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28 February 2025

Committee Secretary

The Senate

Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade References Committee

Dear Sir/Madam

Subject: Inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

Public Skills Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to The Senate Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade References regarding the Inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army).

In line with Public Skills Australia's remit, this submission will provide information that may be of relevance to the following Terms of Reference, as set out by the Inquiry:

- Establishing targeted initiatives to encourage young people to participate in the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army).
- Exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture.
- Integrating volunteer opportunities within educational institutions to increase student participation in volunteer organisations.
- Creating a nationally recognised qualification scheme that provides tangible benefits to volunteers and formally acknowledges their skills and contributions across sectors.
- Other related matters.

About Public Skills Australia

Public Skills Australia was appointed by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) as one of 10 Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs). Public Skills Australia works with employer and employee representatives (career and volunteer) from the Public Safety and Government industry, which includes Fire and Emergency Services, in addition to Correctional Services, Defence, Federal, State/Territory and Local Government, and Police to undertake the following functions:



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- **Workforce Planning**, the strategic centrepiece for JSCs. Workforce Planning underpins intelligence-gathering on emergent skilling priorities and informs strategic planning.
- **Training Product Development**, for VET training packages in line with the intent of Skills Ministers to improve the quality, speed to market and responsiveness of training products.
- **Implementation, Promotion and Monitoring**, by partnering with training providers and organisations to align workforce planning objectives and national training products with career advice and ‘on the ground’ training delivery.
- **Industry Stewardship**, by distilling industry intelligence on workforce issues affecting the Public Safety and Government industry and providing advice on national training system policies.

In support of the Fire and Emergency Services sector, Public Skills Australia is tasked with developing and reviewing the PUA Public Safety Training Package to provide purposeful training that meets workforce needs. The delivery of this training package extends to both career and volunteer members of the Fire and Emergency Services workforce, performing critical roles in responding to emergency incidents.

As volunteers comprise a large portion of the Emergency Services workforce they play an important role in not just Emergency Management. Broadly, Public Skills Australia’s workforce plans and training products support the following occupations, who perform these crucial public safety functions:

- Emergency Services Workers
- Firefighters
- Surf Lifesavers.

Engagement with the Fire and Emergency Services industry-sector

Public Skills Australia is mandated to adopt a tripartite approach to engagement with industry, bringing together employers, employee representatives, and Government bodies, in the identification and validation of workforce challenges and emerging skills and training needs within the Public Safety and Government sector.

In the development of the *2024 Fire and Emergency Services Workforce Plan*, and the current 2025 Workforce Plan (in development) Public Skills Australia actively consults with stakeholders in the Fire and Emergency Services sector as part of research efforts, including (in alphabetical order):

- Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council (AFAC)
- Australian Council for State Emergency Services (ACSES)
- Airservices Australia



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- Department Of Fire and Emergency Services Western Australia
- Disaster Relief Australia
- Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV)
- National State Emergency Service Volunteer Association (NSESVA)
- New South Wales Fire and Rescue
- Queensland Fire and Emergency Services
- Rural Fire Service New South Wales
- State Emergency Services NSW
- Surf Life Saving Australia
- Surf Life Saving NSW
- Tasmania Fire Service
- United Firefighters Union of Australia.

Through engagement with key stakeholders in the Fire and Emergency Services sector, Public Skills Australia identified and validated workforce challenges that are impacting across the industry.

The *2024 Fire and Emergency Services Workforce Plan* identified key trends that may be impacting on volunteer participation in the Fire and Emergency Services industry. These are discussed below.

1. Barriers to attracting and retaining volunteers

A sustainable volunteer Fire and Emergency Services workforce is critical in supporting Australia's emergency management capability and ensuring operational capacity can meet demands during periods of climate disaster. With a 9.9% reduction in volunteers across the sectors between 2022-2023, the recruitment of volunteers presents a significant ongoing challenge.¹

A key recruitment challenge uncovered was attracting young people to a volunteering role, which was also found to be compounded by other challenges that impact general volunteering. This includes balancing paid work, education, and family commitments, with consultations noting that young people appear to be 'less interested' in volunteering than they have been in previous generations.

Further industry consultation identified the following drivers for volunteer separations or challenges with recruitment, which may contribute to the decreased interest in or attrition from volunteering roles among young people:

¹ Public Skills Australia (2024) *Workforce Plan 2024 Fire and Emergency Services*, Public Skills Australia, page 35



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- Cost of living increases resulting in financial pressure for individuals, particularly younger generations. This has led to many people needing to find multiple sources of income to support themselves, reducing their availability for volunteer work.
- Increasing perceptions about a lack of time for participation due to increasing responsibilities, reducing willingness and motivation to seek volunteer work.
- The escalation in scope and demand on volunteering, which has flow-on effects at the organisational and individual levels. For the former, this results in additional training and skill maintenance requirements for volunteers which further drives pressure on volunteers. For the latter, this can lead to both physical and mental burnout/fatigue. For example, between 2018 – 2019 and 2022 – 2023, there was a national increase of 36.4% in SES responses, with 80.9% of responses by fire agencies being for on-fire incidents in 2022 – 2023².
- Increasing demand has shifted agency expectations towards long-term volunteering, while some volunteers prefer episodic, spontaneous, or short-term volunteer engagements³.
- Challenges with volunteer leadership capability were routinely identified as a key driver for separations due to a lack of investment from organisations in volunteer-specific leadership training.

These factors compound to have adverse impacts on the recruitment and retention of volunteers for frontline work, particularly where potential or current volunteers weigh up the opportunity cost of a high-risk volunteering role, leading to taking on lower-risk volunteer opportunities or ceasing volunteering.

Conversely, it was observed by industry-sector representatives that volunteer units may revitalise after close, localised engagement with communities, suggesting this approach may be more likely to yield the desired increase in volunteers as opposed to State/Territory or Federal-based campaigns.

Strategic Considerations:

- This challenge highlights that any consideration of a volunteer attraction and retention pipeline must be sustainable and should build upon existing structures that already support volunteer workforces. Consideration should be given to strengthening these existing structures and pipelines into volunteerism.
- The drivers of volunteerism are often altruistic and in the Public Safety industry, are often based on a volunteer's desire to support their community. Volunteers do not seek compensation for their contribution,

² Public Skills Australia (2024) *Workforce Plan 2024 Fire and Emergency Services*, Public Skills Australia, page 36

³ Public Skills Australia (2024) *Workforce Plan 2024 Fire and Emergency Services*, Public Skills Australia, page 33



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rather they feel that they benefit from the skills they learn and community services they provide. Consideration could be given to how volunteer contributions are valued and incentives that are sustainable.

- The nature of volunteerism is changing, with some signing up in a sporadic or transient manner to support one particular community emergency. The sustainability of the skills development and retention of these types of volunteers should be considered in development of any new scheme.

2. Training delivery and opportunities

The PUA Public Safety Training Package (PUA Training Package) supports training for several emergency agencies. In 2022, there were a total of 11,666 enrolments and 3,999 completions⁴. Data relating to enrolments and completions of the PUA Training Package may also be influenced by how volunteers engage with the package as learners within volunteer agencies may only access individual 'units' and may not be represented in enrolment and completion datasets. Volunteers who do elect to enrol in skill sets or entire qualifications often take many years to complete their qualifications which may account for the significant lag between enrolments and completions.

Training delivery currently presents challenges for volunteers, such as:

- an increased demand for volunteers' time due to the need for specialised roles, which requires agencies to provide more training.
- matching training priorities with the need to manage operational risk rather than with personal preferences, which can lead to a decline in volunteer participation. Ongoing maintenance of skills, as well as training and assessment to address skills gaps and updated qualifications, can be particularly burdensome for volunteers, and volunteer trainers and assessors. Volunteer agencies also report a shortage of qualified trainers and assessors, who are often volunteers themselves, creating an additional barrier to effective training delivery.

Clearly defined career pathways are crucial to support value propositions to retain volunteers. Whilst career-based Fire and Emergency Services pathways are mapped, mapping of volunteer pathways is limited due to volunteers often being retired or holding a primary employment in another industry or organisation.

⁴ National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), Total VET students and courses 2022: DataBuilder [data set], 2023, ncver.edu.au



At an agency level, pathways are aligned with the training that volunteers are required to undertake to perform specific job roles, and to meet the skill needs of their specific brigade/unit. As the specific needs will vary based on risk and location, developing a nationally consistent pathway for volunteers is worth further considering.

Strategic Considerations:

- A nationally recognised/accredited training system/scheme already exists through the *PUA Public Safety Training Package* (the training package) for volunteers in the Public Safety industry. Volunteers undertake a wealth of operational and accredited training to perform their roles. The training package also provides consistency of practice for volunteers. An alternative training system/scheme risks creating inconsistency and would potentially risk the misalignment of the skills of new volunteers with existing volunteers. Instead, the focus should be on bolstering the use and utility of this training package to better support volunteers, which is driven out of the existing Jobs and Skills Council Program.
- In addition to using the established qualification and skillset structure through the training package, consideration should also be given to using it to address skills gaps or emerging skills needs for volunteers. Public Skills Australia works closely with the Fire and Emergency Services industry to ensure that skills needs and accredited training is consistent for career and volunteers within Fire and Emergency Services. The consistency of this training is paramount to ensuring the safety of the public in an emergency. Any proposed training system/scheme should draw upon, where appropriate, the robust range of qualifications and skill sets that are already available across the VET system and its training packages in disciplines such as emergency management, disaster management, relief, and recovery

3. Expansion of responsibility

Concerning other matters relevant to this inquiry, it has been recognised that the increased scope and duration of natural disasters place additional pressure on volunteers. Representatives from the Fire and Emergency Services sector have consistently indicated that the impact of climate change is leading to more frequent, intense, and prolonged bushfires and natural disasters. The total number of fire and other primary incidents responded to by Fire Service agencies has increased by 8%, while the number of incidents responded to by State Emergency Services units has risen by 185%⁵.

⁵ Productivity Commission, Emergency services for fire and other events – Table 9A.7



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With the growing workload and the expansion of core duties—often referred to as 'role creep'—volunteer fatigue and burnout have become concerns, as well as the increasing competition within the volunteer labour market. It is therefore important to consider that the implementation of a National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) may add another layer of competition for attracting and retaining volunteers.

Strategic Considerations:

- With a robust and well-trained volunteer workforce already operating to meet the demands of a changing climate, increase in incidents and growing workload, Public Skills Australia strongly echoes the concerns of the industry that a new scheme, such as a 'Climate Army' may be a siloed approach to enhancing volunteerism. This creates conflicts with existing efforts to strengthen skills and training in these organisations. Noting the expanded responsibility of volunteers and volunteer organisations in Public Safety, it is pivotal that any new system/ scheme strengthens consistency of approaches to emergency management, prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

Conclusion

Public Skills Australia supports a skilled and robust Fire and Emergency Services workforce and appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army), in line with the Terms of Reference. As highlighted in this submission, there are several challenges facing the volunteering industry-sector which would need to be considered should the scheme be implemented. Further research into these challenges, as well as a deeper exploration of the strategies and training needs is required. Public Skills Australia looks forward to ongoing collaboration with stakeholders to address the challenges facing volunteering in the Fire and Emergency Services industry, and to build on any opportunities identified.

Jean Dyzel, CEO

Public Skills Australia