

# More Than “Thank You”

A Review of Volunteer Recognition in  
Victoria’s Emergency Services



*An Interactive Qualifying Project submitted to the Faculty of Worcester Polytechnic  
Institute in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science.*



*better together*

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Oct. 21 – Dec. 11  
2020



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Emergency Services Foundation and its CEO, Siusan MacKenzie, for their dedication to and support of this project. Ms. MacKenzie's passion and drive contributed greatly to our ability to develop recommendations for a sector-wide volunteer recognition program. We would also like to thank each and every manager and volunteer who made the time to speak with us. We know volunteers have many responsibilities, both inside and outside of standard working hours, and we truly appreciate their help. Understanding the volunteer perspective was essential to our development of recommendations for a meaningful recognition program and their insights were invaluable. Thank you for all that you do and thank you for supporting our project. We would like to acknowledge the extensive guidance that our advisors, Prof. Lorraine Higgins and Prof. Uma Kumar, provided. Finally, we are grateful for our families and friends, who supported us throughout the semester.

# ABSTRACT

Approximately 100,000 of the 125,000 emergency service workers in Victoria, Australia are volunteers. They are an important part of the social fabric of the Victorian community and play a vital role in the health and safety of their communities, but sometimes they are not fully recognized for their contributions. Research shows that recognition is critical for the wellbeing of volunteers who work in conditions that are often demanding and stressful. Through a partnership with the Emergency Services Foundation (ESF), we undertook a review of volunteer recognition across the sector. To complete the review, we interviewed nine agency leaders and conducted eight focus groups with a total of fifty-four active volunteers from eight different organizations to evaluate current recognition practices and to identify the kind of recognition volunteers might welcome. We then developed our ideas by consulting with eight experts. Our key findings include a need to redefine some of the existing formal recognition and awards programs and a need to increase more informal means of volunteer recognition, particularly from sector leaders and from the local communities that volunteers serve. We developed a series of recommendations at the sector and agency levels and proposed other individual benefits that might be supported by employers and the state government.

# ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

**AV:** Ambulance Victoria

**CFA:** Country Fire Authority

**EMV:** Emergency Management Victoria

**ESF:** Emergency Services Foundation

**LSV:** Life Saving Victoria

**MSAR:** Marine Search and Rescue

**VCCEM:** Victorian Council of Churches  
Emergency Management

**VicSES:** Victoria State Emergency Service

**WPI:** Worcester Polytechnic Institute

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# A Need for Volunteer Recognition

Emergency service workers in Victoria, Australia assume a multitude of roles. They engage in emotionally and physically taxing work, such as responding to structural and forest fires, violent situations, rescues on land and sea, and medical emergencies. In fact, in the state of Victoria, approximately 100,000 of the 125,000 emergency workers are volunteers (ESF, 2020). The 54 volunteers that we spoke with contribute over 700 hours of volunteer work per week during the offseason. This means that all the volunteers in the sector dedicate over 68 million hours every year. The wellbeing of those volunteers is vital to the sustainability of Victoria's emergency management model.

The Emergency Service Foundation (ESF) is an umbrella organization that collaborates with the 14 main emergency service organizations in Victoria. ESF recently shifted its strategic focus to support the mental health and wellbeing of people who serve or have served the community in Victoria in emergency management roles.

This shift in focus was informed in part by research done by past WPI groups and groundbreaking research undertaken by Beyond Blue, *Answering the Call*. This was a national survey of the mental health and wellbeing of emergency service personnel (including both paid workers and volunteers), which showed that emergency service workers demonstrate a higher incidence of mental health problems compared to the general adult population of Australia (2018).



54

x



1 week

=



700 hours



**In the state of Victoria,  
approximately  
100,000 of the 125,000  
emergency workers  
are volunteers  
(ESF, 2020).**



Additionally, research conducted by ESF in recent years consistently indicates that volunteers feel a lack of recognition (Boyle et al., 2020; Kacherski et al., 2018). Since volunteers are not rewarded monetarily, social rewards such as acknowledgment and recognition may be important in keeping these workers mentally well and engaged. Feeling unacknowledged or feeling that they are treated differently than paid workers can lead to volunteer dissatisfaction and decreased work engagement (Park et al, 2017). Such negative feelings can also make individuals more vulnerable to work-related stress and symptoms of burnout (Abualrub & Al-Zaru, 2008). Increasing volunteers' sense of appreciation and feelings of recognition will be vital to maintaining volunteer wellbeing and retention and therefore the sustainability of Victoria's volunteering model.

The organizations under ESF's umbrella have individual approaches to volunteer recognition, reporting varying degrees of success, according to Siusan MacKenzie, ESF's Chief Executive Officer (CEO). ESF recognizes that volunteer recognition and wellbeing are intertwined and sought to understand how volunteer recognition could be improved sector-wide.



## Project Objective

Our project goal was to review volunteer recognition across the sector in order to make recommendations for improvement. In order to do so, we first investigated how and why agencies across the Victorian emergency services sector currently recognize their volunteer workforce. We then spoke with volunteers from each agency (AV, CFA, LSV, MSAR, Red Cross, St. John's Ambulance, VCC, and VicSES) to understand how they feel about being recognized for their work. This revealed a gap between current organizational practices and volunteer preferences. Our analysis was bolstered by an extensive literature review on volunteer recognition as well as the insight of a range of leaders and experts. Through this research, we have been able to determine areas for improvement in how volunteers are recognized, making recommendations at the sector, agency, and individual levels.

# To Volunteer: A Deeper Meaning

## The Psychology of Volunteerism and the Desire for Recognition

Emergency service volunteers play an important role in serving others who need assistance. Volunteering can take many forms, whether helping at a soup kitchen or working on the frontline fighting a fire. Although unpaid, volunteering has its rewards, including learning a new skill, enhancing one's self-esteem, or garnering the appreciation of others (Thoits & Hewitts, 2001, p. 117). In what follows, we summarize some of the motivations and benefits of volunteering and the link between these and the need for volunteer recognition.

The desire to engage in altruistic behaviors such as volunteering can be explained in many ways. For example, Axelrod's (1984) egoistic theory of altruism suggests that an individual may share resources with others to encourage reciprocal behavior in the future, (e.g., I will do you a favor now so that you will do me a favor later). Janus and Misiorek's research (2019) supports this idea, showing that some volunteers engage in service because they feel that there will be a time when they need help themselves.

Becker's (1976; 1981) egocentric theory of altruism explains that individuals might donate a resource without expecting anything in return as long as the pleasure of watching the recipient enjoy that resource exceeds the pleasure that consuming the resource themselves might bring. In terms of volunteerism, volunteers may be willing to donate their time and energy because they find helping others to be more satisfying than other ventures.

While Axelrod's and Becker's theories focus on a reciprocal exchange between donor and recipient, altercentric theories (Mead, 1934; Frank, 1988) attribute altruistic acts to a moral compulsion to help others. Individuals may not expect to gain favors or feel vicarious joy: they may simply feel that it is their moral obligation to serve others.

Finally, Smith (1976) argued that emotion and a genuine concern for others can motivate altruistic acts. In the case of emergency services workers, the emotional experience of watching a bushfire destroy a friend's home may prompt an individual to join a fire brigade.





Individuals may also choose to volunteer in order to fulfill personal needs. Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (2000) outlines three innate psychological needs: competence (being effective at dealing with one's environment), autonomy (having control over the course of one's life), and relatedness (maintaining close relationships with others). When their needs are met, the individual feels satisfied and motivated. However, when their needs are not met, individuals tend to experience a decrease in motivation and wellbeing. Emergency service volunteers may be intrinsically motivated to serve because demonstrating their ability to respond to emergencies increases their feelings of competence and control, but if it also causes them to feel a loss of autonomy or hinders their personal relationships, they may lose the motivation to continue in that line of work.

Volunteer motivation may also come from what Maslow (1943) described as the pursuit of self-fulfillment. Maslow believed that in their quest to become happy, people first must fulfill basic physiological needs (e.g., food, water, and shelter) before seeking to fulfill more complex psychological needs. His five-tier model of human motivation is depicted in Figure 1. This hierarchy of needs may explain an individual's desire to volunteer in a few different ways. For example, individuals may volunteer to protect their community during natural disasters (fulfilling a basic need for safety), to form relationships with others (meeting a need for belonging), or to feel accomplished and capable (satisfying a need for esteem). These individuals may also be engaging in volunteer work in order to fulfill a need for personal growth and to find meaning or purpose in life (self-fulfillment needs).

While volunteering may satisfy a range of these needs, volunteers still want to be recognized for their work (Kacherski et al., 2018; Boyle et al., 2020). Professional recognition contributes to volunteers' feelings of accomplishment and self-actualization.

Smith and Pettigrew (2011) proposed that individuals will grow dissatisfied if they feel that they receive fewer rewards than they deserve for the work that they do. In the case of a volunteer, the abstract reward of helping others may function to combat feelings of relative deprivation, but a lack of professional recognition may cause discontent because recognition is an expected social reward (of which they may feel they are being deprived). Chen's meta-analysis of empirical research regarding relative status and wellbeing revealed that these feelings of relative deprivation may even reduce happiness and general life satisfaction (2015). Therefore, providing professional recognition to volunteers may keep them motivated and contribute to their psychological wellbeing.

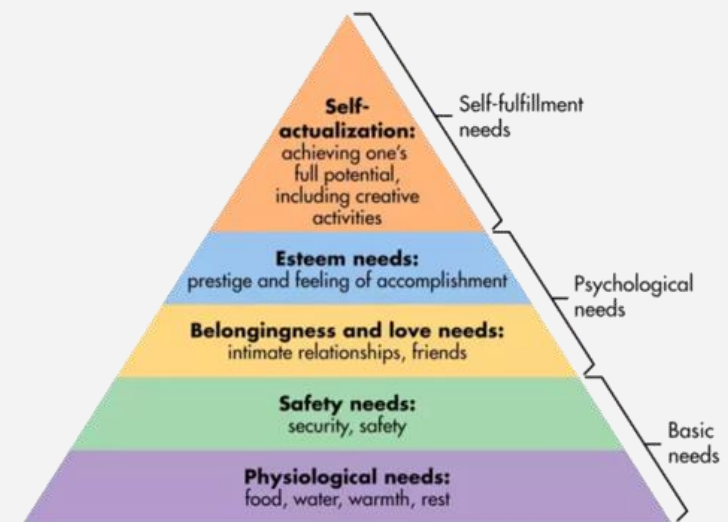


Figure 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McLeod, 2018).

## The Demands Placed on Emergency Service Volunteers

Formal emergency service volunteers require specific training and put in many hours as compared to informal volunteers who may help out during a one-time emergency. Formal volunteers often have to go through multiple levels of training, dependent on what field volunteers enter. Formal volunteer firefighters' "minimum skills" training can take up to six months or longer to complete and can involve the following: "general firefighting, fire safety awareness, community education and engagement, administrative tasks, endorsed truck license, first aid, leadership training, communications, wildfire behavior and suppression, map reading, radio communications, and fire ground safety" ("Volunteering With CFA," 2020). The training itself can be both physically and mentally exhaustive.

Emergency medical technicians (EMTs) in the state of Victoria are tasked with responding to a multitude of scenarios. From attending to people having heart attacks to dealing with victims of fires, there is no limit to the situations an EMT might need to respond to in a day. Their training is comprehensive. The minimum qualification to become an EMT is the Certificate II in Medical Service First Response. To become a certified EMT in Australia, volunteers must complete a 6-12 week course where they learn everything from first aid to infection control to pain management ("Volunteers," 2020).

Volunteers' work schedules are very uncertain. Typically, paid workers have a predetermined time that they are expected to work. However, volunteers' work schedules are often quite unpredictable due to unforeseen emergencies arising. For example, a volunteer paramedic in the state of Victoria is expected to work a minimum of 20 hours per month, however, this number can drastically increase based on unexpected disasters ("Volunteers," 2020). This holds true for multiple types of emergency volunteers, including firefighters. In the state of Victoria and all over Australia, volunteer firefighters have some of the most unpredictable schedules of all. With the impending dangers of bushfires, volunteer firefighters can work hours to days on end where they do not see their families ("Volunteering with CFA," 2020). This was the case for volunteer firefighter Daniel Knox. Frances Mao of BBC news interviewed Knox after one of his shifts fighting the 2019-2020 bushfires. For weeks, Knox worked multiple 15-hour days. He described how he was always by the phone and always ready to spring into action (Mao, 2019). Volunteers face uncertainty when they work with an unstable schedule and this can cause added stress to an already stressful situation.

Unpredictable schedules not only affect the volunteers but also their families, whom they might have to suddenly leave for an extended period of time.

# Occupational Trauma and a High Prevalence of Mental Health Problems in the Emergency Services Sector

Emergency service workers can experience occupational trauma and injury or illness that occurs from specific occupational demands or requirements (Varacallo, 2020). Trauma arising from the devastating circumstances that emergency service workers must respond to can lead to poor mental health indices. Walker et al.'s (2016) findings indicate that heat exposure, smoke inhalation, physical exhaustion, and sleep restriction all appear to cause an inflammatory immune response. This physiological reaction to stress leads to feelings of fatigue and predisposes emergency service workers to reacting adversely to traumatic events and increases their risk for depression and PTSD.



Beyond Blue's (2018) national survey of the mental health and wellbeing of paid and volunteer Australian police and emergency service workers garnered over 21,000 responses (p. 20). These responses showed that physical and emotional injuries are not uncommon in the emergency services field. Approximately 51% of Australian emergency service workers indicated that during their time of service, they had experienced "traumatic events that deeply affected them during the course of their work" (Beyond Blue, p. 51). This high prevalence of trauma is not limited to Australia. Based on an anonymous questionnaire investigating the prevalence of mental health problems among ambulance workers, Alexander and Klein (2001) found that approximately 82% of Scottish ambulance workers had experienced a traumatic incident in the six months prior to their responses (p. 77).

**"There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that police and emergency service personnel who retire or leave the job may have high rates of anxiety, depression and suicide" (Beyond Blue, 2020).**

As noted in Table 1, Australian emergency service employees are more likely to have experienced stressful events at work (65%) than away from work or to not have experienced stressful events at all (Beyond Blue, 2018). These stressful work incidents may result in lasting negative effects. Gómez et al. found that compared to those who had not experienced any occupational trauma, patient-care workers who had experienced work-related trauma were 65% more likely to seek treatment for a mental health problem in the six months after the incident, especially if an injury was sustained (2020, p. 230). These individuals were most commonly seeking treatment for depression and anxiety. These findings align with work by Alexander and Klein (2001), where 50% of surveyed ambulance workers reported experiencing distress for multiple days following a traumatic incident (p. 77). Some workers (8%) even reported feeling distress after more than a month. Considering how long the negative effects of such incidents can last, it is understandable that 34% of emergency service workers in Australia also reported feeling that they were not provided with enough time to recover from traumatic events (Beyond Blue, 2018, p. 81). The opportunity for workers to rest and recover following the experience of such events is important in preventing future mental health conditions. Acknowledging this need may positively affect worker wellbeing.

**Table 1:** Location where stressful events occurred for employees, by sector and mental health indices (Beyond Blue, 2018, p. 68).

	<b>Location where stressful event occurred that deeply affected a worker (%)</b>			
	<b>No Stressful Event</b>	<b>Away From Work</b>	<b>At Police and Emergency Service Work</b>	<b>Both</b>
<b>Sector:</b>				
<b>Ambulance</b>	14.4	18.9	40.6	26.2
<b>Fire and Rescue</b>	19.5	20.2	35.6	24.7
<b>Police</b>	17.1	17.7	41.0	24.2
<b>State Emergency Service</b>	14.9	37.0	26.7	21.4
<b>Total</b>	17.0	18.4	40.0	24.6
<b>Has Probable PTSD</b>	0.6	6.0	13.7	13.5
<b>High Psychological Distress</b>	14.4	24.4	33.9	37.5
<b>Low Wellbeing</b>	19.9	25.3	35.3	35.3

Exposure to traumatic events was shown to correlate with significantly increased rates of poor mental health indices across the sector. By assessing mental wellbeing, measuring levels of psychological distress, and screening for functional impairment associated with symptoms of PTSD, Beyond Blue’s found that emergency service volunteers exhibit a greater prevalence of mental health problems when compared to workers in other fields or to the general adult population of Australia (2018). Survey data showed that 33% of volunteers reported having been diagnosed with a mental health condition compared to 20% of the general population (p. 28). Anxiety, depression, and PTSD were the most commonly diagnosed mental health conditions (Table 2). Emergency service volunteers also reported suicidal ideation and planning at a rate three times greater than in the general population (p. 30).

Furthermore, this research showed that a significantly higher proportion of emergency service volunteers (21%) experience psychological distress compared to the general adult population (8%). This may be due to the empathetic nature of their work. Kitchingman et al.’s study of telephone crisis support workers suggests that frequent empathetic interactions with individuals in distress places those in professional helping roles at increased risk of functional impairment related to symptoms of psychological distress (2018).

All of the poor mental health indices mentioned are associated with longer durations of service, a lack of recovery time between stressful events, and frequent exposure to traumatic incidents (Alexander & Klein, 2001; Beyond Blue, 2018). ESF exists to address this high incidence of mental health problems by collaborating with agencies to improve how the mental health and wellbeing of people (paid and volunteer) who serve or have served the community in Victoria in emergency management roles is supported.

**Table 2:** Proportion of volunteers diagnosed with mental health conditions by a healthcare professional, by sector (adapted from Beyond Blue, 2018, p. 59).

Condition	Sector (%)			
	Ambulance	Fire and Rescue	State Emergency Service	Total
<b>Ever Diagnosed With a Mental Health Condition:</b>	33.3	32.5	38.3	33.1
<b>Anxiety</b>	12.8	14.0	18.6	14.4
<b>Depression</b>	22.8	24.1	28.9	24.5
<b>PTSD</b>	9.1	7.7	9.3	7.9
<b>Other</b>	5.6	5.3	7.3	5.5

## The Emergency Services Foundation

The Emergency Services Foundation (ESF) is a strong umbrella organization aiding the many emergency service organizations across Victoria. These organizations include, but are not limited to, Ambulance Victoria, Country Fire Authority, Life Saving Victoria, Red Cross, and Victoria State Emergency Services (VicSES). ESF offers scholarships to emergency service workers to fund research aiming to help the sector reduce hazards, improve volunteer recognition, and better the life and work experiences of those in the emergency service sector. More recently, ESF has shifted its focus to a more mental health based mission.

ESF's first focus is to protect volunteer wellbeing by reducing work-related stress and other risk factors related to mental health problems. Its second objective is to promote mental health by developing the positive aspects of work, including worker strengths and positive capacities. This objective will play a large role in the development of a recognition program for the emergency services sector in Victoria. Finally, ESF aims to respond to mental health problems as they manifest, regardless of their cause. With this multifaceted approach, ESF hopes to address the mental health problems prevalent in the emergency services sector (ESF, 2020). ESF's mission to support the wellbeing of its volunteers has led the foundation to pursue the development of a meaningful, sector-wide volunteer recognition program, as recognition goes hand in hand with improving mental health and wellbeing (ESF, 2020).



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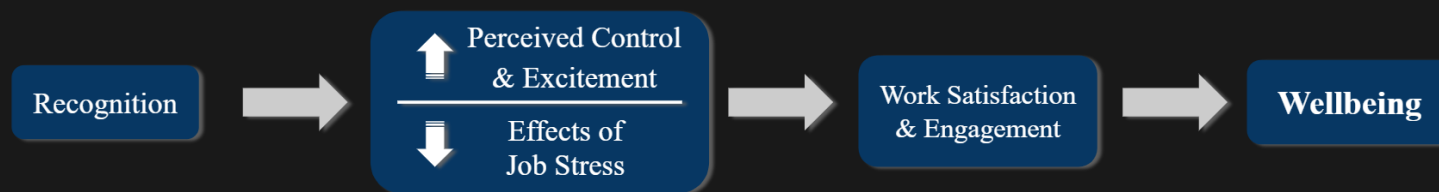


## The Positive Impact of Recognition on Worker Wellbeing and Retention

Considering that 14% of the emergency service volunteers in Australia feel that their work is not recognized by management and 6% feel that they are not treated fairly in the workplace (Beyond Blue, 2018, p. 82), it is important to understand the impact recognition and acknowledgement can have on volunteer wellbeing. Professional recognition can increase perceived control over work, promote positive feelings about work, and combat experienced job stress. Recognition can also reduce burnout, improve job retention, and increase work engagement, satisfaction, and performance.

When investigating the relationship between wellbeing and professional recognition, Angelopoulou and Panagopoulou (2019) found that healthcare professionals reported greater perceived control at work after receiving words of recognition. In this study, they gathered healthcare professionals (nurses, residents, and senior physicians) working in several primary care settings in Greece. These individuals underwent “interventions” where they sat with the group and received words of recognition from themselves, from their peers, and finally, from their patients (p. 3).

First, participants were asked to share one of their own clinical experiences beginning with the phrase “What I did well in that case was...” (this acted as self-recognition; p. 3). Next, each speaker was provided with positive feedback regarding their management of the case (peer-recognition). The final phase of the intervention included participants viewing a video of positive patient experiences from primary healthcare providers (patient-recognition). The participants’ mental states were assessed before and after these interventions. Upon analysis of this data, they found that after these healthcare professionals received recognition for their job performance, they reported greater perceived control at work. As depicted in Figure 2, higher perceived control is associated with higher levels of job satisfaction, motivation, commitment, involvement, and performance (Spector, 1986). Spector’s research also indicates that greater perceived control at work also correlates with lower levels of emotional distress, role stress, and turnover. With 32% of Australian emergency service volunteers reporting feelings of limited control over their work and 21% feeling a lack of influence over the amount of work they are assigned (Beyond Blue, 2018, p. 82), professional recognition may be an avenue through which leaders can foster positive change.



**Figure 2:** The pathway through which professional recognition may increase worker wellbeing (Abualrub & Al-Zaru, 2008; Angelopoulou & Panagopoulou, 2019; Sadovich, 2005; Spector, 1986).

Professional recognition can also increase positive feelings about work while decreasing negative feelings. For example, Figure 2 depicts how professional recognition can increase excitement about work, thus increasing work engagement and worker wellbeing. Excitement about work has been shown to increase the wellbeing of nurses by combating the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (lack of feelings of concern and compassion regarding other individuals) experienced due to work (Sadovich, 2005). Additionally, Angelopoulou and Panagopoulou (2019) also found that positive feedback increased the degree to which participants felt inspired by an average of 23%, proud by 20%, and enthusiastic by 10%, as seen in Table 3 (2019, p. 4). Receiving words of recognition also resulted in a 10% increase in the average frequency of these positive emotions (p. 4). These feelings are all associated with increased motivation and work engagement (Harmon-Jones et al., 2009; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2010). The participating healthcare professionals also reported feeling less upset, nervous, and afraid after receiving positive feedback (Table 3). Participants also reported lower levels of distress, with the average magnitude of experienced distress decreasing by 27% (Angelopoulou & Panagopoulou, 2019, p. 4). This decrease in experienced job-related distress is also associated with a decreased likelihood of burnout (Sadovich, 2005). In general, positive feelings increased and negative feelings decreased after participants received the recognition interventions.

**Table 3:**  
Average levels of positive and negative feelings reported before and after receiving professional recognition (adapted from Angelopoulou & Panagopoulou, 2019, p. 4).

	<b>Affect</b>	<b>Mean Before</b>	<b>Mean After</b>
<b>Positive</b>	Active	3.47	3.66
	Alert	3.47	3.63
	Attentive	3.37	3.29
	Determined	3.53	3.74
	Enthusiastic	2.95	3.24
	Excited	2.78	3.29
	Inspired	2.87	3.47
	Interested	3.71	3.82
	Proud	3.00	3.63
	Strong	3.39	3.63
<b>Negative</b>	Afraid	1.61	1.53
	Ashamed	1.13	1.05
	Distressed	1.58	1.21
	Guilty	1.29	1.18
	Hostile	1.16	1.11
	Irritable	1.61	1.45
	Jittery	1.63	1.29
	Nervous	1.32	1.21
	Scared	1.00	1.05
	Upset	1.39	1.21



Past research on nurse recognition also indicates that recognition for outstanding work performance and achievements correlates with nurses reporting less experienced job stress (Abualrub & Al-Zaru, 2008). Abualrub and Al-Zaru measured participants' experienced job stress, their desire to stay in their position, and their desire for recognition from supervisors. Their findings indicate that even if job stress is experienced, receiving professional recognition buffers its negative effects on work satisfaction (2008). Furthermore, increasing levels of recognition appears to increase the intention to remain at work (rather than leave the position or organization). This improves worker wellbeing and job retention while decreasing rates of burnout, as seen in Figure 2. This research supports previous work by Wilson (2006), who found that private verbal feedback and written acknowledgment from head nurses were among the top reasons why nurses reported choosing to stay at work. In fact, in terms of perceived importance, these forms of recognition were only listed behind monetary compensation proportional to job performance. This aligns with work by Tessema et al., who found that workers who reported feeling recognized for their work also reported feeling more satisfied with their jobs (2013). They found this trend across both collectivist (Malaysia and Vietnam) and individualist (United States) cultures. These findings demonstrate the significant impact that professional recognition can have on worker wellbeing and retention.



## Ways to Recognize Volunteers: Two Major Forms of Recognition

Volunteer recognition is an integral part of many volunteer organizations around the world. The organizations that have successfully integrated these programs into their organizational structure demonstrate the most success in both retaining volunteers and supporting volunteer wellbeing (Dixon et al., 2013). Dixon et al.'s findings also indicate that a successful recognition program provides volunteers with a sense of confidence that their work is recognized and appreciated. There are many ways to acknowledge volunteers and a strong recognition program is one that encompasses a multitude of strategies, some of which were noted in the previous sections, but in general, they fall into two broad categories: formal and informal (Table 4).

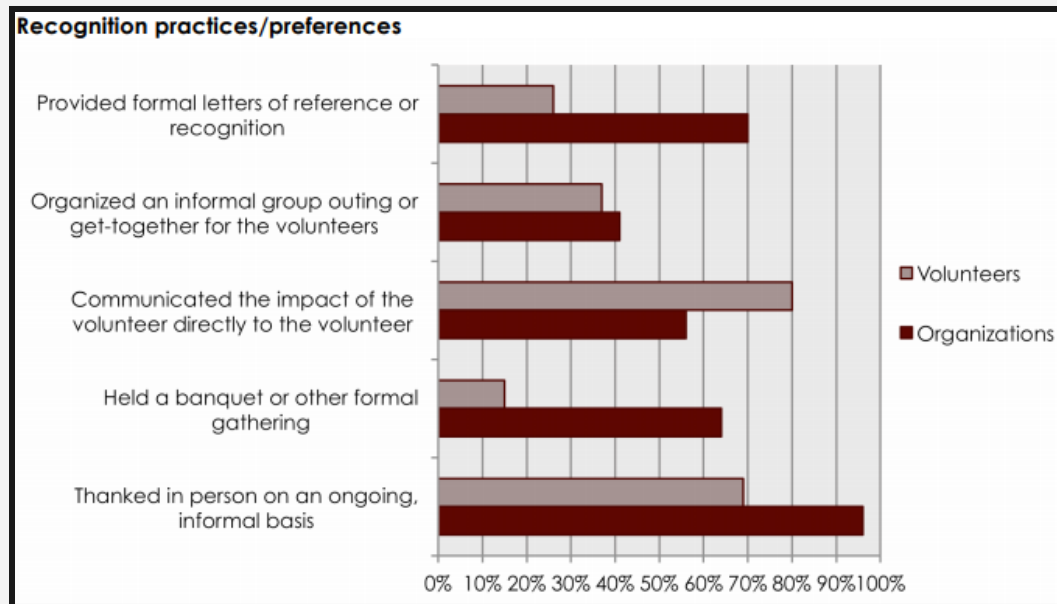
**Formal recognition** is described in one volunteer recognition study performed in Canada as “banquets, formal gatherings, and public acknowledgment in newspapers, radio or television” (Dixon et al., 2013, p. 3).

**Informal recognition** is described by Dixon et al. as any form of recognition that is not formal recognition (2013, p. 3). This includes, but is not limited to, phone calls of gratitude, conversation with leadership, picnics, small gatherings to socialize and connect with employees or volunteers, or even a simple pat on the back.

**Table 4:** Formal vs Informal Recognition

Formal Recognition	Informal Recognition
Recognition in which volunteers are appreciated or honored in a public and structured process.	Recognition in which volunteers are appreciated in a personal less public fashion.
Banquets, formal gatherings, public acknowledgment in newspapers, radio or television, certificates, awards, compensation	Personal letters, informal thank yous, appreciative conversations from managers or leaders, spontaneous verbal or written appreciation from peers or community members

Analyses of these separate forms of recognition have highlighted a clear winner in terms of volunteer satisfaction. A 1999 study by Culp and Shwartz was the first to find that informal forms of recognition are more highly appreciated and desired by volunteers. The number one ranked form of recognition was a personal thank you note (Culp & Shwartz, 1999). Similarly, Dixon et al. found that 80% of respondents would like to be recognized by being informed of the positive impact of their work. Findings also indicated that approximately 70% of respondents preferred recognition “on an informal ongoing basis” (Dixon et al., 2013, p. 3). Figure 3 depicts the discrepancies between the forms of recognition desired by volunteers and those that are practiced by organizations.



**Figure 3:** Volunteer preferences compared to organization practices regarding volunteer recognition methods (Dixon et al., 2013, p. 8).

## The Role of Leadership in Volunteer Recognition

In 2018, Australian emergency service volunteers reported feeling stressed because of staff or resource shortages (17%), the behavior of senior management (19%), and authoritative leaders (21%; Beyond Blue, p. 82). Additionally, Beyond Blue found that 13% of these volunteers felt that the workplace was not inclusive and that debriefs or discussions about issues encountered during their work were infrequent (2018, p. 82). These responses were more frequent in agencies with higher rates of psychological distress and probable PTSD. These findings indicate that workplace stress is often linked to the relationship between volunteers and members of organization leadership. Therefore, it is important to consider the influence that recognition from members of leadership can have on volunteers.

Leaders should work to foster supportive and mutually respectful environments. Findings from Dal Corso et al.'s surveying of Italian social service volunteers suggest that leadership behaviors such as creating a collective sense of identity and encouraging trust and cooperation are positively associated with volunteer engagement and satisfaction (2019). Other impactful acts include recognizing team members as equals and acknowledging that each individual plays a role in the work the team does.

Highly valued forms of recognition tend to be related to work support and involvement (Nelson, 2004). A lack of distribution of responsibilities can result in poor working environments, as indicated by Beyond Blue's national survey, which revealed that workers in agencies with lower rates of wellbeing generally reported stress from unequal sharing of work responsibilities (2018, p. 83). Therefore, leaders should share power with team members and delegate project responsibilities as these acts recognize the skills and capabilities of the volunteers (Park et al., 2017; Srivastava et al., 2006). Leaders that engage in these behaviors should also emphasize the significance of the work being done, convey confidence in team abilities, and have team members take turns in leadership roles (Ahearne et al., 2005).

Volunteers want to be able to share their ideas and opinions as well as be involved in workplace decision making, especially when those decisions affect them. Webber and Jones (2020) found that leaders dictating tasks without consideration for employees' desires results in negative mental and emotional tension. Therefore, leaders should actively involve team members in decision making processes. They should also ensure that volunteers are well-represented in these discussions.

**It is not just about having a seat at the table.  
It is about having *enough* seats at the table.**

Nelson’s survey of corporate volunteers indicates that being awarded autonomy and authority are highly preferred forms of recognition (2004). Therefore, leaders should offer flexible working hours, professional development opportunities, and the freedom to pursue ideas for operational improvement (Blegen et. al., 1992; Nelson, 2004). Leaders should also recognize the work that volunteers do by providing volunteers with the resources and information to do their work (Nelson, 2004). Leaders must also support volunteers when they make mistakes or do not perform as well as others. Volunteers appreciate when leaders are courteous and considerate of their personal situations (e.g., giving them time off to care for a sick family member). These interpersonal forms of recognition are informal but are the most highly valued by volunteers (Nelson, 2004).

Although simple and informal, praise can also be incredibly important in the endeavor to recognize workers. Dal Corso et al. found that volunteer satisfaction may increase when leaders recognize (praise) the achievements of the volunteer, as this enables the volunteer to see the positive impact of their work (2019). Furthermore, through extensive surveying of corporate employees, Nelson found that four of the top ten preferred forms of recognition were types of praise (personal, written, electronic, and public). These methods of recognition were particularly appreciated when given by individuals that the volunteer held in high esteem at work (2004).

All of this research, spanning multiple countries, cultures, industries, and age groups, showcases the significant role that members of leadership play in fostering volunteer wellbeing. Therefore, a meaningful recognition program should incorporate empowering and supportive leadership behaviors into its operational strategies. Leaders should also be provided with the training and resources to properly provide volunteers with the forms of recognition that they desire the most. Leaders should aim to promote the environments described in Table 5.

**Table 5:** Suggestions for leaders

<b>Leaders Should Promote Environments That Are:</b>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Equal</b> e.g., include volunteers in decision making processes</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Equitable</b> e.g., share authority and delegate responsibilities</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Empowering</b> e.g., allow freedom to pursue ideas for organization improvement</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Encouraging</b> e.g., give positive feedback and acknowledge accomplishments</p>

## Current Formal Recognition Programs

In addition to studying the importance of proper leadership, we began to observe specific programs that have demonstrated success in recognizing those who devote their own time to helping others. Established organizations such as the Red Cross, United Nations, and the Special Olympics of Australia have proven their exceptional ability to recognize and retain volunteers. This quality has allowed them to thrive over many years of operation. Upon investigation, it became clear that these organizations utilize both formal and informal means of recognition. This multidirectional approach exemplifies the main component to a successful recognition program, as both forms of recognition are necessary to satisfy all volunteers.



Formal forms of recognition are often documented and defined on organizations' websites and public pages. Research indicates that 60% of volunteer organizations studied use formal recognition as their primary method of recognition (Dixon et al., 2013, p. 3). The Red Cross, a volunteer organization that spans the globe, clearly documents the use of these methods. Awards such as the "Red Cross Lifesaving Award for Professional Responders" and the "Certificate Of Merit" (which is signed by the President of the United States) are distinctly formal methods of recognition. These awards are presented to volunteers who are first nominated by their fellow volunteers for heroic actions or devotion to their community. This nomination occurs through the Red Cross website. They are then voted on by upper management (American Red Cross, 2020). Similarly, the United Nations also bestows prestigious awards upon its volunteers. This includes the "United Nations Online Volunteering Award" (UNV, 2020). The United Nations also established December 5th as International Volunteer Day. Finally, the Special Olympics of Australia awards honors such as "Volunteer of the Year," and "Community Hero" (Special Olympics of Australia, 2020).

Previous studies (Culp & Shwartz, 1988; Dixon et al., 2013) indicate that although formal forms of recognition are not the most effective, they still serve a purpose. These awards provide volunteers with concrete goals that they can aspire to achieve. Formal awards also give volunteers the opportunity to be recognized in front of their peers, families, and other members of the community. These awards allow volunteers to act as organization role models that new or younger volunteers can look up to and learn from. Data has shown that younger volunteers desire this formal form of recognition. Public presentations of awards also promotes the mission of the organization and aids in recruitment efforts as they draw prospective volunteers into the organization (Dixon et al., 2013).

Awards may also contribute to volunteer engagement and retention. Walk, et al. (2018) found that when volunteers were recognized with discretionary awards (awards given to the volunteer at the discretion of the organization) by the Boy Scouts Crossroads of America Council (BSA), they demonstrated significantly lower rates of turnover in the following year. As seen in Table 6, volunteers who chose to stay with the BSA were almost 2x more likely to have received at least one discretionary award when compared to the volunteers who chose to leave the organization (Walk et al., 2018, p. 517). These awards also positively impacted how engaged volunteers were and how well they performed at work.

**Table 6:** BSA volunteer turnover data in relation to whether training and discretionary awards were received (adapted from Walk et al., 2018, p. 517).  
*("Discretionary award (=1)" indicates that the volunteer received at least one discretionary award. If the volunteer did not receive any discretionary awards, this variable had a value of zero).*

Variable	No Turnover		Turnover	
	N	Mean	N	Mean
Discretionary Award (=1)	6,628	0.112	967	0.067

Additionally, volunteers have stated that they would feel most recognized by hearing how their volunteer work has made a difference (Dixon et al., 2013). This idea is one that should be implemented in future recognition programs as it is a newer concept. The Special Olympics of Australia has recently begun to utilize this form of formal recognition. The organization posts stories documenting volunteers' meaningful experiences and interactions with athletes in the program, as seen in Figure 4. This method of recognition highlights the volunteer in a way where the focus is mostly on the athletes, rather than singling out the volunteer as a hero. This prevents any feelings of awkwardness or isolation. However, the work and importance of the volunteer is clearly showcased. Therefore, the volunteer is satisfied as their service is what they ultimately want to be recognized and valued for. Emergency service volunteers are unable to see the impact of their work as they are only present and working around individuals they are trying to save in times of crisis. These volunteers do not see the end result of their efforts or hear about the people they saved. Therefore, it is imperative for volunteers to know about the impact they have on their communities, as this provides positive feedback and recognition.



**Figure 4:** Examples of volunteer impact stories from the Special Olympics of Australia (2020).



## Current Informal Recognition Programs

Informal recognition is also practiced within most volunteer organizations. This form of recognition consists of small acts of kindness performed by organization leaders, fellow volunteers, and the people the volunteers serve and support. The previously discussed work by Angelopoulou and Panagopoulou (2019) indicates that recognition from these parties is well received by workers. This type of recognition is less frequently documented and is usually not broadcasted to the public. Informal acts of recognition can include thank you cards/letters, memory items, and lunch with managers/supervisors. As a model organization, the Red Cross relies on the supportive behaviors of those in leadership positions to recognize volunteers. This highlights the need for proper supervisor/manager training as individuals in these leadership positions must embody the efforts of recognizing volunteers in the most meaningful way. Most volunteer supervisors or managers are incredibly busy dealing with the common problems that arise on the job. Therefore, managers may need to be reminded to take extra effort to recognize the work of the people they supervise. This can be truly meaningful and inspiring. This highlights the necessity for managers or supervisors to possess strong, charismatic leadership qualities.

These individuals must be trained to interact with their volunteers on a personal level to demonstrate the true importance and value of their work. Most importantly this must begin with appointing people to these positions who have exemplified traits and behaviors of a charismatic leader. This leadership helps volunteers feel welcomed and appreciated (Dubrin, 2016). This form of recognition requires very little funding as it is based on personal interaction that occurs during or outside of the volunteer work. In the end, a successful volunteer program must utilize a multitude of recognition methods. Acquiring a foundational understanding of a variety of these methods helped our team develop recommendations for a program designed to satisfy the wide range of individuals that devote their time to helping others.

In what follows, we explain our methods for collecting more information on the roles of these emergency service volunteers, their desire to be recognized, the connection between recognition and wellbeing, and previous volunteer recognition programs.



# Methods and Results

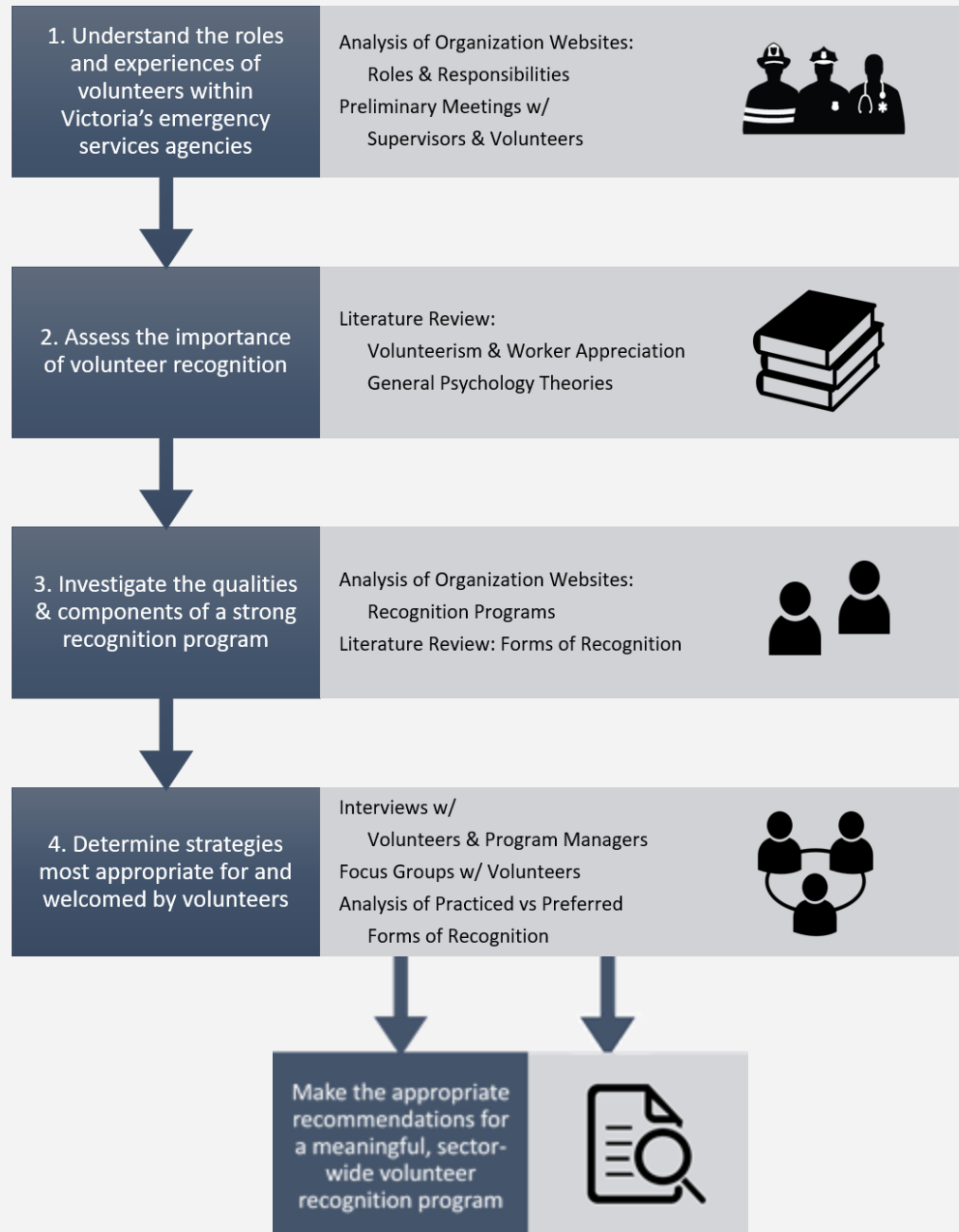


Figure 5: Overview of project objectives and methodology

## Roles and Experiences of Volunteers

To achieve our project goal, we first developed a strong understanding of the roles that volunteers play in Victoria's emergency management model. To do this, we analyzed the organizational websites listed to the right.

We also met with several key sector stakeholders. We first met with Tony Pearce, Inspector General for Emergency Management, who oversees volunteers within the sector, Faye Bendrups, a controller and volunteer with the Victoria State Emergency Service (VicSES), Martin McKinnon, a customer service expert, and Siusan MacKenzie, CEO of ESF. Our meetings and interviews are logged in Supplemental Materials (SM)-B<sup>1</sup>. Our key take away from these meetings was a clear understanding of the vital role emergency service volunteers have in Victoria. We discovered that the government does not have the financial capability to employ an entire emergency service workforce, such as is delivered by the integrated paid and volunteer model. We learned that volunteering is a part of the social fabric in Australia. Australians volunteer because they feel it is their duty to give back to the community.

## Importance of Volunteer Recognition

Next, we reviewed studies discussing the benefits of receiving recognition and the effect of positive feedback on worker wellbeing. We also researched rates of psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, and mental health conditions in healthcare professionals and emergency service workers. Finally, we reviewed past work done by WPI students and previous research conducted by ESF on these topics.

Additionally, we researched psychology theories regarding altruism, such as Axelrod's (1984) egoistic, Becker's (1976; 1981) egocentric, Mead/Frank's (1934; 1988) altercentric, and Smith's (1976) sympathetic theories of altruism. We also researched general theories pertaining to self-fulfillment, wellbeing, and the desire to be recognized or appreciated: the relative deprivation theory, self-determination theory, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, and Maslow's (1943) theory of self-actualization, all of which relate to personal motivation, happiness, and satisfaction with life.

This built our understanding of the influence recognition has on work satisfaction, work engagement, and job retention.

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<sup>1</sup> Supplemental Materials (SM) for this project may be found at [wp.wpi.edu/melbourne/projects/](http://wp.wpi.edu/melbourne/projects/) using the search bar to locate project materials.

- Ambulance Victoria (AV)
- Country Fire Authority (CFA)
- Victoria State Emergency Service (VicSES)
- Life Saving Victoria (LSV)
- Red Cross
- St. John Ambulance
- Victorian Council of Churches Emergency Ministry (VCCEM)
- Marine Search and Rescue (MSAR)
- Emergency Management Victoria

- Literature Review
- Past WPI Studies

- Axelrod (1984)
- Becker (1976; 1981)
- Mead/Frank (1934; 1988)
- Smith (1976)
- Maslow (1943)

# Qualities & Components of a Good Recognition Program

To investigate the qualities and components of a good recognition program, we researched 12 other volunteer organizations' recognition programs, both international and in Australia, by reviewing their websites for the information in Figure 6. These organizations are listed in SM-C. We also reviewed external studies where volunteers ranked different forms of recognition by preference. This enabled us to construct a masterlist of highly desired forms of recognition, as well as a table of the approaches used by organizations, as shown in SM-D and E.

In general, we found that formal recognition was the most documented strategy discussed on organization websites. This consisted primarily of awards based on hours of service. Our overall conclusions and findings on the current forms of recognition used in volunteer organizations across the world was discussed in the previous chapter.

Main Question		Details
1	Does the organization describe informal or formal recognition initiatives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past, current, or future</li> </ul>
2	Who participates in and/or manages recognition activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supervisors?</li> <li>• Peers?</li> </ul>
3	When does recognition occur?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall history</li> <li>• At a specific event?</li> <li>• Around certain times (e.g., holidays)?</li> </ul>
4	Where do these acts of recognition take place?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At work?</li> <li>• At a specific event?</li> <li>• Production of promotional materials or news coverage of the event?</li> </ul>
5	Is there any literature on how the recognition program is run or whether it has been assessed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership training?</li> <li>• Management structure?</li> </ul>
6	Is there a way that the specific challenges of emergency response work are addressed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different trends in reward/recognition types?</li> </ul>

**Figure 6:** Website Analysis Questions

## Determine Strategies Most Appropriate for and Welcomed by Volunteers

Based on our website analyses, literature reviews, and our interviews with sector leaders, we determined possible forms of recognition suitable for ESF to implement across the sector. We then conducted interviews with program managers and focus groups with volunteers to assess the kinds of recognition they practiced and the kinds that they would prefer.

We conducted nine Zoom interviews with supervisors or managers from each of these emergency service organizations: AV, CFA, LSV, MSAR, Red Cross, St. John's Ambulance, VCC, and VicSES. Some of these individuals were paid and some were volunteers. The script used to explain our study and obtain consent is shown in SM-F. These meetings helped us to understand the ways that each organization currently recognizes its volunteers and the perceptions of managers so that we could later compare their views with those of volunteers. Our manager interview questions are listed in Figure 7.

1. How many volunteers do you have in your organization— age, gender, and location demographics?
2. Can you tell us about your volunteers' roles (generally, typical day, # of hours/day?)
3. Can you help us understand how volunteers are managed? (i.e. line managers)
4. Why do you think it is important to recognize volunteers?
5. How do you recognize your volunteers – formal and informal? (Prompt if necessary.)
6. Of those, which do you think is the most popular with volunteers?
  - a. Type? (e.g., social support vs certificates vs financial compensation)
  - b. What specifically do you think they want to be recognized for? (e.g., achievements, time milestones, behavior, leadership?)
7. Is there room for improvement in volunteer recognition/what ideas do you have?
8. How would you feel about implementing a sector-wide program?
  - a. *[insert specific ideas from research & other conversations (ex. Community Open Houses/Expos)]*
9. We know there is a volunteer card Memberlink – tell us about that.
  - a. Could that program be improved?
10. Are you able to help us get together volunteers for a discussion group to gather their perspectives?
  - a. *[insert date and time]*

Figure 7: Manager Interview Questions

## Managers' Perspectives

The manager interviews provided information on how each organization recognizes their volunteers as well as state-level recognition initiatives that the organizations participate in. Program managers tended to focus on formal awards, which included certificates, medals, and banquets. Several managers discussed long service awards for volunteers working five or more years and Victoria's State Emergency Services Medal, which is for volunteers who were rendered in service during specific dates of a nationally significant emergency. Mention of informal ways to recognize volunteers was not as frequent, and the strategies for doing so seemed inconsistent across organizations. One example discussed was how after shifts and during team debriefs, some unit leaders mention a volunteer's excellent performance. These informal forms of recognition seemed to be the responsibility of the unit leaders.

**The awards process  
"is extremely  
outdated and allows  
volunteers to slip  
through the cracks"  
- Manager within the sector**

### **Every manager noted a need for improvement in terms of volunteer recognition.**

Multiple managers mentioned that the nomination and selection processes for both internal agency awards and external state-level awards were tedious and complicated. One manager described how the awards process "is extremely outdated and allows volunteers to slip through the cracks." These nomination forms often require extensive information, and according to our interviewees, managers and volunteers sometimes fail to see their importance, as they are not advertised or given much publicity.

Volunteer managers claimed that most volunteers feel uncomfortable when receiving awards in a very public spotlight and that it can be uncomfortable for volunteers to undergo multiple interviews and write long descriptions of why they should win an award. The extensive nomination and application processes ultimately creates more work for both managers and volunteers on top of their incredibly busy schedules.



Managers also indicated that within the emergency services sector there are missed opportunities for volunteer recognition. For example, volunteer recognition could be integrated into current expos where volunteers gather and interact with the community and other volunteer agencies. These events could facilitate informal thank yous as well as less formal and more personal community-based awards. The program managers further discussed how the expos sometimes lack a broader theme or focus which would help promote informal conversations between volunteers.

Although the managers believe that expos and other community gatherings could be used to recognize their volunteers, it appeared as though they did not want to lead this initiative since they were all focused more so on the operational side of the organization. They believe that recognizing their volunteers needs to be easy to do, so that during difficult times, organizations do not need to shift focus from helping the community.



We learned that, following the conclusion of the recent bushfires, there were numerous instances where third party organizations such as sporting leagues recognized volunteers at their events. Managers claimed these were very powerful events where volunteers felt appreciated and acknowledged. The problem with this form of recognition was that, ultimately, it added an incredibly large amount of work for the managers and volunteer agencies to make arrangements with the organization and plan these events. They suggested an external organization might facilitate and arrange community awards events.



## Volunteers' Perspectives

Following the manager interviews, we conducted eight focus groups over Zoom, one with volunteers from each of the same eight agencies. There were between 3 and 15 volunteers in each focus group and we spoke to 54 volunteers in total. In addition to asking about their recognition experiences in the sector and their thoughts on developing an effective program, we asked them to respond to a list of optional recognition programs we developed from our research. Focus groups allowed for open dialogue regarding potential programs. We recorded the audio from these sessions and began with the preamble found in SM-F. Our discussion questions and options are listed in Figure 8.

1. How many hours have you volunteered in the last week?  
*(Each person)*
2. Why did you become a volunteer? *(Each person)*
3. How do people in your agency get recognized for their volunteer contribution?
  - a. How important do you think it is to recognize volunteers?
4. How do you think volunteers should or could be recognized for their contribution to the community? *(Classify responses as formal or informal)*
5. Can you tell us about a time when you felt (informally) recognised /acknowledged for your volunteer work? *(Classify responses as formal or informal)*
  - a. How often does something like that happen?
  - b. How does it make you feel? *(explore link to wellbeing)*
6. What is it about your volunteer work that you would like to be recognized for? (eg., general contribution of time and commitment to community service, outstanding accomplishments, service milestones, behavior, leadership, sacrifices made by family)
7. How do your team / unit leaders recognize the work of the volunteers they supervise?
  - a. Do you feel that your team leaders do this well?
  - b. If they were to be provided training on how to recognize volunteers what would they need to know?
8. What do you think about a volunteer recognition program that includes all of the emergency service agencies in the sector – recognises them as emergency service volunteers – not by agency but as a bigger team working as one?
9. What do you think of these ideas:
  - a. A discount card program that provides really useful discounts on household costs, entertainment, etc (Similar to Memberlink, but with more variety; e.g., fuel, Coles, entertainment, hardware, beauty services)
  - b. A state wide awards program where the community gets to nominate emergency service volunteers in different categories and volunteers get to nominate their employers to recognise the support they demonstrate
  - c. Incorporating volunteer recognition into existing community events such as bushfire preparedness expos
  - d. Scholarships to promote organization improvement or opportunities for further training/career development
  - e. Volunteer networking events where members of different agencies could come together and learn about each other's work
    - i. *(Discuss why for each)*
10. What would be the best way you could be recognized for your volunteer work? (overall what is the biggest area that could be addressed/ what do you want the most)

Figure 8: Focus Group Questions



During these focus groups, the volunteers also used Zoom's chat feature to supplement discussion, asking questions and making additional comments.

When asked what form of recognition they most desired, many described recognition that is specific and unique to them. They mentioned this can take the form of stories and letters from leaders and managers about a recent act they completed or informal thank yous given during team debriefs. In contrast to some of their managers, volunteers thought the use of service awards, formal awards, and certificates of achievements are a "good supplement" to other forms of recognition but should not be the primary approach. One volunteer talked about how he received a certificate of achievement in the mail, but it was "crumbled up in a ball with [his] name spelled wrong." This lack of care when it comes to presenting formal awards does not provide the volunteer with the desired recognition and if not done well can even make them more displeased.

Participants discussed how the nomination processes for both the internal organization awards and the limited sector-wide awards were convoluted, discouraging, and hindered meaningful recognition. In some cases, they explained, paid employees are automatically nominated for awards, yet volunteers need to go through a more arduous process in order to also be considered for these awards. They confirmed that it often falls to the overworked unit leaders to complete the extensive nomination processes for each volunteer they feel is deserving. The awards criteria and nomination process also differs between agencies in terms of what information must be provided, who can earn which awards and how they do so, as well as who can nominate volunteers. Considering that many volunteers are involved in more than one emergency service agency, this inconsistency results in a lack of unity and promotes a message that is neither productive nor encouraging. Along with the desire for a more structured and streamlined process, volunteers also consistently voiced a need for a clear criteria for each award. They wanted to know exactly what to look for in terms of actions and behaviors when considering another volunteer for an award. Volunteers who serve as unit leaders also wanted a way to track the awards a volunteer had received in the past, as well as any anecdotes about their excellent performance. It was clear that managers thought that their awards systems were more effective than volunteers felt them to be.

**One volunteer received a certificate of achievement in the mail, but it was "crumbled up in a ball with [his] name spelled wrong."**

Additionally, although program managers understood the importance of informal recognition by the community, volunteers made it clear that this was what truly motivated and sustained them. Ultimately, volunteers indicated that they volunteer not for the recognition but because of their desire to support and better the local community. In some cases, this fundamental idea was not recognized by upper management. Furthermore, volunteers reported feeling appreciated when their unit leaders and program managers engage in informal and more personal acts of recognition. However, there is no structured way to promote this kind of recognition within the organization. It is left up to the incredibly busy unit leaders to take this initiative.

**"Quiet achievers slip through the cracks"**

**- A volunteer**

**The number of hours a volunteer has served may not be the best criterion for awards.**

The volunteers we spoke with consistently expressed concern regarding awards based on an individual's number of hours served or the visibility of work performed, rather than on the quality or value of the service provided. They argued that it is important to recognize this difference, otherwise, quiet achievers slip through the cracks (another frequently expressed concern). Those working quietly in the background may be the ones going above and beyond. One volunteer said that "In some cases, 80% of the work is done by 20% of the volunteers, but they go unnoticed."

It must also be acknowledged that some volunteers simply have more time to dedicate to their volunteer work. For example, one volunteer may have a full-time job while another may have a full-time job and three children, but as these respondents pointed out, both may be making important contributions. The person with family obligations may work less but may actually be making the bigger sacrifice. Some volunteers are also much more vocal about their achievements and like being in the spotlight while others are more modest and prefer to let their actions speak for themselves. No matter the type of individual, their service should be valued. Therefore, the number of hours a volunteer has served may not be the best criterion for awards.

In addition to their perception that the organizations themselves sometimes do not recognize volunteers appropriately, these volunteers felt that the government does not properly appreciate them for their vital volunteer work. As previously discussed, the emergency service sector could not function without the substantial contributions of their volunteer workforce. Without volunteers, the government simply cannot afford to employ the emergency service workers necessary to sustain the needs of the sector. Yet, volunteers expressed that they felt like the government “[took] them for granted but still expect[ed] them to show up.”

Several of the volunteers expressed frustration in the fact that they do not receive tax breaks of any kind. CFA workers must still pay the fire levy or fire service tax on their homes even though they are essentially paying for what they already do for free. Also, volunteers must drive long distances in their own vehicles with only limited compensation and they feel uncomfortable even taking these reimbursements from their financially burdened volunteer organizations. They expressed interest in governmental compensation in this area, even if simply in terms of discounted car registration. They indicated the current rewards/discount program, Memberlink, was complicated, not well known by retailers, and did not apply to relevant stores. This made the program ineffective in the eyes of most of the volunteers we spoke with. The program is also limited to only the volunteer, family members of the volunteer do not have access to those discounts, which is incredibly inconvenient. Table 7 summarizes and compares some of the key points that emerged across the manager interviews and volunteer focus groups.

**The government simply cannot afford to employ the emergency service workers necessary to sustain the needs of the sector**

**Yet, volunteers expressed that they felt like the government “[took] them for granted but still expect[ed] them to show up.”**

**Table 7:** Comparison of manager and volunteer perspectives

## Managers

- Felt that Service Awards are the Most Valued by Volunteers
- Do Not Want to Assume Full Responsibility for Recognition
- Want to Manufacture and Distribute Spirit Items (e.g., apparel, stickers)

## Both

- Felt that Current Awards Nominations Processes are Convolved
- Mentioned a Need for Increased Government and Community Support
- Expressed Desire for Sector Unity and Feelings of Greater Purpose
- Felt that Current Rewards Programs Lack Desired Benefits and Function Inefficiently

## Volunteers

- Want More Support from Employers (e.g., Volunteer Leave)
- Want More Opportunities to be Heard by Agency Administrators
- Want More Communication from Senior Leaders
- Want Opportunities to Learn About Other Agencies and Roles

# Summary of Results

Managers and volunteers felt that...

Families need recognition, too

Leaders need to be trained to give recognition

Informal recognition is highly valued

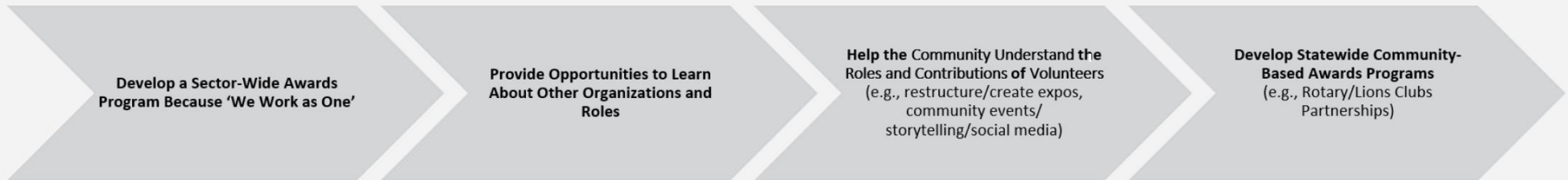
There is a lack of understanding about what we do at multiple levels

Local/community level recognition is important

Don't forget the quiet achievers

We work as one, we need to be recognized as one

# Recommendations



When speaking with volunteers and with their managers, we noticed a common theme: the need to develop more connections across the sector, suggesting that the sector should implement a comprehensive awards program that spans across all of the emergency service agencies. Volunteers and managers alike expressed a need for a revised program where volunteers from other organizations can nominate each other based on outstanding work. Different volunteer organizations often work hand in hand, e.g., the Red cross supporting and providing meals and water for the active CFA firefighters fighting fires. In this case, the work of the Red Cross volunteers sometimes goes unnoticed by the public, even though the CFA volunteers understand the impact their colleagues have on their work. **We suggest implementing a sector-wide awards program where volunteers can nominate colleagues from the other organizations.** This will facilitate peer recognition and promote unity within the emergency services sector.

Every volunteer that we spoke with was adamant that they volunteer not for the recognition but to give back to the community. The community thus should play a key role in recognizing and appreciating the work of the emergency service volunteers. Volunteers indicated that they felt the community did not fully understand the extent of their emergency service volunteer work. Therefore, we recommend that volunteer units receive increased support from sector officials that would allow them to educate local communities on their emergency service work. **The sector could expand and restructure community expos so volunteers and community members can interact, and the public can learn more about what volunteers do.**

As previously stated, volunteers felt that the awards systems in place were inadequate and poorly structured with extensive and complicated nomination processes. We recommend that the volunteer agencies implement a statewide community-based awards program. Volunteers indicated that awards or appreciation from their local community was more meaningful than an award from their organization's administration. **With the possible partnerships of Rotary or Lions clubs, small community-based volunteer awards programs could be implemented across the sector.**

This would not only allow community members to appreciate volunteers, but it would further educate them on volunteer roles and potentially facilitate meaningful informal recognition at the award events. Additionally, it would allow for employers to be acknowledged for supporting their workers who volunteer. These initiatives could be organized by sector officials so that the responsibility for coordinating volunteer recognition does not fall completely on program managers or unit leaders.





Complex nomination processes hinder meaningful recognition. **Agencies should make nomination systems easier to navigate, have clear and more appropriate awards criteria, and include a database to keep track of past awards or any feedback about volunteers they have received.** This will also provide individuals with more information about the volunteer being nominated. As previously discussed, hours are not a meaningful criterion for awards; they should be based on actions and dedication to service. Nomination processes must be simplified for overloaded managers.

Feeling recognized includes feeling heard. **Administrators and managers should speak with the volunteers on the ground more often to sustain their understanding of those roles, and to give volunteers the opportunity to voice any needs or concerns.** Actively listen to what they have to say. Increased communication between volunteers and members of leadership helps ensure that organization protocols are designed *with* volunteers, rather than simply designed *for* volunteers. Organization programs should recognize the role volunteers play and give them the autonomy to pursue ideas for organizational improvement.

Leaders should actively promote equal and equitable environments that are supportive and conducive to teamwork. Mutual respect is the foundation for peer recognition. As they assess volunteer performance, they should also keep in mind the previously discussed visibility vs. value and quality vs. quantity concepts. **Volunteer team leaders should be provided with development informing them of ways to incorporate informal and formal recognition into their leadership style.** This will help volunteers feel appreciated by their specific organization and create a tight knit team.





**Volunteers’ contributions to the community should be recognized in more meaningful ways with targeted benefits from employers and the government.** For example, providing tax relief, like waiving the fire levy, shows volunteers that their service is valued by the government. Also, volunteers must use their personal vehicles to travel extensively for their volunteering responsibility, so the government might provide discounts on their car registration to compensate for their services. Additionally, providing volunteers leave from work shows that employers support their commitment to helping others and will not penalize them for doing so.

Volunteer benefits that already exist should be made easier for volunteers to access (e.g., cutting out extra steps and making sure that store employees are even aware of the current discount programs). Moreover, benefit programs should acknowledge the role that families play and extend support programs to include them as well. **Benefits offered to volunteers should be ones that they and their families would like to have and will actually use.**



# REFLECTION

The emergency service volunteers of Victoria are essential to the health and safety of their communities. These volunteers risk their lives to support their community. However, they are not always recognized for their contributions. We believe that by addressing the sector level, agency level, and individual benefits our recommendations will foster positive change in the emergency services sector. Speaking with volunteers in the sector gave us both a global perspective of and focused insight into volunteerism and wellbeing, topics we hold dear. We wanted to honor the volunteer ethos of Victoria and aimed to incorporate the opinions and ideas of all those that we spoke with. We were astounded by their selflessness, dedication, and commitment to service. We hope we did them justice and allowed for their voices to be heard.

# Volunteer Agencies



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# ABOUT THE TEAM

Our project team is composed of three third-year students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI): Dylan Connors, Dan DiVecchia, and Karen Ho. We were accepted to WPI's Melbourne Project Center, where we would have completed this project. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made traveling to Australia unsafe, so the project was completed remotely with the help of our advisors and the Emergency Services Foundation.



Left to right: Dan DiVecchia, Karen Ho, Dylan Connors

**Dylan Connors** is a Mechanical Engineering major minoring in Business. Through the volunteer work he has completed he feels a passion for supporting and appreciating those who dedicate their lives to volunteering. He hopes the project and recommendations have a lasting and positive impact on supporting the emergency service volunteers in Victoria.

**Dan DiVecchia** is a Civil Engineering major with a focus in Construction Management. He is passionate about wellbeing and mental health issues because it has previously affected his family and friends. He hopes this project and the recommendations provided will improve the well-being of those that have already given so much and will continue to give to their community.

**Karen Ho** is a Psychological Science and Professional Writing double major with a concentration in Psychobiology and a minor in Chemistry. She strives to serve others as a volunteer and mental health advocate in her community. She hopes that the implementation of a sector-wide volunteer recognition program designed with the volunteer perspective in mind will foster positive change and promote volunteer wellbeing in Victoria.

Author contributions to this project are listed in SM-A.



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