

# Conflicts between Emergency Services Volunteering and Family Life: A Volunteer Couple Perspective

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## INTRODUCTION

Declining volunteer numbers have caused emergency service agencies to consider factors impacting adversely on volunteers and their families. Issues relating to work-family balance are important in paid work contexts (Grzywacs & Carlson, 2007), and also impact on emergency services volunteers (Cowlshaw, Evans & McLennan, 2008). However, there remains a lack of research available to inform agencies on strategies to minimise conflicts between volunteering and family. As Stage 2 of a research program on the families of volunteers, this study sought feedback from volunteer couples on their perceptions of conflict between emergency services volunteering and family.

## PROCEDURE

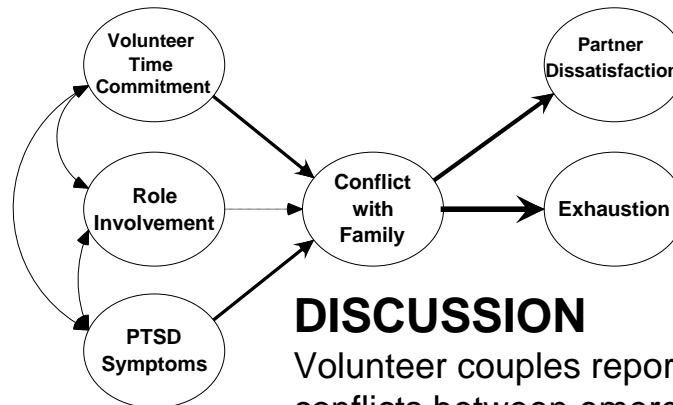
Questionnaires were completed by 98 couples in which one partner (or both) was an emergency services volunteer. These included volunteers from fire (n= 85), SES (n= 4); and ambulance (n= 7) services.

## RESULTS

The most commonly endorsed (*strongly agree and agree*) sources of conflict between volunteer and family roles are shown in the following table.

Type of Conflict	%
Worried or anxious when my partner is attending emergencies	58
Sleep gets disturbed when my partner responds to emergencies during the night	56
I have to make up for my partner by doing extra work around the home	56
Unpredictable callouts cause him/her to cancel planned family activities	53
My partner has to miss family activities due to time volunteering	39
Our family often seems to take a lower priority to emergency service activities	35

Conflicts between work and family have consequences for both volunteers and their agencies, and this possibility was examined using Structural Equation Modelling analyses. These relations are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1**  
**SEM indirect effect model of volunteer-family conflict**

Note: Line thickness indicates relationship strength. Dotted line not significant

## DISCUSSION

Volunteer couples reported common conflicts between emergency services volunteering and family (e.g., anxiety about safety). The severity of these conflicts were predicted by several factors (eg. volunteer time commitment), and were associated with outcomes such as partner dissatisfaction. These findings suggest that agencies may be able to reduce volunteering / family conflict, for example by providing induction packages for the families of new volunteers. Agency endeavours to minimise such conflicts are likely to reap rewards in the form of greater volunteer and family satisfaction and reduced resignation rates.

## REFERENCES

Cowlshaw, S., Evans, L., & McLennan, J. (2008). Families of rural volunteer firefighters. *Rural Society*, 18, 17-25.  
Grzywacs, J., & Carlson, D. (2007). Conceptualising work-family balance: Implications for practice and research. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 9, 455-471.