2022 NSW FLOOD INQUIRY

Submission by the NSW SES Volunteers Association

Contents

Disclaimer

The views supplied within are the result of feedback and anecdotal evidence from NSW SES volunteers and other stakeholders.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association has compiled this information for the sole intention of providing recommendations to the NSW Flood Inquiry and all information contained within is gathered from sources we believe to be reliable.

1. Introduction

The NSW SES Volunteers Association welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

Our submission has been prepared based on feedback and individual responses from our membership-the NSW SES volunteers and mostly relates to Terms of Reference 1a-f and 2a and 2b.

The NSW SES consists of approximately 10,000 SES volunteers located in Local Government Areas across NSW.

These volunteers provide first responder coverage to their communities as determined by the *State Emergency Service Act 1979, State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989.*

There have been multiple reports and inquiries into the management of major disasters-from fire to floods- and yet despite recommendations being made, the same issues and concerns continue to plague emergency response.

The Association is looking forward to this inquiry setting the pace for essential change- for the volunteers of the NSW SES but also, and most importantly to support emergency response to affected communities.

2. Role of the NSW SES Volunteers Association

The NSW State Emergency Service Volunteers Association is a not-for-profit registered charity that was established in 1998 to represent, advocate for and support the volunteer members of the NSW State Emergency Service.

The NSW State Emergency Service Volunteers Association became an incorporated association in 2000 and a registered charity in 2005. In recognition of the need for the NSW State Emergency Service volunteers to have a member body and a voice to Government the NSW State Emergency Service Volunteers Association was included as a consultative body in 2010 into the NSW State Emergency Service Act 1989.

The NSW State Emergency Service Volunteers Association is an organisation set up for the benefit of the thousands of volunteer members of the NSW State Emergency Service.

The NSW State Emergency Service Volunteers Association provides representation, advocacy and support services for these volunteers. It works closely with the NSW State Emergency Service to achieve common goals and represent the interests of its volunteer members, advocating for them when appropriate.

3. Summary of Recommendations

It is the position of the NSW SES Volunteers Association that this inquiry should be provided with recommendations that will enhance emergency response, capability and the experiences of the NSW SES volunteers for future emergency events- not just floods.

As such, we have provided an extensive list of recommendations in the spirit of true consultation with SES volunteers and other stakeholders.

There is overlap between cause and effect across the preparedness and response areas of our submission, highlighting that early intervention through training, capability building, appropriate resourcing and budget would alleviate these areas becoming significant issues during an event.

4. Our Volunteers- From the Community, For the Community

The NSW SES Volunteers Association is drawn from the membership of the NSW SES.

With that comes an ongoing and essential focus on the role of the volunteer in the NSW SES as well as the broader community.

Our members are from the community and for the community and need to be supported by the NSW SES as such.

Volunteers have provided feedback that they have seen a shift from 'volunteer support' to 'volunteer management' and that organisation impact on this is a loss of experience, expertise and engagement with volunteers.

'It is well known by volunteers within SES that the decline of availability is in direct response to the manner in which we have (not) been respected and how we have been treated over past years. The loss of very senior and experienced volunteers is evident.'

The Association has been made aware of examples of treatment towards volunteers by the NSW SES. Fairness, safety and mental wellbeing remains a priority for the Association.

Below are specific, de-identified examples provided by volunteers regarding their experiences.

Impacts on Rural and Remote Volunteer Capacity

Examples provided come from rural and remote volunteers. Volunteers have outlined how they raise safety matters and are then managed via disciplinary management or suspension.

The Association notes that the removal of a trained volunteer from a small rural response unit will significantly impact the capability of that unit to provide rescue and support to their community.

Broad numbers are promoted by the NSW SES however a more accurate account of true capability in rural areas are the numbers available for rescue responses.

When a volunteer is managed, moved or leaves a rural unit, this places a larger burden on rescue response for those members left.

[It has been reported via anecdotal evidence – what does this mean in this context?] While broad membership numbers reported can be kept constant by recruitment of new volunteers in metropolitan areas these numbers do not necessarily reflect the years of experience, training and response that a long-term member provides to their local community. Overall membership figures can mask deficiencies.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommends a review into rural volunteers and reasons for leaving as well as dedicated budget increases funding rural recruitment

Recognition of volunteers

Feedback was received from volunteers that the recognition process is not effective and less than appropriate recognition is afforded to volunteers.

Reports have been made where medals have only been given out to staff as well as volunteers not advised when nominations are being sought.

The Queens Birthday Emergency Service Medal is an example of this. A COVID-19 Honour Role was established, yet volunteers were not advised by the NSW SES that they would be putting members up for nomination and instead two staff members were awarded despite the volunteer commitment during the pandemic.

Volunteers also said they experienced extensive delays to receive the National Emergency Medal in recognition of the 2019/20 Bushfire Season and that they could not check if the NSW SES had their name down for recognition.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommends a review of the recognition process and the SES Recognition Committee have further representation from volunteers and input to how awards are distributed as well as additional funding for staff to provide recognition for members

Protection for Volunteer Support Persons.

This issue has been raised through the Volunteer Joint Consultative Council however, it was not adopted.

The Association would like formal protection to be enacted for volunteers who support or act as a support person for other volunteers.

Issues have also been raised about the treatment to which some support persons have been subject while they ensure safety to volunteers during meetings with the SES.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommends the SES revisit their stance on protection for support people, ensuring they are not subject to adverse treatment, and funding be made available for training for staff who conduct disciplinary meetings

Independent oversight of volunteer issues

Currently volunteers are subject to management and disciplinary action pursuant to the SES policy and procedure framework.

The documents that form this framework allow total autonomy and control by select senior SES staff and there is no ability for volunteers to seek independent review. Strict controls regarding timeframes for volunteers, control of the information they receive and training and knowledge levels of those controlling the process have created a justifiable distrust from volunteers towards this process.

Feedback from volunteers is that there can be major delays , important evidence is ignored and appeals to senior officers for intervention are not actioned.

Years of reviews into the SES by government and feedback from legal professionals reflects the view that the disciplinary management system has not improved. The disciplinary management process denies volunteers natural justice, including procedural fairness.

Disciplinary management of the SES is a major concern to volunteers. A significant amount of time is devoted by the NSW SES Volunteers Association to assisting volunteers with these issues.

Delays and the manner in which such matters are managed are an ongoing concern and issue, leading to risks such as psychosocial injury.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommends an independent review group/committee be established with members drawn from the NSW SES volunteers, the NSW SES Volunteers Association and NSW SES staff. This Volunteer Disciplinary Panels would have input into volunteer matters

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommends the SES implement an independent 'Speak Up' review of raised matters to determine if they have been appropriately managed with an approach similar to the RFS program with an independent legal firm to have oversight and ability to request and seek information

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommends a study looking at the psychosocial injury occurring to volunteers because of management and management actions with a view to pathways of independence and increased rights for volunteers

Stories from the Volunteers

Example 1

Suspended for three months- no contact

A volunteer, deployed to the Lismore flood event was stationed in the Incident Management Team (IMT). The volunteer has a military background and Masters level education.

At the start of the Lismore floods the volunteer was instructed by the Incident Commander to requisition a rescue helicopter to search and rescue people off roofs etc. This was promptly done through the SES incident management system 'Beacon'.

A Beacon job sheet shows the volunteer's requisition and other details. They moved on to more work where they received hardly any sleep for days and at times slept under a desk in the command centre.

The volunteer had an SES vehicle which was requested to be given to another agency, to which they promptly provided the keys.

The volunteer continued their duties for the duration of their deployment and returned home.

Days later they started receiving phone calls from the SES State Operations Centre (SOC) asking if they still needed rescuing.

At least 15 of these calls from the NSW SES State Communications Centre. They attempted to provided information that there was confusion and that they had been the requesting officer for the rescue helicopter many days earlier- not the person who required rescue. They also said for NSW SES to contact the Northern Zone (SES) as they had completed their deployment.

On the last phone call, they attempted to explain to the SOC caller that they were the NSW SES person who originated the request, *not the person needing rescue*, and this information could be seen easily on the Beacon job sheet. They further explained where they worked and their concern about the delay to action this helicopter and what may have happened to the people needing rescue.

The vehicle provided to another agency was driven by the other agency to *another town* and through floodwater which rendered the vehicle undrivable. This incident occurred many hours after handing over the keys to which the volunteer remained visible to the SES staff in the IMT.

The volunteer received a letter of **Immediate Suspension from the SES**.

The allegations outlined that the vehicle, that was not in their possession, and another vehicle were damaged '*to the extent it was unable to be used further*' and also that *they* contacted the SOC regarding the rescue job. On the 6th March, 2022 they were immediately suspended from the SES.

The impact on this volunteer has been substantial.

- They were not able to attend their local SES and provide After Action Review feedback
- They were also removed from attending SES and any support and post incident trauma support
- They were stopped from attending emergencies in their local SES area

- They were unable to assist in the second flooding event on the Northern Rivers or across NSW

At time of writing the volunteer remains suspended and has heard nothing official from the SES.

<u>Example 2.</u>

Impact on flood preparedness and response

An SES Unit Commander in the state's busiest road crash rescue unit and storm unit provides at least 40 hours per week of their own time in 'quiet' periods.

They are also one of three Flood Rescue operators in the unit. They are very popular amongst the community and has received a large amount of community accolades.

The volunteer raised to senior staff requirements to remain compliant with the NSW State Rescue Policy regarding notifications when an SES Rescue truck or unit is 'offline'.

At the same time they were managing a member of the unit. They sought support and advice, as outlined in SES documents, from SES State Headquarters. They had raised issues before and had even organised private purchase of flags for a ministerial visit when the SES could on provide them.

SES State Headquarters over time, delayed and did not respond to them.

For safety the volunteer, as outlined in the Unit Commander role description, moved the volunteer to another area; they did not remove the volunteer's rank.

It was later discovered the person listed by the SES to seek advice from (which was not provided) would also be the person to conduct the investigation. This conflict was noted to senior staff but they asserted there was no conflict.

The Unit Commander was 'transferred' to another area. Major delays occurred and he later received a letter of allegation with two allegations.

The volunteer sought support that is advertised by SES. They received no response. They then sought other support. SES support areas said they could not help.

They were not able to access information that could prove their innocence and had to submit a reply by the due date for a response. They were told to GIPA information, but this information was only made available after the required response date.

Information used to sustain allegations, that is now unable to be located, is indicative of a lack of procedural fairness.

The volunteer was repeatedly talked over by staff in a meeting and this was reported. No action. An independent legal letter was presented to SES to protect the volunteer. In a subsequent meeting with SES they were spoken over again.

They have reported this treatment in multiple emails and verbally.

This member remains 'transferred' out of their unit.

As a result, during the floods there were only two qualified flood operators at the unit.

<u>Example 3</u>

During response to a previous flood event, a Unit Commander driving the SES vehicle was approached by another motorist in the small town.

The motorist yelled and drove up the road. The Unit Commander, a volunteer for decades and a paramedic for three decades was concerned there may be a medical issue. Upon seeing the motorist, he was grabbed by the throat and subsequently 'fought for his life'.

Many floods have seen local residents unhappy with management decisions. These decisions are made by Incident Management staff and not local volunteers. This male was upset with a senior staff decision during the flood.

Police attended and the volunteer attended hospital for injuries. No charges were laid as there were no witnesses.

The SES command did not contact the volunteer for weeks, did not provide any support but then moved the volunteer without his consent to another role.

The SES then made allegations against the volunteer. During the course of the process it was found that another volunteers Safehold report, a document used to record injury and risk, was altered by the SES to form the basis for the allegations.

The volunteer received no compensation for his injuries even though he was in SES uniform, driving a marked SES vehicle, has signed on and was completing SES tasks at the time.

<u>Example 4</u>

A volunteer who does two roles in her community for SES was called to a meeting by senior staff. The staff member expressed comments about her being a single mother and said she cannot do two roles, which she had done successfully and had undertaken due to a limited number of available volunteers.

She felt she was being excluded from her senior volunteer role and confronted another senior member who said he had been told to exclude her.

This action not only causes psychological injury to volunteers, exclusion of information for volunteers in management roles can compromise their capability and knowledge and have serious and even tragic outcomes when managing emergency events.

5. Preparedness

5.1 Incident Management Training (Level 3)

The NSW SES uses the AIIMS structure for incident management, with incident command and officer roles within the structure traditionally being filled by paid staff.

> *"Volunteers increasingly being removed from the management space- no IM training, no people training"*

The NSW Flood event of 2022 was no different, with volunteers providing feedback that the majority of the IMT roles were filled by paid staff, with concerns that many of these could not hold incident management training, as it had not been advertised or run in recent years- additional concerns were reported from members that unlike other agencies rank in the NSW SES is not awarded based on capability and skills demonstrated to gain that rank. This provides uncertainty in Operations Centres and the lack of training provided to volunteers in this space severely impacts their abilities to run events in their local area or in fact, have SES volunteers who are trained and experienced in field and operational roles in critical functions within an IMT both at local, Zone and within the State Operations Centre.

> *'Incident management structure for these flood event obviously not suitable. Lack of control, overbearing staff, loss of control, poor situational awareness.'*

The NSW SES Volunteers Association requested from the NSW SES the current number of volunteers trained in Level 3 Incident Management. The Association is of the belief, that this information, given it is in the establishment of an Incident Management structure, should be accessible to areas of the Service immediately.

The NSW SES advised that they were unable to provide the requested information.

As all disaster events rely on a multi-agency approach; volunteers and stakeholders have provided feedback that preparation should include exercises that occur in real time, with the same challenges simulated as those faced by an Incident Management Team in all phases of the event.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that rank is removed from positions, until such capability is formally achieved, through recognised and training and demonstrated skills.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that *in the first instance*, NSW SES volunteers are provided training and demonstration of skills across all the AIIMS functions to immediately increase the operational management capability of the Service and increase community safety during events and that this training is delivered in key locations around the State to build state-wide capability.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that additional budget is provided to the NSW SES so that:

    a. **- an immediate review is undertaken into the current number of volunteers who have Level 3 Incident Management training <u>as well as</u> the current number of volunteers, their geographical location and level of any other Incident Management training/qualifications recognised by the AIIMS structure or through Units of Competency within the Public Safety Training Package**

    b. **-a gap analysis is conducted to determine where training needs to be run across the state to develop these skills and build this capability within the volunteer membership**

    c. **-the current processes around qualifications collection, and data management with SAP is reviewed to identify and reconcile any training records that have not been captured and are preventing the NSW SES from immediately identifying member skill sets**

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that multi-agency desktop exercises are run bi-annually and in real time with real challenges

5.2 Flood Rescue Training

Feedback from volunteers has indicated a concern regarding the lack of flood rescue training and recertifications that have occurred.

Volunteers provided anecdotal evidence to the Association that while other agencies appear to have been able to conduct flood rescue training, the NSW SES has fallen behind.

> *'Failures in training and recertifications in recent years led to a shortage of operators'*

Courses have been cancelled that were taking place in a 'tried and tested' natural environment in Tumut and there were not enough courses scheduled and run at Penrith Whitewater Stadium or Manly Hydraulic to meet the burden of recertification and attrition of members (new operators trained to fill gaps).

The Association also received feedback that there is no formal training via the NSW SES learning platform (Learning Hub) for key topics such as 'working around electricity (including solar) in floods' or hands-on driver training in 'safely navigating in and around floodwater' or 'driving under response conditions'.

The Association notes the particular dangers around rural communities where a solar array may be located a significant distance from the switch board and as a stand alone unit that may be partially inundated with flood water- creating dangers for flood rescuers who are either on water (boats) or swimming/wading to reach people requiring rescue.

Not only this, roof-mounted solar arrays are becoming increasingly prevalent throughout NSW- with a report from the CSIRO released in May 2021 estimating that NSW was the highest representative in Australia for household solar with 108,922 homes now having rooftop solar panels. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that there is an increase in the 'off grid living' movement, along with current rebates and subsidy schemes by government combined with increasing utility costs that would allow for a reasonable assumption that the installation of solar power in residential premises will only increase and with it the risk to our volunteers

Currently, the Drive Operational Vehicles course is a desktop-based course only, with no physical component including vehicle behaviour and/or driving in hazardous conditions. The structure of this course, and the potential time distance between activations for response driving put volunteers at risk as does the very nature of working in flooded communities increase the likelihood that volunteers, while undertaking their roles within the NSW SES, will indeed come across and potentially be required to transit across flood water- be it for their own safety or to undertake flood rescue roles.

Despite no specific training being offered to members regarding driving in or around flood water, members are nevertheless being placed by the Service in a flooded or likely to be flooded location.These same members, denied proper training, are then being held to account for their actions in relation to these matters. In one instance, a volunteer was accommodated by the NSW SES in an area that was later subject to inundation. The member, using a risk-based approach, removed themselves from the inundated premises and later faced suspension by the Service for *recklessly driving through floodwater.'*

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that there is a suitable increase in the NSW SES budget to provide training and recertification for flood rescue operators.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that training that is accessible to all members via the 'Learning Hub' is developed to address the specific risks around electrical safety when working in or around floods with specific focus on solar power.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommends that consideration is given to provision of a grant from the NSW government for the NSW SES Volunteers Association to build a driver training environment that encapsulates 'flood condition simulation', 'safe extrication from rescue vehicles' and practical driver training at their rural facility. This would also allow for ongoing community engagement as well as open access to other first responders

5.3 Mental Wellbeing Training

Currently the NSW SES Volunteers association is providing MHFA training to members, and the NSW SES has partnered through the Joint Agency Initiative to train members also.

To date, the NSW SES VA has run 28 MHFA Courses for members, with additional courses run via contractors prior to the Association bringing the program in-house.

There is, however, no training for volunteers in the areas of bystander training to assist community members in distress after trauma or SES programs for building mental health and resilience as first responders.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommendation- the Association has a proven record for being able to provide mental health and resilience training. We would recommend that mental health and resilience training for NSW SES volunteers is funded by government and delivered by the Association in key locations around the state, as well as at our wellness facility and via online delivery in much the same needs-analysis format as the First Responder Resilience Program presently under development by the NSW SES VA.

5.4 Structure of the NSW SES
Transformation was introduced in 2018.

The then Commissioner posted to internal communications channels that *"it would not impact volunteers"*.

Feedback received from our volunteers has indicated they have indeed been impacted negatively and have experienced:

-increased bureaucracy

-increased focus on management of volunteers rather than 'supporting' volunteers

-staff increases that are installations at State Headquarters and not out in Zones providing practical support to vols

-anecdotal evidence detailing increased workloads, increased administration burden, less support from understaffing in Zones and an attitude of 'Not My Job' from Zone staff; and no knowledge of 'who does what' at State Headquarters

-constant staff turnover

-constant turnover at Executive Level and critically reducing organisation knowledge and experience at decision-making levels

-Volunteers increasingly being removed from the management space with no Incident Management training, no people management training and no ongoing support in their Unit/Local Command roles

-No management knowledge or experience around first responder volunteer support experience due to recruitment primarily being sourced externally to the organisation

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that in fact the NSW SES has begun down a very dangerous path where an 'emergency service' is staffed almost entirely by public servants and not, first responders with emergency response experience.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommends that transformation is removed and the structure is returned to a catchment base

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommends that events are locally run and managed by volunteers, supported by staff and incorporate local knowledge and communities in

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommends that support administrative staff are deployed to assist local volunteer units with support roles and report to the volunteer Incident Controller through the Incident Management structure and that <u>no</u> non-operational staff are deployed as part of an Incident Management Team in a role other than administrative support

5.5 Resourcing- Facilities, fleet, caches

Appropriate resourcing of the NSW SES has been a recurring issue across multiple inquiries and reports.

Current Unit and Zone facilities are either not suitable for purpose, located in the flood plain or have significant WHS issues.

Volunteers have provided feedback that these issues, when raised, are often referred to the Council/SES arrangements.

Anecdotal evidence from the floods is that some vehicles deployed to flooded areas were not fit for task and that not enough boats were deployed in preparation for the events.

The introduction of strategically located flood rescue caches would allow for the fast deployment of resources to areas where impact is imminent. This would alleviate the logistical constraints of deploying resources from areas of the state that may incur a delay.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that all NSW SES facilities are:

   a) **Subject to a State-wide review to determine suitability starting Northern Rivers that includes genuine consultation with NSW SES Volunteers**
   b) **Brought across to the NSW SES under the SES budget allow for facilities management to be entirely inhouse**
   c) **Relocated based on findings of a State-wide review to ensure that no SES Units is located in flood prone areas**

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that only fit for task vehicles are deployed to flood areas, based on industry advice and reviews and that boats are pre-deployed based on operational requests of Local Incident Controllers

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that the NSW SES budget is increased to include the development and placement of flood rescue caches in strategic locations around NSW

5.6 Availability

The current Availability App that is in use by the NSW SES was, according to anecdotal evidence, not used in the determining of available volunteers to assist with in their local area or for deployment. Instead, text messages were used to ask (some) members to contact their Zone with their availability.

Those who had entered it into the Availability App were unaware that this information was not going to be utilised and as a result, there are a number of volunteers who have indicated they were not used or contacted.

Others have indicated they were not on the distribution list for the text messages and it has been reported that members qualifications were not being checked prior to them being allocated to teams.

IN some instances, volunteers were put in roles with little or no experience and advised they would 'learn it on the go' while deploying flood rescue resources to high priority/life at risk calls.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that the NSW SES is provided with sufficient budget to immediately implement, train and utilise a system for capturing member availability to ensure pre-planning can be undertaken

5.7 COVID-19 and Mandatory Vaccinations

Stakeholder feedback and anecdotal evidence differs to the information provided to the NSW SES Volunteers Association regarding the impacts of mandatory vaccinations on NSW SES volunteers and/or units.

From the north coast, feedback has been that there have been SES units that were offline due to not meeting the requirements of the COVID-19 vaccine mandate. The NSW SES provided a statement that no SES units have been offline due to this.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association also requested the number of NSW SES volunteers, and the number of volunteers who have not provided a vaccination status or who have not met the vaccine mandate requirements.

The Association has not been provided with these figures. The NSW SES provided a statistical breakdown of logged vaccine statuses, this however does not provide evidence as to whether units were offline or not.

Community feedback also indicated that a number (not specified) of SES volunteers who have skills and training in flood rescue who were not able to participate in SES activities due to their vaccination status, participated in the Tinny Army and completed **numerous flood rescues after registering with the SES.**

The NSW SES Volunteers Association Recommends that the NSW SES implement a tiered approach to vaccinations, like that of the NSW RFS, that allows a degree of flexibility, based on a risk-assessment, for the continued emergency response to a community:

1. **Fully vaccinated members facing zero restrictions**
2. **Non-vaccinated members facing restrictions of no 'out-of-zone' activity e.g training, deployment* or socialisation**
3. **Identified units, where no coverage by the combat agency or rescue operators in an area accredited to another rescue agency (in alignment with State Rescue Board accreditation) is available, the unit remains online to provide support to the community and *may* be deployed***

*deployment may be categorised under a catastrophic/disaster event where resources are stretched and additional constraints are imposed e.g. the continual use of facemasks but deployment is deemed in the public interest

6. Response

6.1 Internal Communication

Anecdotal evidence from volunteers indicates they were not allowed to attend briefings held each morning. The impact resulted in a loss of situational awareness as well as difficulty in providing information to oncoming crews and across agencies.

6.2 Community Communication

Review of the NSW SES website confirms that on the 28th February, 2022 there was only one website 'news' article. The frequency of posting community safety news via the website during the peak of the response continued at the same rate, with social media being the reported main focus of the NSW SES media response.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association received feedback from members that community members were required to visit multiple pages across the NSW SES website, often being referred externally, to gain any understanding of the event including current warnings, orders, locations of evacuation centres or the prediction of weather to follow.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that frustration was experienced at needing to visit multiple web addresses to locate information when mobile/internet/connectivity issues meant extensive delays or timeouts were being experienced, if indeed any connectivity was available.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends ensuring operational media staff are embedded as part of an operational response to provide timely, frequent and single source of truth information to the community through regular written situational updates through multiple channels, not just social media

6.3 The 000 Response

The Facebook 000 response. .

Facebook requests for assistance were being received via the NSW SES Facebook page, the Northern Rivers NSW SES and the local unit Lismore SES Facebook page- all 'blue tick' or 'confirmed authentic presence of the public figure or …brand it represents', however,

none of these were acknowledged publicly by the agency to the community members that they had been received, logged or actioned.

Anecdotal evidence shows that requests to Metropolitan-based volunteers to log 000 made via official SES social media channels requests remotely were made on 11.15am on 28th February 2022 however, community members were still not informed that these requests were being logged or recorded anywhere.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that funding is provided to establish experienced (Uniformed/ranked) operational media/communications positions in the NSW SES Communications sections to ensure that operation triaging is established early in any event, that community life-at-risk posts are actioned immediately- particularly in the event of failure of the 132 500 and/or 000 phone network- and that operational updates are made available via the NSW SES website more frequently than once per day, covering current warning, orders, location of evacuation centres, predicted weather conditions and current safety advice in a single location

6.4 Incident Management

"If staff want to run the IMT, (they)need to go through the same pathways as vols- Fundamentals, First Aid, PIARO, Comms etc…"

Frustrations were communicated in feedback from volunteers that they have been increasingly pushed out of the Incident Management space, but that their replacements have no SES training or experience about field operations, and in some instances anecdotal evidence was submitted that non-ranked staff were in critical incident management roles.

 The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that any person in an IMT role <u>must</u> have the appropriate (designated by rank) skills and experience to fulfill that function <u>as well as</u> following the same internal pathways volunteers must follow to achieve that position

6.5 Standardisation of Incident Management Response
Volunteer feedback to the Association has been that requests were made in advance of the event, in select areas for the pre-deployment of resources. These requests were not actioned by State Headquarters.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that, through the implementation of a robust Incident Management training program, Local and Unit Commanders can request support as they determine fit to meet the incident response for community safety without organisation question.

6.6 Flood Rescue Response
Feedback from volunteers and community surrounding the 132 500 number indicate that there is a level of confusion within the community regarding the most appropriate number to call as well as an inconsistency with advice provided during the call.

Complications further arose with tasking of incoming jobs with little or no visibility of rescue assets in affected areas.

Further feedback from volunteers was also received about the lack of declarations for Flood Rescue Areas of Operations (FRAO)- a requirement under the State Rescue Board for the NSW SES to assume command of flood rescue.

This lack of declarations indicate a lack of understanding from the NSW SES regarding their requirements to take command of the flood rescue response, and creates confusion in the triaging and tasking arrangements being implemented.

The NSW SES Volunteers requested the number of FRAO declarations made by the NSW SES. This figure has not been provided.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that calls triaged through the Telstra network as 000 flood rescue calls are managed as all other rescue calls in NSW by the Police through the RCO and allocated accordingly to the closest rescue resource <u>unless</u> a Flood Rescue Area of Operations is declared

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends standardisation of information sought and advice provided to callers particularly around shelter-in-place in flooded residences <u>not</u> including advice to shelter in a roof cavity

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends the immediate implementation of Automated Vehicle Locators (AVL) in all NSW SES fleet- including boats and that a centralised tracking system can be established in multi-agency events that is visible by the tasking cell

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that all agencies with an in-water rescue capability have their own fleet of motorised on-water vessels to ensure independent response ability, agility with response, and team self-reliance in line with Urban Search and Rescue principles

6.7 Safety and Mental Health

The issue of safety for volunteers was raised strongly in feedback provided to the Association. Numerous issues of concern were noted:

- Single operators are not a Flood Rescue 'team', nor are teams that don't meet the 'minimum trained crew requirements' as established by the State Rescue Board
- If the Service (via the IMT) is unable to establish contact with a member/team in the field- notifications need to be undertaken immediately, and not abuse to the members for 'not responding' to radio calls when radio and phone service is absent. As has been recommended above in this submission, the Association would like to see the immediate installation of AVL technology on all SES vehicles and vessels to ensure member safety
- Lack of fatigue management for volunteers

"What happened to looking after volunteers? Staff worked 8 hours shifts but some volunteers worked 48 hours straight with no ability for a replacement"

- Volunteers were accommodated in areas that became inundated, but did not seem to know where their people were because no welfare checks, calls or otherwise were conducted to ensure the safety of these members.
- Feedback from volunteers has also indicated they feel that there is a culture of fear developing around reporting safety matters as they are being used to initiate misconduct or management actions against members as opposed to their true intent (which is to improve safety and comply with applicable legislative and regulatory requirements) . Reports that are submitted are currently done via phone call; from there the phone operator interprets the information being provided by the member which results in inaccurate reports, errors in times and/or dates and invalidates the process
- Reports of:
  - Safeholds being 'weaponised' by staff and turned into disciplinary actions
  - Safehold being altered by staff

The intent of Safehold system is to improve safety, promote reporting of unsafe actions and events and to create improvements so instances do not reoccur.

Mental Health of volunteers on the ground has also received significant feedback from volunteers.

The Association has received anecdotal evidence of concerns around Trauma Fatigue- dealing with community members who've lost everything on the day of the disaster and being resident in the same community being constantly exposed to additional trauma simply by being a part of the community e.g. Cumulative effect

Homelessness amongst members is also an issue amongst members in affected areas. Feedback received from volunteers suggests they felt 'abandoned' by the Service in the immediate hours and days after the event. The sentiment of 'disaster tourism' was explained by volunteers who said there were lots of 'visitors from State Headquarters coming through looking' but little actual support offered.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that the NSW SES should track affected areas to ensure support is provided immediately to affected volunteers

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that the new NSW SES safety management system is fast-tracked for implementation and that volunteers can log reports in their own words and an independent oversight group ensures reports are actioned and not altered

6.8 The 'Tinny Army'

The actions of those community members who stepped up and completed hundreds of rescues within their communities at the peak of the flood emergency must be commended and recognised.

Without their efforts, it is unquestionable that more lives would have been lost.

'Transformation' promised not only an increase in active SES volunteer numbers but also the ability to harness other types of volunteers in large events. The Floods of 2022 have demonstrated a dismal failure of this program.

Not only were community members instructed in the first instance to not assist, there was conflicting information through local and online media regarding registration and locations for community response.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends formal recognition of the 'Tinny Army' members through a special category under the National Emergency Medal.

6.9 Business as Usual

The Association appreciated that the NSW SES is an emergency service, and as such has response roles within the community during events pertaining to floods and storms.

However, there does need to be a business as usual approach to the organisation as, while the 2022 flooding was devastating for the communities it affected, the civilian or corporate side of the NSW SES should have continued to function for day-to-day business including- responding to volunteer communications, closing off grievance/management/misconduct matters in stated timeframes etc.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that non-operational staff should maintain their day-to-day roles and the State Operations Centre be backfilled with trained volunteers to fill Incident Management roles ensuring business continuity

7. Recovery

The anecdotal evidence from the northern rivers is that the establishment of evacuation centres was disjointed at best.

Locations were provided that were already inundated, centres were broadcast and yet locked when community members evacuated and there was little to no communication regarding the availability of safe evacuation points for pets.

This highlights the need for management of the evacuation process to be established early, be developed in conjunction with the local community and be communicated clearly and through a single source of truth.

As the flood event shifted from response to recovery, the role of the NSW SES also needed to change. As the rescue response was no longer required the focus became ongoing resupply roles and clean-up operations within affected communities.

This switch should be that the NSW SES becomes a support agency for the resupply process as well as a Hazardous Materials (HAZMAT) response.

Similarly, to other submissions already made to the Flood Inquiry, and following questions raised by our membership, the Volunteers Association seeks a review into the allocation of funding to and clarity around the roles and responsibilities of Resilience NSW.

Volunteers have provided feedback that After Action Reviews conducted by the NSW SES, in their current format, do not seek genuine consultation from the members. Instead, the process appears to simply be a box-ticking exercise with little or no improvements implemented.

"…not using lessons learned and recommendations of prior event on north coast to improve and change SES practices…"

Perhaps more concerningly, members provided feedback that they felt they were unable to speak openly and honestly about issues during the AAR process because "Any volunteer who speaks negatively about the SES will get action against them." Even if the perceived negative comments are genuine in their attempt to highlight an issue that needs to be fixed.

Further comment was that in the AARs from the most recent event, not all feedback was captured and restrictions on who was able to attend and he number of volunteers allowed to attend significantly reduced the ability for genuine consultation.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association recommends that the establishment of evacuation centres is the responsibility of the Local Emergency Management Officer with overall oversight by Resilience NSW, including the provision of centre staffing, supplies and security to ensure that the focus of the NSW SES remains on protecting life at risk as an event is developing.

NSW SES is provided support to provide volunteers with formal training in Hazardous Materials in order to support Fire and Rescue NSW in recovery and clean-up efforts safely.

All members who participate in an event should have the option to attend an AAR.

All feedback provided must be captured and triaged for appropriate action and all information gained from AARs should be provided to volunteers via internal communication channel to increase the transparency and faith in the process.

8. Conclusion

Volunteering is on the decline, natural disasters are on the increase and as development and urban sprawl continues to grow both in major centres as well as regionally the impacts of these disasters too, increases.

To maintain emergency response for the communities of NSW, the NSW SES must change the way it functions . It must have an organisational structure that allows for the management of floods, it must recognise the importance of local knowledge and the expertise within the volunteer ranks, and it must provide the volunteers with the training, tools and support needed to run these events.

There have been reviews and inquiries into floods previously, where findings and recommendations have been made public and yet no action has occurred. This inquiry <u>must</u> be different.

Agencies must be held to account, and changes must be implemented- it is simply not enough to identify issues where there is no resolution.