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YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE EMERGENCY SERVICES: WORKING TOWARDS INCLUSIVE PARTNERSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

The 'Diversity and inclusion: building strength and capability' project identified the need for Emergency Management Organisations (EMOs) to develop a greater understanding of the communities they serve, and to look for ways to engage more effectively with the diverse nature of Australian communities.

The community aspect of the project introduced a new perspective for EMOs and the development of diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies by introducing the experiences of communities themselves. The research focused on two key groups: a refugee community in regional Victoria; and young people aged 18–25 years old. Findings from the young people's group informed the development of this resource.¹

Young people, 18–25 year olds, may not identify themselves as a diverse community. We define diversity as the way we differ and this age group has a low level of community participation with the emergency services.

Young people represent a unique challenge for EMOs, with low levels of community engagement. Their life stage of emerging adulthood and increasing independence, as well as their focus on study and/or work, present barriers to their community engagement. The changing nature of volunteering presents new opportunities for EMOs to engage with this age group and to develop inclusive partnerships.

The resource begins with an overview of what is important to young people, their areas of interest, and motivation to engage in their community. Communicating effectively and through their popular social media mediums is vital, and this resource provides an overview of how to engage with this age group online. The resource also provides strategies of how to find ways to work together, and the skills, attributes and capabilities young people bring to your organisation.

The resource has a practical focus, and provides links to organisations who have developed effective strategies to engage young people. Links to existing resources with checklists and more information about how to work with young people in your organisation are also provided. Young people have a lot to offer EMOs, but they are not necessarily aware of their own potential. Developing an understanding of young people's interests and motivation is important if you are to find ways to develop inclusive partnerships that are mutually beneficial.

'It's just how you make these links where people can see you have all of these capabilities that we would really love to have and this would be a great resource to have and maybe inspiring or making young people aspire to be part of these emergency services. Because for a lot of people, I'm generalising, I think people think they'd love to do it, but don't think they're capable. I have so much respect for people who are in the police or fire brigade and things, but I don't know if I could.' — Young female

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT A PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED, THEY WANT TO BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

Question 1: Do you understand what motivates young people to engage in their community?

What is important to young people

The environment – young people are global citizens. They care about climate change and the future of our planet.

Community – young people care about Australia and their local communities. It is a myth to think that young people are disinterested in their local area.

Active contribution is a key motivator for many young people who want to have their ideas and actions taken seriously.

Inclusive practices are preferred and expected by young people. They have grown up in a multicultural society, and have been taught to be inclusive of all – to value and respect diversity.

Cause issues – young people want to engage in ways that are cause or issues-based.

Bottom-up or top-down – some young people want to become active participants in their local community, while others are interested in the development of policy and programs at a systems level.

Active engagement – community participation better reflects young people's desire to be actively involved citizens in ways that are not traditional and less conventional.

What motivates young people to engage with community organisations

Connection and belonging – young people love being with friends and their peers.

Relationships – young people enjoy working collaboratively.

Social engagement – young people value being acknowledged, appreciated and socially engaged.

Skill development – young people are hungry to learn.

Future employment – young people see community participation as enhancing their employability.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth Report provides valuable insights into the extent and impact of young people's volunteering and social participation in Australia:

https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/youth_volunteering_evidence_review_0.pdf

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF VOLUNTEERING

Question 2: What does volunteering look like in your organisation? How open is the organisation to the changing nature of volunteering?

Current trends

18–25 year olds have the lowest level of participation in volunteering engagement at 25% (except for the over 75s). The 15–17 year age group are the most active volunteers, at 42%.²

Around 7% of volunteers engage with Emergency Management Services (EMS). Other community groups, including welfare, local council organisations and religious groups attract 22% of volunteers. Education and training have an 18% engagement, and sport and recreation have the highest level of participation at 37%.^{2,3}

Young people often have a negative view of volunteering, associating the concept with the performance of lower-level tasks.

Young people may feel constrained by the current operational structures, limited by traditional entry points as paid employees or volunteer roles.

Looking to the future, thinking strategically⁴

- Flexible volunteering strategies and models
- Spontaneous, shorter term and less formal post-disaster volunteering
- Digital and digitally enabled disaster volunteering
- Private sector involvement – employee or corporate volunteering
- Community-based disaster risk reduction (CBDRR).

Forces and trends that are impacting on volunteering with EMOs⁴

- Diverse and episodic volunteering pathways
- New communications technology
- Private sector involvement
- Government expectations and intervention in the voluntary sector – funding
- Constraints, regulatory requirements and increased demands.

Cockermouth Emergency Response Group is a CBDRR group established to ensure the community works together to be better prepared for flooding:

<https://www.cerg.org.uk>

LOOKING BEYOND THE STEREOTYPES AND ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

Question 3: Can you break down your stereotypes of young people and give them the opportunity to challenge their opinion of your organisation?

Challenging the stereotypes

Many young people learn about the EMS through their own experience of disaster or natural hazards, or through their primary school years, but there is little evidence of broader community engagement through their secondary school years or young adulthood.

The young people we spoke to consider their relationship with the EMS as a one-way engagement. They acknowledge the important work of EMS, but do not identify a role for themselves in building resilience and preparedness for future events.

Young people report a number of barriers to working with the EMS, including a lack of connection or understanding about their needs, and the expectations or role they could play in your organisation.

Young people are concerned that the EMS are stuck in their ways and reluctant to listen to a younger perspective.

Social connection and a sense of belonging are vital for young people, but they may not have strong links to a place-based community. At this stage of their lives, young people affiliate more with communities within communities (e.g. online, tertiary, youth, and sporting organisations).

Misunderstanding the behaviours, motivations, skills and capabilities of young people creates barriers that hinders their participation. Many Generation Zs are already changing the world, <https://www.fya.org.au/2019/10/07/2019-young-social-pioneers-participants/>.

‘I like working in a team and working with people. I get bored really easily, so I like to have a job that challenges me and would be different every day. Dealing with different people and different scenarios. There is always the positive; you get to help people, and things like that.’ — Young female

WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD YOU TARGET TO ENGAGE WITH YOUR ORGANISATION

It is difficult to be specific about the types of young people who will engage with the EMS, but there is evidence that the following are more likely:

- Young women
- Educated young people
- Young people from higher socioeconomic groups
- Confident young people who are already volunteering or engaged in their community.

‘If we have to do a rescue at work, it takes two of us to work together and talk to each other and communicate really effectively and get the rescue done properly. Not miss any steps, and make sure the customer, or the person we are rescuing, is okay and well looked after. I definitely think I have got good communication skills and I am able to work in a team, and able to take – not orders, but I can listen and be told what to do and I will do it.’ — Young female

A lack of engagement from other young people has also been attributed to:

- Low socioeconomic background – paid employment takes priority
- Life stage – moving from adolescence into adulthood, focusing on education and work
- Labour market – impacts on how and where young people look for employment, they are often in casual employment, with irregular shifts and limited availability for community participation
- Rural/urban migration – moving from rural locations to larger regional centres or urban environments for education or work.

Girls on Fire aims to address the lack of gender diversity in the NSW fire service, and build the capability of girls and young women to consider a career or voluntary position in the EMS:

<https://www.girlsonfire.com.au>

COMMUNICATING WITH GENERATION Z

Question 4: Do you know which social media platforms are the most popular with 18–25 year olds? They change, so it is important to keep up-to-date.

Young people are digital natives and love technology – it has been a part of their lives since birth. They find most of their information online, on the run, and often through their online networks. Engaging with the most appropriate social media platforms is essential, but there are other aspects to communicating with Generation Z (born 1995–2010).

Instant messaging

- They expect information to be instant and in the moment
- Messaging should be concise and visual – you have eight seconds to make an impact
- Young people will access the information from their phones or mobile devices, so messaging should be developed for a mobile experience
- Texting is a very effective way of conveying information, particularly when information is vital, such as bushfire updates, flood warnings, evacuate or stay messaging
- Choose the right social media platforms, the most popular platforms for Generation Z in 2020 are YouTube, Instagram and Facebook
- Emojis and GIFs (a short, animated picture, without sound) are relatable, fun and very popular, but are widely used to convey a message, although they can be misunderstood.

Developing a social media campaign

- Social media campaigns should be well thought out – think about your aims and what you want to achieve
- Videos and images are very effective means of communicating
- Messages should be genuine and relatable:
 - > Authenticity is very important
 - > Young people want to see your social responsibility in action
 - > Build a relationship with young people, don't just 'sell' your brand
- Young people want real people, real interactions and real human connection from their social media experiences
- They like to be entertained but also want to learn
- They are empowered by their values and beliefs, messages have to resonate beyond 'what it trending', and speak to their interests
- Personalised messaging has a greater chance of catching their attention.

Ambulance Victoria have created a series of 'Thank You, Victoria' videos across social media platforms. The latest says thank you to Victorians, opening with the 2019/20 bushfires and through the COVID-19 pandemic:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWj1oSB_Acc

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Question 5: Can you engage young people in your community to assist with your communication strategies? They are experts in keeping in touch online, so why not use their expertise.

There are so many barriers to understanding, and young people may misinterpret a message or instruction that appears clear to you. Why not trial important messaging with young people in your community before a disaster or crisis to ensure they will understand your message when timing is critical?

Young people are not a homogenous group – they do not all speak the same language. Understanding the diversity of your community is essential. The Centre for Multicultural Youth provide valuable resources of how to engage young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and multicultural communities.⁵

The way we use language is a product of our generation and the society we grow up in, so it might feel that young people in Australia today are speaking a different language to the one you use. The Urban Dictionary was developed to include slang and cultural words or phrases. It might surprise you, but there are over 2,000 new entries added to the dictionary every day.

The 2016 census showed that 49% of all Australians were born overseas or have one parent born overseas. Language and communication are not simply the art of learning words. Meaning and understanding are linked to culture, society and the lived experience of the individual.

Build relationships with youth groups and organisations. It is not possible to represent the breadth of diversity that exists in Australian communities, so building relationships with leaders in your community will open up communication channels with young people – particularly, but not exclusively, with young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds: <https://www.cmy.net.au/organisations-businesses/collaborate/> and Indigenous groups, and <https://kooariyouthcouncil.org.au>.

Young people engage with messaging developed specifically for their age group. While marketing strategies can be helpful, authenticity is vital.

The Royal Life Saving National Drowning Report (2019) recommended: ‘Increasing engagement with ethnic media to ensure that key messages are being disseminated effectively and in a culturally appropriate manner across multicultural communities’:

https://www.royallifesaving.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/25833/rlssa-ndr-2019-digital.pdf

FINDING WAYS TO WORK TOGETHER

Question 6: What role is there for young people in your organisation? Can you frame their engagement as community participation or working together rather than volunteering?

Initiatives that have proven to be successful with young people share a number of characteristics⁶:

- **Relevant and meaningful** – avoid task specific roles, young people like to think big and shape their future. Give them a problem and invite them to plan, develop and implement a solution.
- **Issues of concern** – young people are passionate about the environment, sustainability, environmental conservation, issues that concern them, and they see the same concern in your organisation.
- **Innovative and creative** – young people embrace change. Wherever possible, be open to their ideas of innovation and creativity, occupational health and safety allowing of course.
- **Youth-led projects** – young people are powerful agents of change and our future leaders. If they are passionate about a project, they bring with them an energy and desire to achieve.
- **Values and priorities** – young people have engaged with your organisation because it aligns with their values and priorities, but they will introduce new ways to think about how these are enacted.
- **Build strength and capability** – understand the skills, attributes and capabilities they bring. Play to their strengths when you can, but work with them to build their capability – they are hungry to learn.
- **Emotionally safe environments** – young people want to feel valued and accepted by you and their peers. Create safe environments where they can speak openly and share their ideas.
- **Relationships and support** – young people want to feel empowered, so share your knowledge and be available for advice, but include them in decision-making and work together to find solutions.

THE SKILLS, ATTRIBUTES AND CAPABILITIES YOUNG PEOPLE BRING TO THE EMERGENCY SERVICES

Question 7: Can you identify young people's attributes, skills and capabilities. How could these assist you to work together to build resilient communities, prepared for future events and disasters?

Young people bring many attributes, skills and capabilities to your organisation. They will differ across individuals and groups of young people, but the following were consistent with the young people who participated in our research:

- Look for common ground – do not be judgmental or have preconceived ideas about what young people bring to your organisation
- Show interest in the young person as an individual
- Face-to-face interaction is important, but might not be practical so what medium can you meet on (e.g. Zoom, phone, FaceTime).

Young people believe they have skills that are distinctly different to previous generations that are of value to the EMS:

- **Communication** – young people are skilled communicators, particularly in online mediums, but they understand how to keep in touch and the most appropriate mediums and platforms for communicating with their peers.
- **Perception** – they perceive the emergency services as an inclusive sector, particularly around gender, believing you engage in inclusive practices for all.

'I would say that inclusion is highly valued [in the EMS]. They usually work in teams and want to have good leaders, so they value including all different sorts of people and probably want to be as diverse as they could.'

— Young female

- **Training** – the Australian F-10 Curriculum teaches young people important social and personal capabilities:⁷
 - > Self-management
 - > Self-awareness
 - > Social management
 - > Social awareness

- **Technology** – young people are adept at technology, it has been part of their lives since birth. They identify the importance of up-to-date technology to the EMS and have a range of technical skills that could be helpful for your organisation.
- **People management** – young people have often had experience working in organisations with effective diversity and inclusion practices and see the value of including everyone in the workforce:
 - > Many have held down leadership roles
 - > They see the value in creating inclusive workplaces, enabling everyone to voice their opinion
 - > Safe work spaces are not just about the physical environment, young people want workspaces to enable everyone to feel supported, listened to and included
- **Networking** – young people are very skilled at networking with their peers, online and through their studies. Think about how those skills could be adopted in your organisation.

‘I think that’s one aspect where the CFA can improve. I think young people can bring a lot to the table and they can be very useful in that situation [advocacy and networking] if the CFA used them in that way.’ — Young female

Attributes

- **Organisational understanding** – young people’s knowledge of the EMS is context-specific, with those living in regional environments more aware of the CFA and SES than their urban counterparts, who include ambulance, fire brigade and police under the EMS umbrella. While the specific details of the role are less clear, as discovered in a New Zealand study⁸, young people recognise the role the EMS plays in keeping the community safe.
- **Collaboration** – when asked, young people can see a role for themselves to collaborate with the EMS, they just have not really thought about it, or are unsure about the traditional volunteering/paid work force space:

‘Collaboration is definitely important, working with people in the community and the emergency response people. Working together and collaborating on ideas and how to make things run smoothly, or be better prepared.’

— Young female
- **Openness** – young people bring with them an openness to learn and a new perspective on how things could be done.

‘I think that young people want to know more and people aren’t closed off maybe so much or stuck in beliefs. They are open to actually, a different perspective, for example, “this is actually not what I initially thought and I’m open to changing that”, maybe we are not as rigid.’ — Young female
- **Engagement** – young people recognise that they may not be as involved with their local community as they have been or might be in the future. Their focus at this stage of life is on education, work and social environments. Their advice to the EMS is to engage with them through schools, sporting clubs or social activities.
- **Intercultural understanding** – young people consider themselves to be accepting of others and more culturally aware of diverse groups and individuals than older generations. They have grown up with inclusive practices and are familiar with D&I strategies and effective practices:⁷
 - > Recognising culture and developing respect
 - > Reflecting on intercultural experiences and taking responsibility
 - > Interacting and empathising with others
- **Respectful** – young people believe that respect for the EMS is well established by the time they reach young adulthood. Although they recognise that some of their activities (e.g. drugs, alcohol), may prove challenging in a relationship with the EMS, they believe their underlying respect for the EMS was instilled in childhood.

Capabilities

- **Trust** – young people recognise that trust is integral to working with the EMS. They believe that they have been socialised from childhood to trust someone wearing a uniform but the presence of the EMS at community events and activities reinforces trust.
- **Community cohesion** – young people believe that this is a stage of life where their connection to place-based communities is not always evident. This presents a challenge for organisations that are largely place-based and focused on risk within specific locations. However, young people still report a strong sense of connection to their community when questioned, so the potential exists to engage them in your organisation.

‘Yeah, I instinctively think that community as a location, but I guess you could be part of a broader community. Be it your school’s community or your cultural community.’ — Young female

- **Social cohesion** – young people’s social networks can be disparate, formed through friendships, sporting endeavours, work or study, rather than physical spaces.

‘Even though I live here, I would consider those people [online] my community I guess, because they’re the people that I hang out with the most. I’d say we’re [young people] not as good at community groups.’

—Young female

- **Strategic thinking** – young people feel very strongly about being part of conversations and decisions about their community, and express a desire to ensure their local environment and community is cared for, for their benefit and future generations.

‘I think right now our age, we feel very empowered to advocate for what we want. It’s kind of a thing at the moment and so I think that has a huge impact and positive effect on the community or whatever that community is they’re advocated for.’ — Young female

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE UNDERSTAND BUSHFIRE AND NATURAL HAZARDS RISK

Question 8: Are you confident young people know about the risks and danger of disasters and natural events in your local community?

Understanding natural hazard risk is relative to the context of a young person’s life, impacted by their life experience, local environment, and level of community participation. Environmental understanding and knowledge for young people is context-specific, with some very aware of the Australian landscape, climate and potential natural hazard risks in their own local environment and Australia more broadly, while others are less so.

‘I live in a town called Wallan. We’ve been evacuated a few times over summer [2018/2019] over those really hot weeks. It’s pretty scary. One year, it was like every day for a week we got evacuated.’ — Young female

A recent survey with young Australians aged 10–24 people revealed a generation who feels that they are ‘underprepared, under-educated, concerned and increasingly scared by the prospect of a disaster.’⁹

Table 1: Survey conducted February–April 2020 with approximately 1,500 Australian children and young people aged 10–24 years old⁹

What do you think are the most important things young people need to learn about natural hazards and the risk of disasters?	
How to plan and prepare for natural hazards and disasters	73%
How to care for themselves and others if their community experiences a natural hazard or disaster	70%
Where to access emergency warnings and alerts	69%
The actions children and young people can take to prevent or reduce the impact of natural hazards and disasters	66%
The causes of natural hazards and disasters	64%

Young people report that they learn about hazards and disasters that are not relevant to Australia or their community¹⁰, and many turn to social media and the internet to learn more, and be better prepared for natural hazards and how to protect their communities.

Young people want information about how to:⁹

- plan and prepare for natural hazards
- care for themselves and others in a crisis
- access emergency alerts and warnings
- prevent or reduce the risk of a disaster.

CASE STUDIES

The Oaktree Foundation

The Oaktree Foundation – <https://www.oaktree.org> – is one of Australia’s largest youth-run international development organisations. Their vision is:

- a world where all people have the opportunity to thrive
- to ensure young people have their voices heard.

The Oaktree Foundation aims to facilitate young people leading, demanding and creating a more just world and to make sure that young people are not shut out of decision making for a just future.

Yarra Youth Ambassadors

Yarra Youth Ambassadors – <https://www.instagram.com/yarrayouthamb> – are passionate about making a difference and influencing positive social change. Yarra Youth Ambassadors aims to break down the stereotypes that young people can be labelled with. They aim to create a community that celebrates diversity and values equality, and gives all young people the opportunity to take the lead on issues that affect them.

RESOURCES

YERP – <https://yerp.yacvic.org.au/about> – is a toolkit brought to you by the Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) and informed by young people. The toolkit is a package of information that supports the idea ‘that young people have an important role in shaping the present and future of Victoria.’ Yerp shares ideas of why it makes sense to involve young people in what you do – and how to go about it.

The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People has developed a resource to assist with engaging children and young people in your organisation – <https://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/participation-guide>. The resource includes information about why you should include children and young people in decision making, how to enable their participation, and practical information about how to go about it.

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