

# FIRE NOTE

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## KEEPING YOUR RECRUITS: BOOSTING VOLUNTEER RETENTION

**During 1995–2003, total volunteer firefighter numbers across Australia declined appreciably, because of complex economic and demographic changes in Australian society (McLennan & Birch, 2005). While most agencies report that these declines in total numbers appear to have been halted, and in some cases reversed, there is little room for complacency. There is concern about likely negative impacts of climate change in large areas of Australia on future volunteer numbers (Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner, 2008): an increase in the frequency of severe weather events plus generally drier conditions will likely result in more frequent large fires, and thus greater demands on volunteers' time. Furthermore, it seems likely that economic uncertainties and concerns (such as rising fuel costs) may deter many from volunteering with fire agencies in the future (McLennan, 2008).**

There are indications that most agencies have reviewed and improved their approaches to recruiting new volunteers (e.g., McLennan, Birch, King & O'Loughlin, 2007). However, in order to maintain adequate numbers of volunteers to meet community protection needs agencies must not only recruit, but also retain, their volunteers. In 2007/8 resignation rates for Australia's larger volunteer-based fire agencies ranged from 6.7 percent to 8.3 percent, with a weighted mean resignation rate across agencies of 7.7 percent. In 2003, the corresponding figures were: 6.3 percent to 10.4 percent, with a weighted mean of 7.9 percent.

Seeking to boost volunteer retention is like examining a coin, there are two sides: one is concerned with identifying, and minimising, factors likely to lead to resignation; the other side is concerned with identifying, and maximising, factors which make volunteers

want to remain. The findings reported in this Fire Note were based on two studies; each investigated a different side of the volunteer firefighter retention coin. The first analysed exit surveys returned by former volunteers who had resigned. The aim was to identify the major reasons why the volunteers had resigned, distinguishing between 'avoidable' and 'unavoidable' reasons. The second study investigated determinants of volunteers' reported intentions to remain with the agency. The purpose of the research was to identify possible means by which volunteer-based fire agencies might boost retention of their volunteers.

### SUMMARY

Annual resignation rates for Australian volunteer-based fire agencies range from 6.7 percent to 8.3 percent of total volunteer memberships. The research reported involved two studies of volunteer retention. (1) Analyses of 396 exit survey returns from former volunteers found that reasons contributing to resigning were: Work/Family needs, 51%; Moved from the area, 38%; Age/Health issues, 28%; Dissatisfaction with the volunteer role, 25%. A major contributor to dissatisfaction was poor brigade climate. (2) A survey of 514 second-year volunteers found that higher levels of volunteer satisfaction, and thus intention to remain, were associated strongly with being a member of a well-led, inclusive, and harmonious brigade.

Overall, the findings indicated the need for agencies to: (a) distinguish unavoidable reasons for resigning (Moved; Age/Health) from potentially avoidable reasons (Work/family; Dissatisfaction); (b) balance demands on volunteers' time and the needs of their volunteers' work and family life; and (c) enhance the skills of brigade leaders.



## TWO RESEARCH PROJECTS

### Study 1 – Resignations

At the request of the South Australian Country Fire Service (CFS), 394 returns from 2,438 exit surveys mailed by CFS to former volunteers who resigned during the period December 2005 – December 2007 were analysed.

Respondents were 306 men (78%) and 88 women (22%); their median ages were 46 and 37 years, respectively. Median length of volunteer service was 10 years for men and 5.5 years for women. These percentages and median values resembled those of the overall CFS volunteer membership.

The exit survey questionnaire asked former volunteers to rate up to 5 of 12 listed possible reasons for resigning, on a 5-point scale: 1 = most important, 5 = least important.

### Research Outcomes - Resignations

Four clusters of reasons for resigning were identified (Figure 1):

1. Dissatisfaction with CFS volunteering: 25 percent nominated these as contributing reasons for resigning.
2. Age/Health Concerns: 28 percent of respondents nominated these as contributing reasons for resigning.
3. Work/Family Commitments: 51 percent of respondents endorsed these as contributing reasons for resigning.
4. Moved away from the district: 38 percent of respondents endorsed this as a contributing reason for resigning.

Agencies are necessarily limited in what they can do to significantly counter issues involved in clusters 3 and 4. Cluster 2 will prove difficult to address, as this requires attention to: volunteer workload issues; income and cost of living concerns; and socioeconomic pressures on families.

However, the makeup of Cluster 1 suggests that some resignations could potentially be avoided by improving effectiveness of volunteer leadership and management (Figure 1). This was confirmed by analysing written comments provided by the former volunteers about negative experiences associated with their volunteering. These were concerned mostly with poor brigade climate stemming from poor brigade leadership.

### Study 2 – Commitment to Remain

As part of CFA's New Member Tracking Project (McLennan, Birch, & King, 2006) 514 completed survey returns from current CFA volunteers who had been members for 12 months were analysed.

Respondents were 345 men (67%) and 176 women (33%). Their median age was 38 years.

The survey questionnaire asked the volunteers about their experiences in their brigade, time conflicts, perceived risks, limitations on activities, constraints and frustrations, benefits derived from their volunteering, satisfaction with volunteering, and strength of intention to remain a volunteer.

### Research Outcomes – Commitment to Remain

Perceived risks, time conflicts, limitations on activities, and constraints and frustrations, were not related to either level of satisfaction with volunteering, nor with intention to remain.

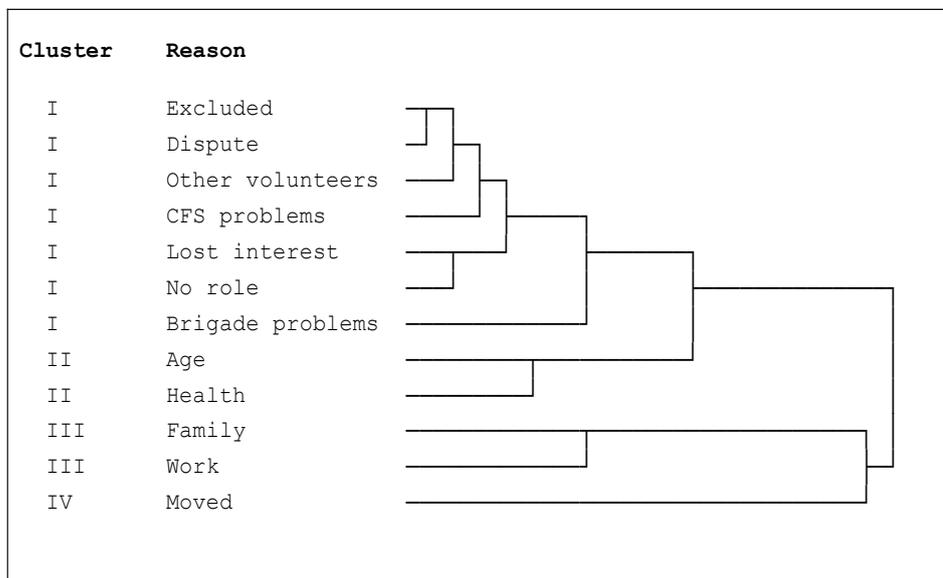
Brigade climate and leadership, and benefits of being a CFA volunteer, were found to be related strongly to satisfaction with volunteering, and level of satisfaction with volunteering was, in turn, linked strongly with intention to remain a CFA volunteer (Figure 2).

What is of considerable interest is that for these current volunteers in their second year of service, notionally 'negative' aspects of volunteering (risks, time conflicts, limitations, constraints and frustrations) were, apparently, not related to reported levels of satisfaction with being a CFA volunteer.

However, quality of brigade climate and leadership was a major determinant of satisfaction with volunteering (along with benefits derived from volunteering).

This is consistent with both common sense observations, and findings from much of the research on employee turnover: being a member of a well-led, inclusive, and harmonious volunteer brigade is associated strongly with higher levels of both satisfaction and commitment to remaining a volunteer.

Figure 1: This shows there are four (I - IV) main clusters of reasons for resigning. For example, age and health were closely related by the respondents. Similarly, family and work commitments were related. Moving away from the area, however, was not a reason strongly related to any other.



## KEY FINDINGS

Trying to boost volunteer retention is like studying a coin; there are two sides: one side is identifying, and minimising, factors leading to resignation; the other side is identifying, and strengthening, factors which make volunteers want to remain.

The evidence suggests strongly that enhancing the quality of brigade leadership both minimises avoidable reasons for resigning, and strengthens volunteers' commitment to remain.

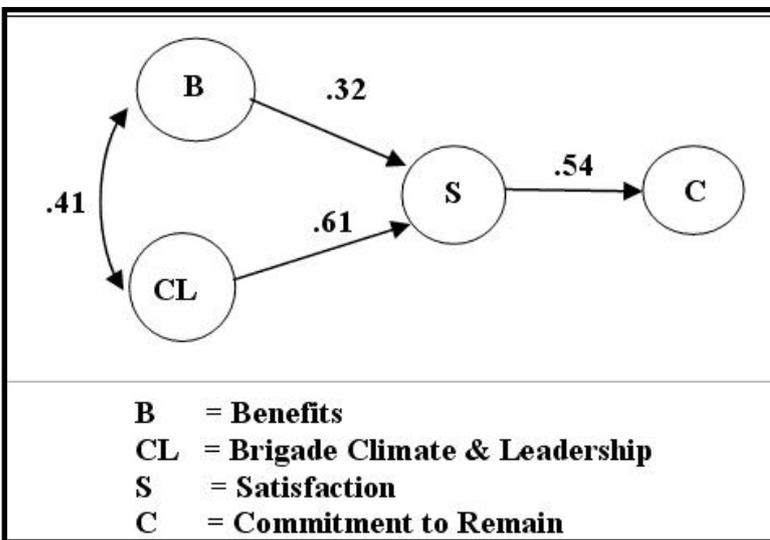


**HOW THE RESEARCH IS BEING USED**

These, and related findings from other joint agency/Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project research, have stimulated discussion within agencies' senior management groups and within Volunteer Associations' executives concerning: enhancing the quality of the volunteering experience; improving the effectiveness of brigade leadership; and lowering volunteer resignation rates.

Several agencies have reviewed, or are in the process of reviewing, their current training opportunities for volunteers to develop their people-management and leadership skills. Several agencies have also reviewed how they deliver volunteer management and support services to their volunteers in regions and districts.

Figure 2: Determinants of Intention to Remain (Commitment): Coefficients show the relative strengths of the link (0 – 1)



**END-USER VIEWS**

The Volunteerism Project has enabled fire agencies and volunteer associations to become more objective about fire and emergency service volunteer issues.

Through the Bushfire CRC work we now have a better picture of issues from the points of view of volunteers, their families, their employers and from the point of view of members of the community.

In particular, we have a greater understanding of the importance of retaining volunteers and maintaining good relationships with their employers.

The environment around us continues to change. This is partly attributed to drought and climate change, but also because of quite significant demographic change.

The importance of continuing to evaluate contemporary volunteer needs and attitudes to emergency service organisations and community service will increase, rather than decrease in the future.

**Euan Ferguson**  
 Chief Officer  
 Country Fire Service, South Australia

Volunteer churn is both disruptive to Brigades and an expensive process to manage.

These two studies have assisted CFA to focus its limited resources on the most effective way to retain volunteers, in particular leadership within Brigades.

The studies have also given CFA some health check indicators when looking at Brigades with a high turn over.

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## FURTHER DIRECTIONS

Further research with agencies will build upon the research findings base established thus far.

Priorities include:

- Identifying core skills for volunteers wanting to move into brigade leadership roles.
- Identifying key aspects of supervision of volunteers by career staff in regions and districts.
- Exploring ways in which working relationships among agencies' career staff and volunteer members can be more consistently positive.

## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

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

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Bushfire CRC is a national research centre in the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) program, formed in partnership with fire and land management agencies in 2003 to undertake end-user focused research.

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