of the job, and competing time commitments of family and work.

- Data from the NSW Grain Belt Community Survey showed that members of the

community not involved with the fire service had little knowledge of the range of roles available for volunteers (McLennan et al 2007b).

- About 19 percent of women in the CFS and 23 percent of those in the ACT RFS Women Volunteers Surveys indicated that lack of knowledge of the roles available had initially been a barrier to their volunteering.
- Perceptions about the physical demands of the job act as a barrier to recruitment with 28 percent of the CFS Women Volunteers Survey respondents indicating that their own concerns about being physically incapable of the work initially prevented them from volunteering.
- In the RFS Grain Belt Community Survey 35 percent of women (compared with 13 percent of men) reported that not having anyone to mind their children was a barrier to joining. The South Australia CFS and ACT RFS Women Volunteers Surveys revealed a similar picture with 28 percent and 19 percent of respondents respectively nominating childcare responsibilities as an initial barrier.
- Similarly, 25 percent and 19 percent of volunteers respectively in the SA CFS and the ACT RFS Women's surveys reported as a barrier that "paid work occupies too much time".

### Retention

Among the factors that discourage women from continuing to volunteer are difficulties

with the shape and size of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). For example, for standard shaped over pants to fit around a woman's hips, they are often too long in the leg and inside leg. The low inside leg makes it awkward for women to step up onto large tankers.

Other difficulties are with equipment being heavy, awkward to use, or stowed too high on trucks; and a rejection of women's ability as firefighters by a small but vocal minority of male firefighters.

- Approximately one third of women in the SA CFS survey, and over two thirds of those responding to the ACT RFS survey, had difficulties with shape and size of their PPC.
- Up to 54 percent (ACT) said that climbing onto trucks was difficult.
- Between 33 percent and 42 percent of respondents reported difficulties with equipment being heavy/awkward or stowed too high on trucks.
- The CFS Women Volunteers Survey data showed that 18 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that 'I have been told by at least one man in the brigade that women do not belong in the fire services and are not capable of the work'.

However, 87 percent agreed with the statement that 'Most of the men in the brigade have no trouble with women fighting fires'. It appears that a small, but vocal, minority of male volunteers are opposed to the notion of women serving as volunteer firefighters.



## END USER VIEW

This research has served to confirm that we are heading in the right direction in terms of being able to benchmark equity and diversity programs and services to volunteers.

The 'Working In Harmony Program' has continued to grow as it is rolled out across South Australia, and we now have 39 volunteer harassment contact officers sector-wide.

Progress is being made in improving PPE and facilities for all volunteers and recruitment resources have been developed that focus on inclusivity.

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#### HOW BUSHFIRE CRC RESEARCH IS BEING USED IN FIRE AGENCIES

Australia's volunteer fire agencies have taken a number of initiatives aligned with the research findings.

Several agencies have modified their recruiting materials, advertising campaigns and agency websites to more clearly show women contributing in both operational and non-operational roles.

Agencies have introduced, or escalated, training in workplace equity, relationships, and diversity, designed to explain and cultivate appropriate behaviour and relations among volunteers from diverse backgrounds, including women.

AFAC is working with manufacturers of PPE to introduce a more diverse range of size and body shape of firefighter clothing that will better accommodate the needs of women.

Work is also underway into the use of elastic-waisted over-pants that will avoid the need for braces, which many women find awkward. Correctly fitted over-pants will mitigate problems some women experienced climbing into large trucks.

Firefighting vehicles are now being designed with the guidance of ergonomics experts to ensure that firefighters, including women,

can use them safely and comfortably. The Tasmanian Fire Service has produced medium tankers with lockers and pump controls set low enough to be easily accessible for most women.

The need for privacy is being taken into consideration in fire station design, with increased recognition of the need for appropriate female toilets.

Equipment is being introduced that has fewer requirements for physical strength to suit a broader range of users.

Carbon-fibre BA cylinders being introduced by many agencies are much lighter in weight and place fewer physical demands on the wearer.

Branches with shut-off and flow-control allow branch operators to regulate the jet reaction of the branch according to their individual limitations.

As these improvements occur, agencies are starting to benefit from increasing numbers of women volunteering. In the CFA female membership has increased from 16 percent to 19 percent from 2004 to 2008.

NSW RFS female volunteer membership increased from 18 percent to 20 percent from 2004 to 2007. The SA CFS has maintained its relatively higher proportion of women at about 23 percent.

#### TERMS IN USE

“BA” is an acronym for breathing apparatus; equipment needed to protect firefighters from smoke and toxic gases.

BA sets include a cylinder of compressed air which is worn on the firefighter's back. Until recently, most cylinders were made of steel making them heavy to wear for an extended period and contributing to user fatigue.

A “branch” is a device fitted to the end of a hose line to allow the water to form an effective firefighting spray or jet. Outside the firefighting industry people would commonly use the word “nozzle”.

PPE - Personal Protective Equipment, includes protective clothing (pants, jacket) and other personal firefighting gear such as helmets, goggles and boots.



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## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The numbers of women volunteering as firefighters have steadily increased in recent years as muscle-based stereotypes about the requirements of firefighting wither.

The increased inclusion of women into volunteer firefighting promises to significantly broaden the pool of available recruits and improve the service levels as well as the viability of many brigades.

Fire agencies are progressively addressing disadvantages women encounter with PPE, the use of equipment, vehicles and buildings.

However, the research suggests that further work needs to be done to address pockets of bullying and harassment and to improve the inclusiveness of brigades.

## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This project is part of Bushfire CRC Program D: Protecting People and Property. Project D.3 Enhancing volunteer recruitment and retention.

The research team is Ruth Beatson, Jim McLennan and Adrian Birch, from the School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University.

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AFAC is the peak representative body for fire, emergency services and land management agencies in the Australasia region. It was established in 1993 and has 26 full and 10 affiliate members.