

# Resilient Emergency Service groups

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A study into pre incident resilience and emergency  
service groups

Emergency Services  
Foundation Scholarship Study  
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## Acknowledgements

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the dynamics of first responder group resilience in Australia. First responder groups are those groups within a community whose primary purpose is to serve and protect the community. The study has taken place here in Victoria, South Australia and NSW, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the following organisations and agencies for the generous and kind support they have provided to me throughout the study:

- 1 Country Fire Authority
- 2 Victoria Police
- 3 NSW State Emergency Service
- 4 South Australian Fire & Emergency Services Commission
- 5 Mental Health Foundation of Australia
- 6 National Disaster Resiliency Centre at Monash University
- 7 Torrens Resiliency Institute in South Australia

Evidence has been gathered from 3 cohorts within CFA and for their support, encouragement and honesty. My sincere thanks go to:

- 1 CFA State Wide Community Safety Forum groups
- 2 CFA Member Engagement Reference group
- 3 CFA Regional Peer Support groups

In closing I would like to thank Lex de Man for his kind recommendation on my behalf. It is difficult to truly capture the full extent of the support provided by the Emergency Services Foundation, and in particular the scope of contribution Jenny Davis has brought to this opportunity. Without this level of support the study would not have been possible. My deepest thanks go to Jenny for her confidence and encouragement, the ongoing advice and support she has provided, as well as her patience and understanding throughout the course of my research

The ESF scholarship has enabled me to have the financial support to invest my volunteering hours into areas of learning and development that matter most to me. It provided me with the privilege of learning from the expertise we have here in SE Australia and gave me a deeper appreciation for the volume and scope of work that is being undertaken behind the scenes, by first responder groups and the agencies that support them. Above all the opportunity as enhanced my knowledge of how to take care of my group, my community and myself.

## Resilient Groups Executive Summary

**Purpose:** to identify strategies which increase and/or maintain resilience in emergency service first responder groups.

### **Learning gained:**

Agency based policies and procedures both developed and developing can be clearly seen to address the contributing factors which support emergency service group resilience. In part due to the subjective nature of resilience, our interpretation of resilience is mixed within first responder groups. However, common themes emerged.

Key qualities of a resilient group included the ability for the whole group to be able to adapt to changing situations within the groups dynamics, to have the ability to self-actuate as a group and to have a shared understanding of their purpose, role and expectations in their capabilities in establishing and maintaining relationships and managing expectations.

Self-efficacy as a group is influenced by a self-determined or a victim mentality and this influenced the different expectations that a group has of support mechanisms. This can also inform how a group will influence the views a group has of self-reliance and their cultural beliefs of where and from whom resilience should be contributed.

Some of the key indicators of self-determined groups are their ability to identify gaps in their own strengths and more importantly, the ability to implement resolution strategies to address issues identified. The group's ability to exercise a situational awareness of changes within their group dynamic, as with operational environments and the communications skills required to manage issues effectively was also found to be a key influence. High functioning groups can also be seen to have:

1. Clearly defined reason and purpose
2. Clearly defined roles and functions
3. Clearly defined group expectations

### **Group dynamic influences on groups' resilience included:**

- 1 Positive relationships with commonality are a primary contributor to the quality of positive experiences in these relationships. Meaning is gained from camaraderie and sense of belonging.
- 2 Adversity while contributing to short term bonding is not an agent for long term bonds. E.g.; turning out together and facing adversity is not enough alone to build positive relationships and therefore the need to include other bonding agents remains.
- 3 Communication while being a critical aspect of our relationships and group cohesion is also an instrument in breakdowns that can occur. This can directly impact the group dynamics and create issues around our trust and respect in each other.
- 4 If these areas of communication are not resolved effectively by members and leadership, then issues continue to disintegrate group functionality and corrode trust in leadership itself. Work must then be done to restore the groups trust both in each other and in their leadership. Trust is easy to break, but is much harder to fix once broken.

### **Areas of importance as viewed by research participants:**

From the 5 specific qualities of resilience that were presented to participants, the evidence gathered from the 3 cohorts within 1 field/agency continued to be identified in subsequent interviews with other agencies, organisations and individuals. This has confirmed that of the 5 factors, the three most frequently identified in order of importance were:

- a) Meaningful relationships
- b) Positive emotions
- c) A sense of meaning

This does not suggest that the other 2 factors were not valued, but perhaps it identified the sense of “group” which individual participants identified more closely with.

### **Resilience assessment tools that can be applied to emergency services groups, if developed would need to include:**

Community based resilience assessment tools do exist and the Torrens Resilience Institute toolkit is an example of a comprehensive and easily engaged tool that addressed this need at a community level. To a lesser extent there are also resilience assessment tools used to measure the resilience of military forces, which while being defense specific also presented examples of the type of information such tools seek to assess.

What assessment tools would need to encompass;

1. Connectivity of the group.
2. Awareness of threat; this should be viewed as threats to group cohesion rather than operational/response threats. Threats to group cohesion included the level of familiarity group members have of each other, strengths and reactions through their training and drill practice. Individuals who may not train regularly with the group are not as built into to the group dynamic and may be less familiar with actions and roles that are required of them. Training regularly with all group members helps to establish our understanding of the group’s norms.
3. Planning process and problem solving.
4. Self-efficacy.
5. Resources.

### **Action plans to promote greater resilience in emergency service groups would be valued by a diverse range of responders:**

This area of learning did not highlight specific strategies but did identify what the key focus outcomes are that strategies would need to address, identified as the following:

- a) Strategies which support group cohesion
- b) Strategies which manage conflict resolution
- c) Strategies which identify threats to group dynamics
- d) Strategies which empower individuals within the group to remain connected
- e) Strategies which identify the importance of regular training and practice

## Introduction

This study took place in Australia from June 2012 to May 2013 and investigated resilience in first responder groups in SE Australia. I wanted to further explore the nature of resilience as a group dynamic. The skills, behaviours and approaches we bring to the resilience of our emergency services groups were of a particular interest to me.

The year that this study took place during has been, in hindsight, a particularly pertinent year in which to look into and over the subject of resilience in emergency services. The year brought a series of challenges to us as an industry, as organisations and for services in many areas which were impacted by natural and man-made disasters.

Our collective and individual responses to the challenges imposed indicated not only the value of the evidence gained but also the living nature of resilience in our first responder groups, and the ways in which our resilience was both tested and in many cases, proven. This is a particularly important characteristic of groups such as first responders, as they are the groups within a community whose primary function is to serve and protect their community.

The study shed light on many direct and embedded influences that are contributing to our resilience as groups, but also captured a year in which strategies emerged, others were consolidated and in some cases had evolved to involve comprehensive implementation, dynamic refinement and ongoing review.

In understanding more about resilience as a description of the human condition it is important to understand where on the spectrum of human response resilience sits, and the variety of conscious and unconscious influences that both contribute and detract from our resilience as groups. This served as a basis from which to begin to understand how we may also operate as resilient groups and the mitigating and protective factors which influence resilience as a group dynamic.

The Key areas for study were:

- 1 What is resilience?
- 2 The scope of interpretation needed to accommodate a range of emergency service group perceptions and values.
- 3 Existing strengths based group resilience assessment models that may be adapted to emergency service groups.
- 4 The best practiced psychological strategies needed in generic pre- incident resilience primary action plans.
- 5 The contexts that pre- incident resilience primary action plans need in order to be applied by a range of emergency service groups.
- 6 Strategies which support emergency service groups to take ownership of their own resilience.
- 7 Information dissemination strategies which will enhance the ability of groups to implement pre incident resilience assessment and action tools.
- 8 The strategies needed to support organizational implementation and integration.

## What is resilience?

*"The concept of resilience has recently migrated from the fields of engineering and the environment to address the capacity of individuals, families, communities and institutions to withstand and recover from catastrophic events and experiences."*

– Torrens Resilience Institute

### **Mental Health Foundation of Australia – Meagan Mc Queenie and Alan Sutherland:**

These interviews helped to give me a basis from which to understand what resilience is in a psychosocial context and clarified the commonly agreed influences that constitute resilience in psychological definitions. Further reading material utilised during these interviews is listed in the reference section of this report. Martin Seligman's Wellbeing Theory was of particular interest to me in the work that had been done with Emergency Service groups overseas (amongst other reference groups). The components that this theory highlights formed a sound basis to gather feedback from Emergency Service participants. These discussions also provided me with advice on theoretical references for the following:

- 1 Resilience - Crisis spectrum.
- 2 How resilience is informed by and in turn informs our reactions to trauma.
- 3 The influence of repeated and single high impact exposure.
- 4 Good stress and bad stress: difference between aspects of being engaged and distressed.
- 5 Some of the elements of resilience as a group dynamic:
  - Pragmatic leadership
  - Common purpose
  - Groups ability to be adaptable
  - Inclusive of diversity
  - Self-efficacy
  - Sufficient resources

Resilience is not developed in the absence of challenge and crisis but in the process of overcoming manageable impacts. This for me demonstrated the very nature of first response and the frequency of crisis to which we are routinely exposed.

To be resilient requires skills, attitudes, behaviours and resources which collectively contribute to an outcome we would identify as resilient. In any given group the level of capacity individuals have to be resilient will directly impact the resilience of the group.

The fine line for first responders sits between being very good at frequently overcoming crisis for the public, and the vulnerability of being the most likely personalities to go the extra mile. To be resilient encompasses qualities we deeply admire and for which we wish to be admired. Somewhere between resilience and trauma is a no man's land and landmarks that we need to be familiar with. What has emerged strongly is the uniform desire by first responder groups to be resilient. What remains undefined are the interpretations of what resilience is, how it is attained and how we maintain it as groups.

## What constitutes a resilient group?

Through interviews with CFA Operations, Training and Volunteering, and Communities and Communications departments I learnt more about what the dynamics of a resilient group looks like on the ground and the obvious and subtle indicators of a group's overall resilience.

Key learning outcomes;

- 1 Positive relationships with commonality contribute to the quality of positive experiences in these relationships. Meaning can be gained from camaraderie and sense of belonging.
- 2 Adversity while creating a sense of connectivity is not an agent for long term bonds. E.g: turning out together and facing adversity is not enough alone to resource positive relationships. Therefore the need to include other bonding agents remains.
- 3 Communication while being a critical aspect of our relationships and group cohesion is also an instrument when breakdowns occur which can directly impact and create issues around our trust and respect in each other.
- 4 If these areas of communication are not resolved effectively by members and leadership, then issues continue to disintegrate group functionality and corrode trust in leadership itself. Work must then be done to restore the groups trust both in each other and in their leadership. This trust is easy to break, much harder to fix.

Key qualities of a resilient group included the ability for the group to be able to adapt to changing situations within the groups dynamics, to have the ability to self-actuate as a group and to have a shared understanding of their purpose, role and expectations and in their capabilities in establishing and maintaining relationships and managing expectations.

Self-efficacy as a group is also influenced by a Self-determined mentality as a group culture and the different expectations that group has of itself and support mechanisms. Conversely a Victim mentality as a group culture will influence the expectations the group have of self-reliance and their cultural view of where and from whom resilience should be contributed.

Need Help/ High Needs -----Self Determined/ low needs

Key indicators of self-determined groups are their ability to identify gaps and arguably more importantly, the ability to implement resolution strategies to address issues identified. The group's ability to exercise a situational awareness of changes within their group dynamics, as with operational environments and the communications skills to manage issues effectively was also found to be a key influence.

High functioning groups can also be seen to have:

1. Clearly defined reason and purpose
2. Clearly defined roles and functions
3. Clearly defined group expectations



The level of awareness and ability a group has to Self-Care also contribute to better defined expectations, and this can also be seen to help groups to understand what they can reasonably expect to self-determine and where they need to seek additional support.

Understanding areas of self-care brought to the forefront the importance of a group's level of commonality as a long term bonding agent and the associated vulnerabilities of relying on the short term bonds of adversity.

Managing member expectation is a balance between what the agency can support and what groups need to do for themselves. This is also an area in which several factors interplay in the influences upon group resilience.

Influences included managing expectations:

- Members have of emergency service agencies
- Members have of brigade/unit
- Members have of self
- Members have of communities

When considering the level of resilience a group have, the influence of 'capacity', while being a consideration, was not as heavily focussed on volume within group membership. Indeed smaller groups may be able to be more inclusive and often have more control over the decisions the group make. The values and behaviours that are contributed by individuals will impact the overall dynamics of the group. This is particularly true of the influence that leadership culture can have.

What emerged from these discussions was that when trying to assess resilience there are behaviours which are common but vary in intensity from one group to another, and that while these behaviours differ on the ground and may not be observable in all individuals, they do form areas of commonality from which reference points can be drawn.

This was further highlighted by participants during the research feedback sessions. This, combined with previous and tour based study, demonstrated how much of our ability to be resilient stems from our unconscious values and learnt behaviours. For example, a) our ability to get along with each other, b) to manage conflict and c) to build group cohesion.

From an educational perspective it also presented parallels in indicators commonly used to assess "ability" as per the following:

1. Unconscious / competent
2. Conscious / competent
3. Conscious / incompetent
4. Unconscious / incompetent

## Which areas are most important to emergency services?

In order to accommodate a wider scope of views than just my own and to test the validity of the wellbeing theory (Flourish, Martin Seligman 2011) in an Australian emergency services context I conducted 3 rounds of evaluative research and gathered feedback from 3 cohorts within CFA.

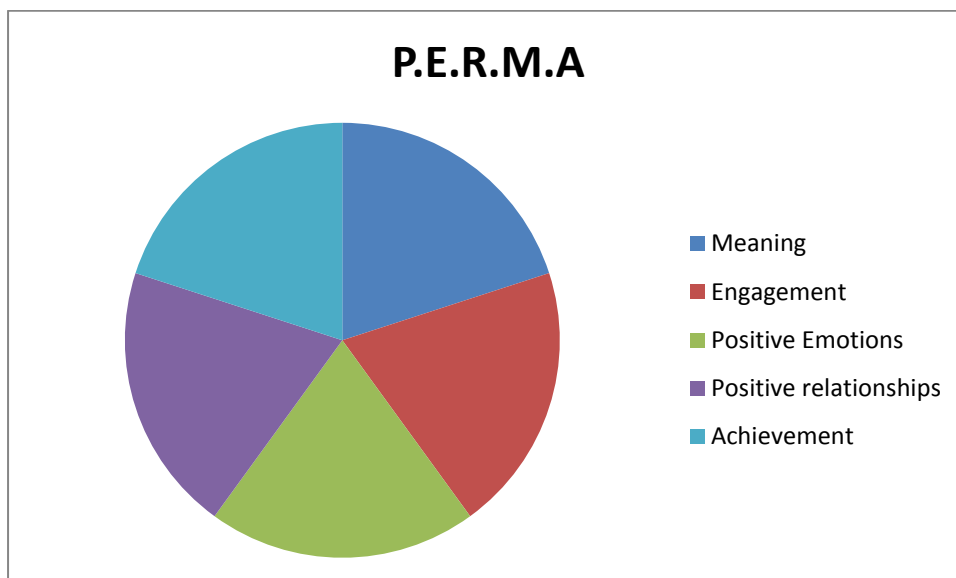
1. CFA State wide Community Safety Forum groups
2. CFA Member Engagement Reference group
3. CFA Regional Peer Support groups

While this feedback did not incorporate views from other agencies, it was interesting to note that much of the feedback provided was viewed by participants as being not exclusive or specific to fire service members only.

This theory served as a comprehensive and well researched framework to use to examine our emergency services thoroughly and to give some acceptable and relevant parameters through which to conduct the study.

Dr Seligman's work sought to better understand the relationship between positive psychology and resilience. His research has included groups and individuals across schools, emergency service and military personnel, and was able to give a reference to the scope of age groups involved in emergency services as well as the intensity of circumstances which emergency services in particular are faced with. Specifically the PERMA (see below) framework had identified key areas that influenced group dynamic and resilience:

- 1 Positive emotions
- 2 Engagement
- 3 Relationships
- 4 Meaning
- 5 Achievement

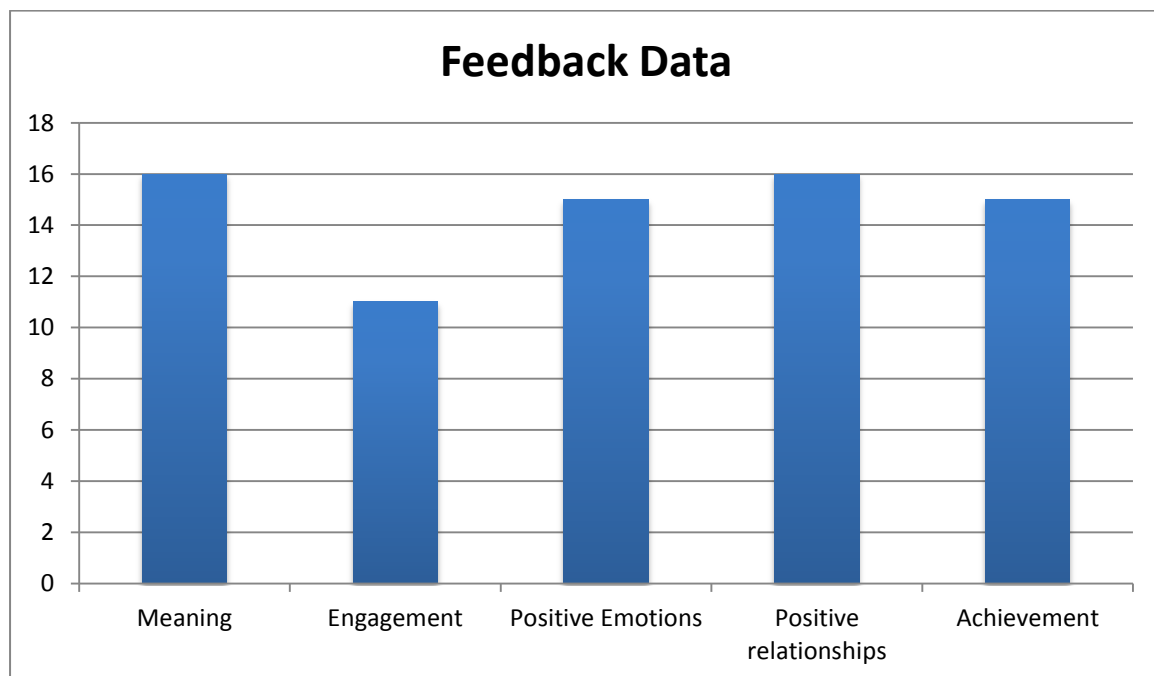


**Evidence:**

Five specific qualities were presented to participants during round table feedback sessions. The evidence gathered from the 3 cohorts within 1 field/agency continued to be identified in subsequent interviews with other agencies and individuals. This has confirmed that of the 5 factors, the three most frequently identified in order of importance were:

- a) Meaningful relationships
- b) Positive emotions
- c) A sense of Meaning

This does not suggest that engagement and achievement were not valued but perhaps more that it highlighted the sense of “group” that participants identified with.



**Observations:**

The timing (2012-2013) in which evidence was gathered was particularly intense and took place at a time when government cuts were a significant challenge, and a climate of financial uncertainty was prevalent for many organisations across industries and regional locations. Coupled with this is an ongoing subjectivity in our personal interpretation of what resilience is and how and from whom it is attained. The participants feedback ranged from passionate conviction in their group’s resilience, to criticisms of its absence. It is intentional that the following observations are phrased in the positive and is provided as such to give insight into the areas in which our strengths lie and the areas in which we need to be vigilant in order to stay or become resilient.

Participants demonstrated strong views not only on their desire for their group to become more resilient but more for their relationship within their groups to be functioning as well as they can. Participants did not view getting along as always being in agreement and expected that difficulties could and would arise with their group, but that as a group they and their group leadership would manage those times effectively.

*“Groups that generally get on well and are close – not just as a result of training and turning out together, but also because they are close socially”*

In describing their idea of a resilient group many participants draw parallels with the notion of mateship, of friendship and of the vital roles that trust, respect and effort played.

*“Having mates around gives you strength to keep going”*

*“Part of a “family” and supported by them, people you can turn to”*

*“Positive relationships provide an opportunity to build trust”*

*“Negative- people may overstep others personal boundaries because they are “mates”. This can decrease resilience.”*

Comments reflected on the correlation of bonds that are formed during formal and informal contact. This implies that groups who interact well outside of operational contact will engage better when involved in operational activities, when compared with those groups who do not engage in activities outside of operational responsibilities.

*“I know you’ve got my back (how we each operate and what our capabilities are)”*

The importance of a shared understanding of commitment also arose as a key ingredient that participants viewed as being an area that needed to be carefully managed to ensure that individuals contribution are sustainable and that workloads were as evenly distributed as possible.

*“Part of a team – need to support one another”*

This is a challenge which remains for many workplaces regardless of the industry in which they operate. It is however important when considering the balance needed between our care of self, our care of group and our care of community. Inadvertently these areas will influence our ability to maintain our resilience.

Participants viewed these concerns as being entangled in some ways with the group members expectations; particularly when joining the group but also through the group’s ongoing interactions. This was another area in which solid links emerged between the views of existing research and the views from first responders on the ground.

Participants felt that more can be done to give direction and intention to our on the ground understanding of being a resilient group and mental health and that a greater range of tools that can be easily implemented are needed.

*“I don’t think my brigade really does this. We have very occasional social events and the brigade is very political and divided in general. Plus, after challenging or traumatic events, there is very little (if any) debriefing.”*

*“If volunteers are resilient and well supported, they are less likely to suffer low mood, depression, PTSD and the like following these incidents. In the long term, it means having a fully functional brigade with enthusiastic members who are happy and willing to train and turn out.”*

### **Strategies which support emergency service groups to take ownership of their own resilience:**

This area of research provided an opportunity to both explore options and to identify existing influences. It also clarified that many brigade/unit based non-operational activities directly contribute to group resilience, and particularly those activities we traditionally consider informal play a significant role in creating healthy bonds between members and their groups.

Historically we have identified areas such as training, skills maintenance and operational success as being of high value to group efficiency and cohesion. These practices are indeed protective and valuable influences on our resilience but informal BBQ’s and social catch up are equally nourishing when thinking of our access to strategies we as groups can implement.

Understanding how long term bonds are formed and maintained highlighted that we should not underrate the importance of these times and the ways in which socializing contributes to our trust, empathy and understanding of each other.

The importance that research participants placed on meaningful relationships and positive emotions confirmed that giving priority to these activities is valued by members and from a psychological perspective, these are conducive social climates in which to build protective influences and equally, to maintain them.

When thinking of strategies which support brigades/units to “take ownership”, the example of CFA member engagement department is a great example. This department created a range of tools which members can implement to engage a range with their communities. Perhaps more importantly, the tools created for community and member engagement are diverse, inclusive and present options which different personality types can engage with. Creating a similar resource kit to support group resilience would be a valuable addition.

In the views of participants, our skills in preparing for crisis, the value of simulated training and the types of training which can be simulated could be broadened to also include communications, conflict resolution and culture change skills. Increasing our members understanding of communication and conflict resolution approaches can teach us to be more familiar with signs of distress in our own groups.

## **SAFECOM South Australia.**

SAFECOM is the South Australian Fire and Emergency Services Commission, and predominately provides corporate services to the MFS, CFS and SES agencies. Part of Jane Abdilla's role encompasses psychological support for members across each of these agencies.

I was keen to understand more about the SPAM (Stress Prevention and Management) program and the ways in which this program is supporting resilience in emergency services members.

The SPAM program supports CFS SES and VMR volunteers by providing a range of critical incident support mechanisms but of particular interest to me is the approaches and support mechanisms which SPAM employs in pre incident training sessions (PITs).

This approach was also reflected in the aspects in which OH&S staff embraced the SPAM program, and OH&S training was expected to address both physical and psychological impacts. The SPAM program is actively promoted through all levels of the respective agencies. This is contributing towards creating a culture which empowers members to recognise and respond to "not being ok".

By enabling these skills in individuals there is a flow on effect that supports group cultures to also be able to respond more effectively if group members need additional support.

### **What I learnt:**

SES in SA has recently revised their operational structure and has included a broader focus on a range of people skills as a part of their district managers training. In the future, managers will be supported to have a better understanding of Psychological First Aid (PFA). This was also encouraged and facilitated for first responder leadership roles. It is hoped that funding will be sought to enable PFA training to occur.

Further, District Officers in NSW SES have KPI commitments to ensure that the SPAM program is known and that members are aware of the SPAM team and the support they have to offer. Cadets who join the SES also have information about the SPAM program and aspects of PIT are included in their induction, orientation and preliminary training.

Brochures and promotional materials were simple, easy to remember and eye catching. The acronym used was also easy to remember and raised awareness in a supportive and non-confrontational manner.

By incorporating these types of psychological awareness skills at the beginning of volunteer and staff experiences, it enhances the likelihood that generational change will be effected and those cultures which may, in the past have not placed value on people skills will evolve to not only view these skills as valuable but this will also contribute to members having a greater capacity to implement the skills needed.

## How is PIT (Pre-Incident Training) implemented?

NSW SES – Peer Support Department

Again the subject of measuring group resilience can be viewed as difficult to measure in numerical terms only.

Indicators such as the following play a role in how resilience can be understood:

- the units pride in their own environment
- the clarity of individuals in understanding their roles within the unit
- ability to embrace diversity in meaningful ways
- level of compassion/empathy within the unit leadership
- climate and style of communication within the unit
- ways in which contribution is recognized
- manner in which members were able to nurture themselves and each other
- ability to show vulnerability
- access to resources
- how self-determined they are as a unit.

By developing more conscious skill sets in these areas members are better equipped to recognize signs and indicators that fellow members may need more support or may be struggling. Incorporating these skills in overall training can also be seen to enhance a culture within units that does not view psychological/emotional distress as a weakness or affliction but simply as part of being human and an inherent risk of what emergency first responders are exposed to.

Much of the feedback that has emerged from members attending the PIT training has occurred during the sessions. More experienced members commented that the session provided information they “wish they had learnt 20 years ago”. Members also reflected that the information learnt in PIT sessions had value in many aspects of their lives not just in managing the emotional and psychological risks associated with emergency first response roles.

Skills maintenance sessions are run by Peer support leaders on a bi-annual basis and this is important, in my view, on several levels. The opportunity for members to revisit this learning semi regularly is on par with our need to continue to refresh our skills and knowledge in physical first aid and by establishing a 2 yearly routine it gives a similar priority to the learning that we hold for physical wellbeing. Delivering semi regular PIT refresher courses could also support facilitators and program management to incorporate new developments/approaches in Psychological/Emotional wellbeing.

Sessions included participant lead small group work and developed strategies around accepted influences on group and relationship behavior but importantly these sessions draw from the ideas and thoughts of the members. This supports not only good facilitation practices but addresses key areas of adult learning principles in relevance, motivation and ownership of the learning.

PIT training has now been delivered within the NSW SES for 10 years.

### **Further learning:**

As with many learning outcomes, members preconceived ideas of mental/emotional wellbeing and of resilience were found to be key influences on their ability to embrace and engage the learning. We know that reprogramming a person's understanding can be more complex than to develop that same understanding for the first time. Practices and perceptions of members, who had previous experience with other emergency services agencies, were also an influence on their expectations and perceptions of what constituted mental/emotional wellbeing in their roles with SES.

### **Interview with Victoria Police – Member Support**

What I wanted to understand better:

What are the protective and enhancing influences that help Victoria Police members to experience a sense of belonging to the group?

The purpose of the learning sought and gathered from Victoria Police was to gain a simple overview of the "Resilience at work" program and some of the protective influences that contribute to member sense of belonging. The study does not give opinion or examination of the full scope of influences of member resilience nor the overall mental health strategies of the agency. Information was provided by member support staff and not by sworn members.

I sought to understand in general terms some of the approaches and systems that support group resilience. The development of the "Resilience at work" program is a particularly important example of a clearly defined practice and mechanism, one which had captured the qualities of resilience in an emergency service specific context. This has helped to enhance an understanding of some of the ways in which individual members of emergency service groups can be supported to maintain their own sense of belonging both in the company of their team members and also in the absence of the group.

Victoria Police members must be seamlessly capable of operating in groups that may vary from small to large numbers of personnel. This speaks of a high level of flexibility and an adaptive sense of belonging to groups in transient numbers. This may be particularly valuable when considering other emergency service groups that do not meet together on daily or even weekly basis such as remote volunteer brigades.

This also gave a reflection of the type of desirable skills, behaviours and factors which contribute to immediate sub group integration which needs to take place during large scale emergency events and in cohesive collaboration. For example strike team events where workloads don't just include a spectrum of natural and man-made threats but also include significant organisational/administrative requirements.



### **What I learnt:**

**1)** That a strong influence on the individuals' sense of belonging to the group is supported by the social connections experienced by members in their workplace relationships. It supported timely implementation of collaborative action and helped members to think as one organisation and therefore as the wider group.

This ability to remain task focussed can be seen as a protective factor which of itself would contribute to minimising mental distress, better utilising precious decision making time and encourage a more rapid mental assessment of the situation.

**2)** That the influence of group culture can be equally informed by task and purpose as by geographical commonality. This is important in understanding the group motivation of a range of emergency service groups and gave more insight into some of the influence shared experience provides the group itself.

For Example: Where there is a strong influence for rural fire brigades to be motivated by a desire to protect their "home" areas, a strong sense of identity also influences groups that exist to serve particular tasks. This appears takes place within all emergency service agencies and their internal groups, whether referring to operational or administrative groups. For example; crime specific police departments, member engagement and welfare support departments as well as locally focussed volunteer groups.

Understanding these different purposes that groups exist to address showed a strong correlation with my earlier feedback results and further supported the understanding of the importance that groups place on unified direction and achievements. It also further supported the evidence which emerged that highlighted the importance of diversity within groups and the role that more senior members play in helping newer member to adapt to challenges and to help to define valued attitudes and behaviours.

This can be seen to enable greater empathy towards each other and to create natural bonding through sharing experiences in which individuals overcame adversity. In considering the types of challenges that emergency service groups face this should be viewed as an important aspect to the overall resilience of a group.

As with the other emergency service agencies interviewed the strategies which supported group resilience could be found in both embedded factors within wider organisational protocol and systems as well as in more specific approaches and activities. Strategies which support group resilience included "Resilience at work" program.

This program provided collaborative activities and strategies which worked directly with units and stations to identify and enhance group cultures which placed value on group identity by supporting units/stations to clarify and unify the groups own sense of identity and the behaviours and values that group members placed importance on. Most importantly the program is able to take that information and actively work with groups to put these intentions into actions and approaches that groups could sustain, implement easily and which reflected and operated in a complimentary manner with the values and approaches of the whole organisation/agency.

## **Resilience Assessment and Actions:**

Of specific interest were the type of tools and resources available to measure a group's resilience. This is an area in which the following interview was highly valuable through identifying gaps in existing resources, identifying existing tools and understanding how to understand the differing types of information that can be gained when examining resilience in a psychosocial context.

### **Torrens Resilience Institute; Adelaide – Professor Kristine Gebbie.**

#### **Research Questions:**

- 1 Are there existing strengths based group resilience assessment models that may be adapted to emergency service groups?
- 2 What best practice psychological strategies are needed in generic pre- incident resilience primary action plans?
- 3 What are the contexts required for pre- incident resilience primary action plans, in order for them to be applied by a range of emergency service groups?
- 4 What is the scope of interpretation needed to accommodate a range of emergency service group perceptions and values?
- 5 What strategies are needed to support organizational implementation and integration?
- 6 What information dissemination strategies will enhance a groups' ability to implement pre-incident resilience assessment and action tools?

#### **Findings of the research questions:**

Questions 1: Are there existing strengths based group resilience assessment models that may be adapted to emergency service groups?

What already exists? Community based resilience assessment tools do exist and the Torrens resilience institute toolkit was an example of a comprehensive and easily engaged tool that addressed this need at a community level.

To a lesser extent there are also resilience assessment tools used to help understand aspects of the resilience of military forces which while being defense specific also presented an example of the type of information the tool sought to assess and gave examples of the desired attributes needed for military groups to be resilient.

What do not yet exist are specific assessment tools to measure the resilience of emergency service groups.

This is important because we may subjectively view ourselves as resilient, but this is different to knowing that we are and perhaps more importantly knowing which areas are greater in strength and which areas need more work. This to a large extent can be seen to encompass both our confidence and our competence to function well as a group and thus be more effective under duress.

What would assessment tools would need to encompass?

- 1 Connectivity of the group.
- 2 Awareness of threat; this should be viewed as threats to group cohesion rather, than operational/response threat. Threats to group cohesion included the level of familiarity group members have of each other strengths and reactions through their training and drill practice. Individuals who may not train regularly with the group are not as built in to the group dynamic and may be less familiar with actions and roles that are required of them. Training regularly with all group members helps to establish our understanding of the group's norms.
- 3 Planning process and problem solving.
- 4 Self-efficacy.
- 5 Resources.

Question 2: What best practice psychological strategies are needed in generic pre- incident resilience primary action plans?

When investigating the best practice psychological strategies, it can be said that this area of learning did not highlight specific strategies, but did identify what the key focus outcomes are that strategies would need to address. These included:

- a) Strategies which support group cohesion.
- b) Strategies which manage conflict resolution.
- c) Strategies which identify threats to group dynamics.
- d) Strategies which empower individuals within the group to remain connected.
- e) Strategies which identify the importance of regular training and practice.

Question 3 & 4: What are the contexts required for pre- incident resilience primary action plans, in order for them to be applied by a range of emergency service groups? What is the scope of interpretation needed to accommodate a range of emergency service group perceptions and values?

Contexts which presented differences included organizational language: Brigades, Stations, and Units. Further it was evident that the move towards "all agencies all hazards" approach lent a commonality to the ways in which preparedness, response and recovery were phrased and structured.

Emergency Services while having different organizational language did show commonality in several respects:

- a) First responder groups had task specific roles both within and as a group
- b) First responder groups had a sense of group identity which was meaningful to the group and should be preserved in healthy ways
- c) Groups were facing and overcoming similar challenges in managing expectations, conflict, leadership and group capacity/capability
- d) Groups valued similar motivations in being emergency service personnel
- e) Individual agencies strategic intent incorporated the key influences of resilience throughout policies and procedure in both embedded and distinct ways

## Question 5: What strategies are needed to support organizational implementation and integration?

The pursuit by emergency services as an industry to embrace the principles of resilience has shown that at an organisational level, significant progress has been made. The core values of resilience are now extensively embedded in numerous aspects of both policy and procedure; this was evident through all the agencies visited.

While it is a subjective view, I believe that systems and procedures are also developing in ways that both value emotional and mental wellbeing and which are actively seeking to enhance these strengths in the general membership. Several agencies have harnessed the skills of welfare departments and are engaging their contribution to achieve preparedness outcomes rather than “damage control” as may have been seen to be the case in the past.

The sheer volume of collective work being undertaken to develop resilient emergency service personnel is a testament to the organisations desire to support first responder resilience, and as an industry we are better placed to implement resilience assessment tools and action plans than in my opinion, we have ever been before.

At a district, regional, organisational and societal level the importance of resilience and indeed emotional and mental wellbeing has gathered momentum. Much like any practice which is new to the learner we are increasing our collective awareness and the practice of information sharing not only between agencies but also between disciplines of academia. This is enhancing our ability to become unconsciously competent in these areas.

### **Understanding evidence:** CFA Research and Evaluation Department

In undertaking both the research and interviews within this study a range of considerations emerged regarding understanding evidence through an emergency service context but also in the nature of interpreting and measuring subjective information. Results presented Qualitative and Quantitative evidence and it is notable that this blend of insight has been given greater value at the highest levels of organisations as is seen in the “ Developing an evidence based decision making culture. CFA 2013”

This interview gave a clearer insight into how the emergency services industry is broadening its perceptions of evidence and the diverse interpretations through which we measure evidence. Learning gained through this discussion reinforced that Resilience will remain fluid in our personal and group interpretation and validated that it is difficult to capture something that differs from one person or group to another.

Conversely this discussion further validated the notion that while we do not all rate different behaviours in equal measure, there are shared values and behaviours that we can consider vital to good group functioning.

This was further exemplified by the themes and comments contributed by research participants who both identified some of the differences in views and provided evidence which highlighted some of those commonalities.

Question 6: What information dissemination strategies will enhance a groups ability to implement pre-incident resilience assessment and action tools?

Having a self-assessment tool would enable groups to identify where they already have areas of strength and ability, and identify areas that may need to be enhanced. This would also provide a validated structure for groups to informally learn more about good mental health strategies. In order to support such learning, we need to provide information in a manner in which groups and individuals can more easily engage with the information

As resilience is understood to be both fluid and having common denominators, the value of having contextualized assessment and action would support adult learning principles of relevance and meaning by providing the following;

- a) Information which is customized to emergency services using industry specific language
- b) Identifying influences which support resilience in common terms
- c) Providing a platform from which desirable behaviors/skills become familiar and expected

First responders frequently show a high degree of kinesthetic/visual learning style, and those strategies that use visual stimulus and action based outcomes could be more easily embraced and implemented than strategies that do not have a strong visual component. While it is inappropriate to assume all first responder are kinesthetic/visual learners, indicators suggest a higher percentage of this learner style in emergency service first responders can be observed. By utilizing best practice applications of information dissemination we can also customized both assessment and action plan tools to accommodate varying levels of literacy and learning styles.

Indicators of kinesthetic/visual learning styles which can be observed in many first responders, examples include:

- a) Comfortable with hands on skills sets
- b) High degree of self-actuation
- c) Often self-reliant
- d) Tendency toward independent personality traits
- e) High degree of self-efficacy
- f) Frequency of trades backgrounds in volunteer responders

By pursuing the development and implementation of assessment/action tools that address group resilience we would also build on a selection of similar tools used to assess many aspects of first response such as physical first aid, response activities and psychological support.

## **Summary of the key findings:**

In summarising the learning gained during this study key areas captured the different influences in which emergency service group increased and/or maintained their own resilience

### **Member Wellbeing**

Reoccurring patterns emerged from the preliminary stage of researching theories around Psychological Contracts, Psychological First Aid and cultural competence. These themes continued to be reiterated during the gathering of feedback and subsequent interviews with agencies. What this showed is that our ability to take care of ourselves and each other is a key determinant in how we increase and maintain our resilience.

### **Member Engagement**

The ability to get along with each other is a fundamental and generic quality of resilience. This was not an expectation that conflict would not occur but did highlight areas in which the importance of both being civil to one another and allowing room for arguments/discourse to be resolved presented challenges and opportunities.

The greater amount of participant feedback was centred on this area. This was also coupled with the importance of having social connectivity adding a weight to the influence this can have on our group wellbeing. However in terms of the role that engaging with each other plays in group resilience, this was also an area which some of our greatest strengths and contributions to our group's resilience lay.

Those units/brigades that have regular social/informal contact, who get together often both in their whole group and with each other as individuals could be viewed as better equipped to face adversity and are creating a climate in which long term bonds are built.

It is appropriate and indeed critical that as an industry we have established codes of conduct. These create acceptable boundaries for what is not acceptable. It is equally important that we are able to give definition to what is ok and what is helpful.

The vast amount of work that has been taking place through the emergency services industry over the last 4 years has provided a selection of sound tools across different agencies to give members a better understanding of these areas and directions on the ways in groups can action a range of issues. Individually these tools address key areas of risk in a preventative yet easily engaged with strategies. At the time of writing of this report such programs were not yet available to all agencies, but plans to more broadly apply them were underway.

### **Group Values**

The concept of mateship, while not being exclusive to Australians, is a core feature of our national sense of identity. This is a value with which we identify very strongly and it informs our ideas of friendship, trust, compassion, empathy and of being there when we are most needed.

When thinking of mateship as a concept we are naturally drawn to the importance of trust, respect and effort. This has stood us as a nation through times of crisis that goes back much further than our relatively new ideas of resilience in a psycho/social context. This desire to both protect and be protected by the people we trust extends through relationships, our sense of connectedness and the ways in which we respect and connect with each other.

We as a nation have been proactive when our mates are physically under threat but it has not always been viewed as culturally appropriate to intervene when discourse or difficulties arise between group members, nor to be interfering when individuals are showing signs of mental or emotional distress. Rather as a mark of our respect for their privacy we have taken a “mind our own business” approach.

As our national and international understanding and appreciation of the importance of good emotional and mental health increases it is also appropriate that this aspect of mateship is also maturing.

Understanding the need for mates to be helped in these times is not outside our scope of experience but knowing how to intervene and what sort help to implement can be much harder. Developments in societal views on what constitutes mental and emotional strength are also creating a shift in the ways we view our role and it has been timely for us as an industry to incorporate these values in our everyday work.

By utilising conflict resolution and peer support skills in working with groups to build skill bases and group cohesion could aid the development of cultures that not only place a higher value on good mental health but would also be better informed about mental health in general.

### **Human Resources**

This area showed me the mutual influential relationships that exist between the role that agency human resources departments and brigades/units play in managing member recruitment and retention programs and in managing member expectations. It highlights that organisations and groups on the ground were very much at the mercy of each other in how issues around human resources were contributing to resilience.

The ability groups had to manage a range of expectations and motivations of their members also provided opportunities for relationships to be better supported and to minimise sources of misunderstanding, disappointment and potential conflict. This area brought several other influences into play and shed light on the importance of leadership communication skills, embracing succession planning and the balance of operational and psychosocial skill sets needed to manage groups of people well. Ultimately it was the influence we have on each other within our groups that had the most direct impact on the ways in which groups’ management of human resources contributed to our overall resilience.

### **Pre incident Training and Skills Maintenance**

This area was very mixed in the learning that stemmed from the study and lent a degree of extremes to the evidence. The work that was being undertaken through the SPAM, Pre Incident mental health

training and Psychological First Aid training is exemplary. The principles and skills that will be developed by implementing these programs correlate to best practice psychosocial theories.

Conversely groups who were either not choosing to fully engage the programs or did not have access to these resources felt the difficulties their groups were grappling with keenly. These views felt that the challenges within their group dynamics stemmed in many ways from a lack of skills in understanding or appreciation of the influence of good psychosocial practices and that this in turn was a detriment to their groups' resilience.

As the study was focussed on pre-incident factors, the intricacies of rebuilding resilience following trauma were not investigated. In light of the now vast areas of SE Australia that have been impacted over recent years by high intensity fire, flood and storm events and the sheer volume of people and districts affected it is important to acknowledge that the issues we are facing in supporting pre incident training are complex and delicate.

Throughout the discussions on pre incident training and psychosocial resources, I was struck by the similarities between the heightened pace of learning that is going on in these subjects and the evolution we have experienced in technology. We are entering a stage where many younger or already qualified individuals entering the emergency services industry will take for granted that these subjects must and will be applied. The learning around these areas is increasingly embedded as a standard competency in many fields of study and is further addressed in wider mental health and OH&S public education campaigns.

Over time this will improve our capacity to increase and maintain our own resilience, however, during the handover period a need to up skill will continue to prevail across many industries.

Furthermore the onus to become as proficient as we can in these areas cannot be worn only at the top. How well we are able to integrate these practices on the ground will also support our ability to preserve our sense of group identity, be applied in ways that enhance group culture and bring a sense of meaning that is borne of personal ownership.

### **Community Engagement**

The subject of community engagement is often focussed on how well, we as emergency service groups engage with the community and the flow on benefits of this. Engaging with community does have direct and beneficial flow on effects that support our resilience as groups from accessing sources of social capital, the mitigation of risk through education, access to much needed donations and the emotional value of having our efforts appreciated by community members.

This study was aimed at somewhat a selfish view not of the benefits to community through our engagement with them but a broader view of what the benefits are to us. What emerged informally was how well a community engages with us is equally important and includes many factors which are not in our control as a group nor as an industry.

Community groups who engaged well with emergency services were a vital source of resilience for some of the above mentioned reasons but those community groups who did not engage well were a



direct source of distress on the group and a detriment to groups' desire and willingness to engage. In turn, fuelling us v them mentalities that felt isolated, unappreciated and unsupported. This is of particular concern for groups who live, work and volunteer in those areas as this sense of being undervalued helped to isolate members from their own sources of social connectivity.

Finding acceptable boundaries around what the community can reasonably expect from emergency service groups would help to give guidance to community groups and emergency service groups, and help to give a more balanced influence on the effects communities can have on us.

### **Research & Evaluation**

It has been encouraging to learn of the ways in which agencies are finding more creative ways to understand and value evidence and the specialist areas of study that are being applied to enhance our collective abilities and skills.

Within our groups, our capacity to look for solutions and to learn from our mistakes directly informs our ability to problem-solve and in turn to face challenges. This also deems that a balance be struck between accelerated evolution and the preserving of those protective influences that have served us well in the past. Implementing qualitative approaches to this enables us as an industry to broaden our understanding of opportunities, challenges and solutions

### **Social Capital**

The strength and quality of first responder group relationships and their social connectivity within that group has emerged consistently as being crucial to our overall resilience. Understanding the motivation that members have in joining an emergency service group sheds insight into how important meaningful relationship and sense of belonging can be in a person's desire to join.

This brings into play not only our interpersonal connections with each other but also the relationships we bring into that group.

Member's families play a key role in this and the relationship between first responder groups and their families brings a fundamental source of social capital. The role that families play in first responder group resilience, while being largely under investigated, often provides critical sources of support. From more obvious aspects such as assisting in fundraising activities through to role they play in informal debriefing outcomes, families input cannot be underestimated.

### **Skills and knowledge:**

Response experience and expertise has been identified by many members as being a contributing quality to our resilience as first responders. This was viewed not only as a quality of individuals but also of the collective experience and expertise of first responder groups.

Equally valuable are the skills and knowledge we gain in preparedness activities both in operational training and in our access to psychological preparedness tools such as psychological first aid training, pre incident training, conflict resolution skills and familiarity with team and morale building activities.

Having awareness of what builds resilience and also of what presents threats to our group resilience enables groups to take preventative actions and to better foresee areas which may undermine even the most resilient of groups.

When considering that many aspects of our groups' resilience have emerged as being contributed in unconsciously competent ways it is important for groups to be able to bring those behaviors and attitudes into more clearly identified forms. By recognizing what is working well groups are better positioned to role model these qualities and to develop cognitive strategies that help newer and older members to develop a culture which values these.

### **Resources**

The resources that emergency service groups have access to are a critical factor which will influence a group's ability to increase and maintain their own resilience. When considering resources in the context of group resilience several key areas are pertinent. It can be argued that in some situations, unlimited funding can be allocated with very few demonstrable results achieved.

However this does not account for the full scope of influence different types of resources and access to resources has on groups' ability to fully develop their own potential and increase or maintain their own resilience.

The question which must be addressed when considering resources support is about prioritizing needs through a broad spectrum framework. Theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Psychological needs are directed towards the individual but bring a reference also for groups.

The need for groups to have a sound financial base from which to operate, to have a sense of safety in their relationship with agencies and to know that their views are not only valued but also acted upon are critical factors in a group's ability to self-actuate. Broader socio economic theories also point to the effects that are borne of poor financial support and the impact that has on humans' ability to self-determine their outcomes, and has a direct impact on their physical and emotional wellbeing.

Inadequate funding has a direct impact on group morale and the sense of value members' perceive is placed on their contribution and can severely impact the relationships between groups and the support staff who work behind the scenes. It compromises the level of support that agencies can provide and fuels "us vs them" mentalities between first responders and agency staff. In the frustration that is engendered by poor resource support it can be easy to forget that the buck does not stop at the agency but rather with the sources that provide emergency service budget allocations.

## **Conclusions**

The research has consolidated and enhanced my knowledge of what resilience is in an Australian context, of the variety of conscious and unconscious ways in which we increase and maintain our own resilience as groups, the ways in which our agency's policies and procedures are creating a sound platform for us to increase and maintain our resilience and the areas in which we can make improvements as an industry. I have gained a better understanding of what we are already doing and through the process of the research have had access to examples of actions/approaches that with the right support we can all implement on the ground.

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