



WHAKARATONGA IWI

FIRE
EMERGENCY

NEW ZEALAND

THE VOICE OF THE FAMILY: RESEARCH WITH FAMILIES OF VOLUNTEERS

LITMUS

July 2017

This report recommends practical solutions that Fire and Emergency New Zealand can implement to support families of volunteers. It summarises how families support volunteers to serve their communities, and the impact volunteering has on families. It summarises families' experiences of social activities and support from the brigade and Chief Fire Officers (CFOs). It also summarises national and international literature on best practice interventions to support families of fire and emergency service volunteers.



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The voice of the family

Research with families of volunteers

Prepared for:
The New Zealand Fire Service

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Report purpose

This report recommends practical solutions that Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ)¹ can implement to support families of volunteers. It summarises how families support volunteers to serve their communities, and the impact volunteering has on families. It summarises families' experiences of social activities and support from the brigade² and Chief Fire Officers (CFOs)³. It also summarises national and international literature on best practice interventions to support families of fire and emergency service volunteers.

This report was commissioned by the New Zealand Fire Service Commission (NZFSC) during the transition to FENZ. The new organisation aims to merge and modernise New Zealand's fire services and create better support for fire and emergency volunteers. This report includes the perspectives of New Zealand Fire Service (NZFS) and National Rural Fire Authority (NRFA) volunteers and families.

¹ The Bill currently before Parliament will amalgamate NZFS, the National Rural Fire Authority (NRFA), 12 enlarged rural fire districts and 26 territorial authority rural fire authorities into one service, and will replace the Fire Service Act 1975 and the Forest and Rural Fires Act 1977. The new service Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) will start on 1 July 2017.

² The term brigades used in this report refers to both NZFS brigades and NRFA fire forces.

³ The term CFO is used in this report refers to both NZFS CFOs and NRFA CFOs / Controllers.

Research summary

Practical solutions to support families

Volunteers and their families made the following practical suggestions for making FENZ more family-friendly. These solutions aim to:

- address the equity issues that volunteers and their families face
- economise demands on volunteers' time
- provide information and equip families for volunteering life
- develop a guide for families
- give back to families who are supporting volunteers to serve their communities.

Families enable volunteers to serve

When a volunteer joins the brigade so does their family. Families do a number of important tasks to enable volunteers to serve their communities. These include household labour and caregiving, providing emotional support and fundraising. Families also make sacrifices when a family member joins a brigade. These sacrifices include not attending family celebrations together and sharing their family member with the brigade.

Families benefit from volunteering

Families experience a number of benefits when a family member volunteers to serve their community. Families gain pride knowing through their partners, parents' or children's volunteering efforts their community is a better place to live in. Families strengthen their networks and achieve status in their community through their association with a brigade.

Volunteering impacts negatively on families

Volunteers are always ready to respond. Volunteers' families experience tension and uncertainty due to volunteers constantly being on-call. Partners in particular have to be ready to drop everything to manage parenting and household affairs when volunteers are called out during the day. Partners have to hold the fort and manage early morning and evening family routines when volunteers are called out at night.

Volunteering impacts on the relationships volunteers have with their partners and children. It impacts on their partners' physical and emotional health and wellbeing and mobility. It also impacts on their families' financial security.

Families with young children and low income families are particularly impacted by volunteering. Families are also affected more when volunteers are in their first year of service, when they belong to busy brigades and when they hold senior or specialised roles.

Social activities and events

NZFS and NRFA brigades undertake a number of social activities and events for volunteers, their families and the wider community. Hosting activities and events develops a sense of community and helps with image building. Brigades are becoming more family-friendly but could still improve.

Best practice interventions

The literature suggests several interventions to support families of fire and emergency services volunteers. These interventions include providing information to volunteers and their families, involving families in training, hosting social activities and events, and developing support systems. Brigades are implementing some but not all of these interventions.

Practical solutions to support families

Volunteers and their families made the following practical suggestions for making FENZ more family-friendly. In most cases, these solutions were substantiated by international and national literature.

Address inequities

Ease the financial burden when volunteers attend training

Design a reimbursement system that is fairer and does not financially disadvantage volunteers when they attend training. This supports the FENZ Transition Project's proposal to provide clarity to volunteers on the policies and process for reimbursement and payment and review existing policies to simplify and make reimbursement more efficient and timely. It also supports the FENZ Transition Project's proposal to work with the Department of Internal Affairs and the Inland Revenue Department to address the financial disadvantage and administrative burden that comes from the current tax treatment of reimbursement.

Help volunteers get insurance

Advocate on behalf of volunteers for accessible and affordable life and income protection insurance. This would include working with the Insurance Council of New Zealand (ICNZ) and individual insurance providers to agree the risk and insurers' exposure to claims. This would also include approaching insurance companies and asking for a discounted rate for volunteers, providing information to volunteers on 'volunteer friendly' insurance companies, and assigning a point of contact for volunteers who have insurance issues.

Economise demands on volunteers' time

Look at ways to use volunteers' time more productively so that volunteering does not compete unduly with family and work time. This would include implementing a watch (roster) system for busy brigades, delivering training in regions⁴ and reviewing non-critical tasks required of volunteers, such as cleaning. It would also include investigating how technology could be used to align the demand from callouts to the supply of volunteers⁵. Attention should also be given to economising the demands on CFO's and senior volunteers' time, such as reviewing administrative requirements.

⁴ This suggestion was strongly advocated by volunteers and families living in Northland.

⁵ This suggestion was in response to an oversupply of volunteers turning up for a callout and going home again as they are not needed.

Provide information to families

Develop an induction pack for families

Provide families with useful information on what to expect when a family member becomes a volunteer. The induction pack should include information on the roles of brigade members, time commitments, types and lengths of callouts, social events and the policies and procedures that keep volunteers safe, for example, the safe person concept. Families should also receive a list of the support services available to volunteers, for example, counselling and peer support. Families should receive contact details for the CFO and senior members of the brigade. Providing families with information aligns with Cowlshaw, Evans and McLennan's suggestions on how to support families^{6,7}.

Develop a communications system for families

Develop a system to inform families of the brigade's movements, including the location and type of incident. This system would help families manage unscheduled disruptions, and reduce anxiety. It would be particularly helpful for rural brigades on campaign fires who can be away from home and out of cell phone range for long periods. Existing technology such as the Volunteer Availability Communications System (VACS), Fire Portal or the pager system could be used for this purpose. If the pager system is used, families should receive a cheat sheet that explains codes, acronyms and technical information.

Develop a guide for CFOs

Develop a guide for CFOs on how to build and maintain a family-friendly brigade. The content should draw on best practice and include examples of what brigades are doing that makes their brigade family-friendly. The guide would help CFOs implement suggestions made in the literature on how to support families, such as supporting volunteers and their families in challenging life stages⁸ and economising demands on volunteers' time⁹. The guide should also include how to welcome and support new volunteers and their families, tips on hosting social events and the services that are available for families.

⁶ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Volunteer work life balance: Recommendations for emergency service agencies*. Melbourne: La Trobe University (2009).

⁷ McLennan, Jim. *Issues Facing Australian Volunteer-Based Emergency Service Organisations: 2008-2010*. Australia: La Trobe University (2010).

⁸ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Volunteer work life balance: Recommendations for emergency service agencies*.

⁹ McLennan, Jim, Adrian Birch, Sean Cowlshaw, and Peter Hayes. "Maintaining volunteer firefighter numbers: Adding value to the retention coin." *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 24, no. 2 (2009): 40-44.

Give back to families

Introduce a family discount scheme

Develop a discount scheme that would give volunteers and families significant discounts, savings and benefits. This would include negotiating with national retailers and suppliers to get deals for volunteers and families. It would be important to ensure the scheme allows individual brigades to negotiate discounts with local suppliers. This is particularly important for rural brigades and communities who want to support local suppliers. A variety of retailers and services should be included, for example, supermarkets, petrol, movies, eating out, gym memberships, St John, optometry and dentistry.

Open training up to families to provide skills

Provide free or discounted training on topics of relevance to families, for example, first aid training and fire safety. This would provide skills to families, as well as enhance confidence that volunteers are well trained and supported. The literature also suggests involving families in training to improve their understanding of the demands of volunteering and how organisations keep volunteers safe¹⁰.

Show appreciation by hosting family days

Continue to show appreciation to families by hosting Christmas parties and other family days. These events provide families and the community an opportunity to come together, relax, have fun and celebrate achievements. Events could be managed on a regional basis to take the pressure off brigades organising their own events. International and New Zealand studies also note the importance of including families in social activities and events^{11,12}.

¹⁰ Cowlshaw, Sean, Jim McLennan, and Lynette Evans. Volunteer Firefighting and Family Life: An Organisational Perspective on Conflict between Volunteer and Family Roles. *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, 13, no. 2, (2008): 21-31.

¹¹ NSW Rural Fire Service. *Making a difference: Women in the NSW rural fire service*. Sydney: NSW Rural Fire service (2010).

¹² UMR Research Limited. *Developing a strategy to Nurture, Enhance, and Expand the Volunteer Fire Brigade*. (New Zealand Fire Service Commission Research Report 23). Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Fire Service commission (2001).

Families enable volunteers to serve their communities

Families do a number of important tasks to enable volunteers to serve their communities. These include:

- providing household labour and caregiving duties when volunteers attend training or callouts
- providing emotional support to volunteers when they are tired and stressed
- helping volunteers overcome trauma and have a normal life
- preparing and bringing hot meals to stations to support volunteers attending long callouts or critical incidents
- supporting other volunteers and families in times of need (ill-health, death, relationship break-up, loss of employment)
- fundraising for the brigade.

Families also make a number of sacrifices to their communities. These sacrifices include not celebrating birthdays and anniversaries together, sharing volunteers with their 'second families', and having a partner or parent who is ready to respond at short notice.

Families benefit from a family member volunteering

There are a number of positive benefits for families of volunteers. Families are aware that volunteers need their support to enable them to serve their community. Families gain pride knowing that through their partners, parents' or children's volunteering efforts their community is a better place to live in. Families strengthen their networks and achieve status in their community, due to their association with a brigade and a trusted institution.

Young children in particular are proud that their parents are fire fighters. Children are proud when their parents attend their kindergarten or school open days or show their friends around the station.

92%
of volunteers think
volunteering has made
their family feel proud

'My son gets a **real kick** out of me being a volunteer. I let him bring his friends down to the station once and he was stoked. They all thought it was really cool to check out the truck and all the gear... I do it to make him proud, and to make my wife proud.' – Volunteer.

Families also make new friends or strengthen connections with other volunteers and families through the volunteer's involvement in the brigade. However, this is dependent on the culture of the brigade, and whether the brigade is welcoming and inclusive of families. It is also dependent on families' ability and willingness to engage in the life of the brigade.

80%
of volunteers think their
family has made new
friends through the
brigade

While volunteers learn new skills through training and experience, families do not receive these benefits.

The unpredictable nature of volunteering impacts negatively on families

The unpredictable on-call nature of fire and emergency services volunteering means that volunteers are always ready to respond. Volunteers have their pagers with them and adapt their day to day routines to enable a fast response. This can be seen in little actions like having clothes laid out at the end of the bed or reversing into car parks so they can respond faster.

Volunteers' families experience tension and uncertainty due to volunteers constantly being on-call. Partners in particular have to be ready to drop everything to manage parenting and household affairs when volunteers are called out during the day. Partners have to hold the fort and manage early morning and evening family routines when volunteers are called out at night. Families who took part in studies in Australia also found the unscheduled interruptions caused by fire service volunteering made it harder for them to navigate their day to day lives.^{13,14}

‘All of a sudden **I’m ‘it’ for the kids** and that could be getting them to school, feeding them... it could be from 3am until the next evening.’ - Partner

The disruptive nature of volunteering, impacts on volunteers' relationship with their partners. It also means that partners need to undertake more household labour and caregiving which can restrict their mobility. Callouts at night time impact on partners' physical and emotional health and wellbeing.

Partners are able to plan around weekly training. This makes training less disruptive for families than callouts. However, when volunteers have to go away for training it puts more pressure on partners. This is because they have to manage parenting and work commitments on their own for an extended period.

Volunteering also impacts on families' financial security. However, this impact does not seem to be related to the unscheduled nature of volunteering.

¹³ Cowlshaw, Sean, Jim McLennan, and Lynette Evans. *Volunteer Firefighting and Family Life: An Organisational Perspective on Conflict between Volunteer and Family Roles*.

¹⁴ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Conflicts between Emergency Services Volunteering and Family Life: A Volunteer Couple Perspective*. Melbourne: La Trobe University (2008).

Impact on partner and family relationships

Attending callouts can cause tension in partner relationships

Most volunteers have strong and enduring relationships with one another. This bond is established through volunteering for a common purpose, and is sustained through shared experiences. Volunteers and their families often describe the brigade as a ‘second family’.

Volunteers feel highly obligated to the brigade. They describe the ‘tug of war’ they experience when their pager goes off. When they go they let their family down and if they stay their brigade may be short crewed. Around one half of volunteers surveyed consider volunteering has taken them away from spending time with their partners and children.

51%
of volunteers think volunteering has taken them away from spending time with their family

When volunteers join a brigade they are more likely to prioritise the requirements of the brigade over the needs of their families. There is also increased pressure to turn out in small brigades. Ranked and qualified volunteers also feel more pressure to turn out when there is a low number of them in the brigade.

Some partners feel like the brigade always comes first and the family always comes second, which is putting strain on their relationships. Partners in these situations often feel guilty about asking the volunteer to spend time with them instead of attending callouts and may feel resentful if the volunteer attends.

‘When he has already been to a call, and then the pager goes off again I’ll say to him “do you have to go?” I give him the choice but I want him to **choose me.**’ – Partner

‘When I was in labour with my first child the siren went off and [volunteer] was going to **run away** but I wouldn’t let him.’ - Partner

The tension created by partners missing family time and feeling that family is a lower priority than the brigade is consistent with the experiences of international emergency services families.¹⁵

¹⁵ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Conflicts between Emergency Services Volunteering and Family Life: A Volunteer Couple Perspective.*

Volunteering impacts on the ability for families to be together

Spending time together as a family strengthens a sense of belonging, enhances communication and can have health and educational benefits for children. However, volunteers often miss important family gatherings and celebrations, for example, Christmas, birthdays, weddings and anniversaries, due to callouts. For the same reason, volunteers often miss important events for their children, for example, sports games.

Partners and children are left at events and occasions by themselves if the volunteer is called out during the event. When volunteers leave their families at these important times family members feel hurt and upset and this causes resentment and friction within the family. This experience aligns with the findings of two Australian studies that found volunteers missing special occasions and family time is a source of conflict and tension in family life.^{16, 17}

‘I have been at functions and I have had to leave my wife there **by herself**. She doesn’t like it when this happens, especially if we are somewhere where she does not know too many people.’ – Volunteer

Volunteers are aware that volunteering takes them away from spending time with their children. This can be especially challenging in families where both parents are volunteers. Some volunteers are conscious of the extra pressure their absence puts on their families. These volunteers try to compensate by ensuring they spend time with their children when they are home to give their partners a break.

When volunteers experience trauma it affects family relationships

When volunteers experience stress and trauma it influences their mood and behaviour at home. Volunteers may be quiet, withdrawn, moody or irritable following a critical incident and this creates tension in the household. This tension can be stressful for partners and children if they feel like are ‘walking on egg shells’, and do not know how to seek help. This experience aligns with an Australian study that found volunteers mood and behaviour following critical incidents experiences created conflict within the household.^{18, 19}

51%
of volunteers think
volunteering has made
them moody, irritable or
stressed at home

¹⁶ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Conflicts between Emergency Services Volunteering and Family Life: A Volunteer Couple Perspective*.

¹⁷ Cowlshaw, Sean, Jim McLennan, and Lynette Evans. *Volunteer Firefighting and Family Life: An Organisational Perspective on Conflict between Volunteer and Family Roles*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Conflicts between Emergency Services Volunteering and Family Life: A Volunteer Couple Perspective*.

Flexible brigades and strong leadership support healthy family relationships

Some brigades offer flexibility around the requirements for attending training and callouts if volunteers have pressures and demands in their personal or family life. For example, brigades offer flexibility to volunteers who have new born babies, sick parents, or where both parents are working. In these circumstances, brigade leaders promote the 'family first' message in weekly trainings and give volunteers permission to not turn out. This flexibility allows volunteers to remain with the brigade.

Impact on household labour and caregiving

Partners take the burden of household labour and caregiving

Over 80% of volunteers in the NZFS and the NRFA are men. Families we interviewed tended to have a traditional, gendered family structure with male volunteers as the main income earners and their partners working full time or part time or not working and running the household and caring for the children.

36%

of volunteers think volunteering has made their partner pick up more household or childcare duties

Volunteers put significant time and energy into their volunteer role. The time that volunteers spend training and at callouts takes them away from participating in household labour and caregiving duties. This puts more pressure on partners to do more of the household labour and caregiving. This can cause friction within relationships, particularly if tasks are not completed, or if partners would prefer to be doing other things with their time. Partners' experience of having to pick up more of the household labour and caregiving aligns with findings from research in Australia.^{20,21} Partners feel this issue is becoming increasingly significant as more families have both partners working and people's lives are busier.

'It's a lot of **extra work** around the house for me. I have been using the lawnmower a lot more than I would have liked to over the last 18 months.' - Partner

In sole parent families, household labour and caregiving falls on young people to pick up when volunteers attend callouts and training.

²⁰ Cowlshaw, Sean, Jim McLennan, and Lynette Evans. Volunteer Firefighting and Family Life: An Organisational Perspective on Conflict between Volunteer and Family Roles.

²¹ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Conflicts between Emergency Services Volunteering and Family Life: A Volunteer Couple Perspective*.

Impact on mobility

Volunteering restricts partner and family mobility

Volunteering restricts partners' mobility to pursue their own social activities and restricts families' movements. Some families have also experienced being stranded without transport when going about their activities or attending social events.

'We were at the shops. I turned around for a second and the next thing I knew **he was gone!** I'm left there in the supermarket with a trolley full of groceries, two kids and no car.' - Partner

Families with one car or living in places with limited or no public transport or family support are also particularly affected.

Volunteers who belong to brigades that run a roster system tend to stay close to home when they are on duty. Volunteers' partners acknowledge that they could go out for a family activity without the volunteer. However partners tend to stay home because activities are not as enjoyable without the whole family.

'The beach is too far away for us to respond. If we want to go to the beach for fish and chips as a family **we can't**. I can't go and the family won't go without me.' - Volunteer

Volunteering restricts partners' ability to participate in clubs, teams and social events that give them enjoyment and fulfilment. Partners are cautious about committing to regular events such as, sports teams and book clubs, as they don't want to let members' down. This is because partners know that there is a strong likelihood that they will not be able to attend, if volunteers are called out.

Impact on physical and emotional health and wellbeing

Partners experience fatigue due to lack of sleep

Volunteers are generally considerate when their pagers go off at night. They try not to disturb their partners by responding quickly to their pagers. They try and muffle noise and vibrations by putting pagers under their pillows or on another soft surface (e.g. in a sock). They also take other actions to respect their partner and family by keeping their clothes, car and house keys handy, moving around the house quietly and trying not to turn lights on.

46%

of volunteers think volunteering has disrupted their family's sleep

However, in spite of volunteers' efforts, partners are often woken, and many do not go back to sleep. Partners who are new to brigade life, partners with young infants and partners working full time are more impacted by sleep disruption than other partners. This leads to fatigue when partners are woken by a high number of night time callouts.

Partners feel anxious about volunteers' safety

Partners feel anxious about volunteers' safety when they attend fire or emergency situations. This aligns with the experiences of volunteer fire families in Australia.^{22,23} Families are also concerned about volunteers' safety and security when they travel home after callouts. This anxiety interferes with partners' day-to-day living.

Partners are more anxious at night. Partners' anxiety is increased when there are long absences with limited or no communication from volunteers. Partners' anxiety is increased when volunteers attend significant events, for example, when the Auckland Operational Support Unit supported in the Canterbury Earthquakes. Partners' anxiety is also intensified when volunteers attend incidents that are reported in the media.

36%

of volunteers think volunteering has made their partner worry about their safety

Partners who are new to brigade life are more anxious when volunteers are called out. This is because they lack information on what to expect and the level of training volunteers have. People whose partners have been volunteering for a long time, who are volunteers themselves or have grown up with a parent or older relative in a brigade feel less anxious. These partners are more confident that volunteers are equipped to manage risk in a fire or other emergency situation. This is because they know about the training volunteers undertake, the personal

²² Cowlshaw, Sean, Jim McLennan, and Lynette Evans. Volunteer Firefighting and Family Life: An Organisational Perspective on Conflict between Volunteer and Family Roles.

²³ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Conflicts between Emergency Services Volunteering and Family Life: A Volunteer Couple Perspective*.

protective equipment volunteers have and how situations are managed. Partners who are used to brigade life also know how long volunteers are going to be away, depending on the type of callout. They are able to make a rough guess of how long volunteers will be when they attend a house fire, scrub fire, campaign fire, vehicle crash or medical callout.

‘I don’t have **too many worries** when she goes out. I pretty much know what they are doing. I know the guys that she is working with and that they are all capable. I have full trust in them.’ - Volunteer whose partner is also a volunteer

Partners are anxious when volunteers experience stress and trauma

Partners are anxious when volunteers experience stress or trauma when they respond to critical incidents. These incidents include suicides, or serious incidents involving children or people that volunteers know. Partners note that this stress and trauma is often experienced when volunteers respond to medical emergencies. Partners and volunteers consider that volunteer’s stress increased when brigades becoming first responders. Partners are also anxious when volunteers experience prolonged traumatic events such as the Christchurch Earthquakes.

Volunteers shield their families from the critical incidents they experience. They often pick and choose what they share with their partners. They generally do not discuss these events with their children.

‘The family might pick up on the fact that I am quiet when I come home. **I pick and choose** what I tell the family and then I tone it down. I may tell the wife that someone died. The wife will say “how are you feeling?” and I say “yeah, I’m OK”. Then we move on.’ - Volunteer.

Partners are concerned that these incidents and constant exposure to trauma could result in volunteers developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Most partners do not know the signs of PTSD or what services and support are available for volunteers and families. One partner shared her experience of not knowing what to do when her volunteer partner cried every time he saw media coverage of a critical incident he attended and the distress this caused her family.

Some partners are also anxious over the long-term health effects of fatigue from volunteering. They are concerned that volunteers who are working full time and attending frequent night time callouts are not getting sufficient sleep.

Brigade leaders have a role in family emotional health and wellbeing

Brigade leaders are aware that volunteers and families experience fatigue due to lack of sleep. Where their situations allow, they often say to volunteers with new-borns or who have attended consecutive callouts to stay home for a while. However, the 'traffic light system'²⁴ provides limited flexibility to leaders to enable volunteers and families under pressure significant time off from volunteering.

Brigades debrief after critical events and professional support is available to volunteers who request it. One brigade brought in a registered psychologist to talk to volunteers at training night about trauma and its effects. Volunteers who attended this session found it very useful. However, most families are not aware of the services, help and support available to volunteers. Families are concerned that they do not know where to go to get help for volunteers.

Some brigade leaders telephone or visit volunteers and their partners in their homes following critical incidents. This ensures volunteers are managing well and do not require further assistance. Volunteers and partners visited by CFOs found this contact assuring.

Where callouts are long or require volunteers to be away from home, brigade leaders or partners of other volunteers may contact partners to provide an update and to see whether the family needs help. Partners who received this contact found it comforting. This communication is especially important for rural brigades who may be away and out of cell phone reception for long periods due to campaign fires.

²⁴ Operational personnel are trained in new skills through the NZFS Training and Progression System (TAPS) and other structured courses. Refresher training is required to ensure safe and effective operational practice, and the NZFS does this through Operational Skills Maintenance (OSM). OSM is recorded within the Station Management System (SMS). A traffic light system is used to indicate the status of an individual fire fighters current competency in a range of core and specialist skills.

Impact on financial security

Families recognise there are financial commitments when a family member is a volunteer firefighter. Families believe it is reasonable to incur costs in the same way as they would for a sport or hobby, such as being on a cricket team. However, they do not think it is fair when they are financially burdened over and above a reasonable level. In many cases, families' financial security is also affected by volunteering.

Reimbursement policies affect low income families

When NZFS volunteers attend training courses in Rotorua many they take unpaid leave from their employer. The service then reimburses volunteers for lost wages. This policy financially disadvantages families, particularly low income families.

Most low income families do not have financial reserves to cover volunteers' loss of earnings before they are reimbursed. This means families may need to borrow money, use an overdraft facility, or draw down on interest bearing credit cards. Some families are experiencing significant delays in reimbursement, which is creating additional pressure.

The reimbursement policy also means that volunteers are charged secondary tax on their income. This disadvantages most volunteers who are normally taxed at a lower rate.

Applying to Inland Revenue or a tax refund company for a tax refund at the end of the financial year places an additional burden on families.

Getting insurance is difficult

Many insurance companies treat volunteering as a high risk activity. Most volunteers have to pay higher premiums for life and income protection insurance or have been refused insurance. Some volunteers have been put off applying for insurance. This is because they believe getting insurance will be difficult or that they will be refused. Families with children, where the volunteer is the sole or main income earner are particularly impacted by insurance companies' decisions. Lack of insurance could impact on a family's ability to cope financially in the event of a volunteer's ill health or death.

'It was **easier** to get insurance when I was dangling over the side of buildings for a living than when I became a volunteer firefighter.' - Volunteer

'When we had our first child I started to **worry** about how we would cope if anything were to happen to [volunteer]. I actually don't know how we would manage.' - Partner

Volunteering impacts on employment decisions

Family demands and workforce opportunities are mainly driving families' employment decisions. However, volunteering demands are also contributing to these circumstances. In some situations volunteering is also affecting volunteers and their partners' ability to progress in their careers. One volunteer had turned down a promotion that offered his family greater financial security as he was already sacrificing too much family time to his fire service obligations and could not take on additional responsibility in his working life.

Volunteers who attend a high number of callouts, experience fatigue from lack of sleep, physical exertion and emotional distress. Some employers allow volunteers to come in late if they have been called out at night. However, other employers are less flexible. Some volunteers are taking annual or sick leave when they experience fatigue. This practice means volunteers are using employment entitlements for volunteering purposes. It also means that volunteers are depleting leave which means less leave for family holidays.

Fuel and out-of-pocket expenses add up

Fuel costs to attend training and callouts are an expense for volunteers. This expense particularly affects low income families and families who live in rural areas or far from their stations. Auckland OSU volunteers who travel large distances are particularly impacted by fuel costs. In some cases, the cost of fuel means volunteers do not attend callouts. Vehicle wear and tear is an additional expense for volunteers.

Families incur out-of-pocket expenses when volunteers attend training. Volunteers' accommodation and meals are covered when they attend training. However, families incur out-of-pocket expenses such as additional toiletry items. Partners may also spend more on takeaways or other treats to relieve the burden of parenting on their own.

Rural brigades incur costs when they attend campaign fires. Volunteers often purchase food and other items for overnight campaigns or emergencies lasting several days. These items are purchased spontaneously and often from small, convenient stores, that are more expensive than supermarkets in main centres.

Seventeen percent of volunteers agree or strongly agree that volunteering puts financial pressure on their family.

Families appreciate financial help and rewards

In tight-knit communities, brigades, volunteers and families often contribute to volunteers in financial need.

One brigade gives \$100 to volunteers who attend training. This koha is designed to ease the pressure on families. Volunteers in rural communities often shout their fellow volunteers' food and other consumables when they go to campaign fires, if they know money is tight.

Rural brigades welcome the Council stipend for attending campaign fires²⁵. This additional income is particularly welcomed by low income and unemployed volunteers.

Some brigades also run discount schemes. Volunteers can get discounts on retailers and services such as Mitre 10 and St John. However, families have low awareness of discount schemes and how to access them. There are also many challenges with accessing these rewards. These challenges include discounts only being available to volunteers, staff working for businesses not being aware of discounts, or discounts only applying to certain goods. There are also issues with proving eligibility as identification cards are hard to get and renew. Discount opportunities are also limited in rural brigades where there are less services and competition.

Families appreciate discounts and rewards that are available and of value to the whole family. Families in one brigade spoke favourably about the previous arrangement their brigade had with Waiwera Hot Pools. This arrangement provided low cost entry to the pools for the whole family to enjoy.

²⁵ In some cases members of NRFA brigades who attend campaign fires may receive a stipend or honorarium from the local council to recognise lost earnings. Policies differ between brigades and councils and not all brigades and councils have these agreements.

Impacts vary amongst families

Families with young children and on low incomes are particularly impacted by volunteering

Families are under more pressure when they have young children. Volunteering decreases the amount of time and energy the volunteer has to contribute to domestic and caregiving duties. This puts pressure on partners to manage household duties and caregiving.

Low income families are particularly impacted by volunteering. This is because low income families are more compromised by the training reimbursement process. They are also less able to afford fuel and other out-of-pocket expenses.

Families are more affected when volunteers are in their first year of service, when they belong to busy brigades, or hold key positions

Families are affected more when volunteers are in the new recruit phase and their first year of service. This is because families do not know what to expect, they do not understand the policies and procedures that keep volunteers safe and they do not have close relationships with brigades for support. During this time volunteers also attend their seven day recruit training course in Rotorua. This is a pressure point for partners who have to manage home affairs and caregiving on their own.

Busy brigades are more impacted than quieter brigades. Volunteers feel more obligated to attend callouts when stations are busy, the brigade is small or when they hold key positions, for example, drivers and officers. This is because there is a higher chance the brigade will short crew without them. There is also a high administrative burden on CFOs and DCFOs. The time spent completing administration decreases the amount of time CFOs and DCFOs have available to spend with their families.

Families are more resilient when they are exposed to volunteering

Some families are very resilient to the impact that fire and emergency services volunteering has on them.

If the volunteer joined a brigade before entering a relationship, the partner finds the demands of volunteering easier to cope with. This is because the partner went into the relationship knowing volunteering was a significant part of the volunteer's life, and therefore 'signed up' to the lifestyle. It is also perhaps because the partner did not know anything different. These partners are more likely to consider that volunteering is part of their partner's DNA.

Partners who are volunteers or who have a family history of working or volunteering in emergency services see volunteering as a way of life. These partners find it easier to deal with

the demands of having a volunteer fire fighter in the family. They are more confident undertaking their role of supporting their partners to serve their communities.

The longer families stay volunteering the more they adapt to the lifestyle and are more resilient at managing demands.

Volunteers' partners are more impacted than their children

Partners of volunteers are more impacted by volunteering than children of volunteers. Partners take on volunteers' parenting roles when volunteers are called out or attend training. Partners are more likely to have their sleep disrupted than children when volunteers are called out at night. Partners are more likely than children to be burdened if volunteers experience critical incidents.

Experience of family-focussed activities and events

The NZFS and the NRFA undertake a number of social activities and events for volunteers, their families and the wider community. These activities and events are instigated and managed at the brigade level. Therefore the range and number of events varies widely.

Brigades host a range of social activities and events

All brigades organise events for specific purposes and celebrations, for example:

- Formal events like Gold Star ceremonies and Awards nights
- Christmas, Halloween, Guy Fawkes, Easter parties
- ‘Laddies nights’ an event for partners
- Themed evenings, such as 1920’s night and progressive dinner
- Fundraising events, such as fishing competitions.

Most brigades host informal get-togethers, for example:

- Friday night drinks and barbecues
- Movie nights at the station
- Kids sleep overs at the station.

Most brigades also attend other community events, for example:

- School galas and open days.

Hosting activities and events develops a sense of community and helps with image building

Volunteers and families believe it is important and worthwhile for brigades to host social activities and events, and to play a role in other community events. Providing social activities and events for volunteers and their families shows the services’ appreciation to volunteers in terms of their achievements. Providing these events also shows the services’ appreciation to volunteers and their families in terms of their commitment and investment in volunteering.

Activities and events are more than social. They assist with connecting volunteers and families with one another and building a sense of community. This is important for building resilience, particularly for new volunteers and their families.

When members of the wider community attend brigade events or when the brigade goes to other events this helps with image building.

Stations are becoming more family-friendly but could still improve

Most volunteers and families believe that stations are becoming more family-friendly and welcoming to partners and children. However, in a few brigades the 'party culture' is still present and families feel uncomfortable exposing their children to these environments.

Families feel that physical changes to stations such as carpeting, painting, installing televisions and new furniture have contributed to the warmth and homeliness of stations. However, most stations do not have fenced areas so parents need to keep a close eye on their children at all times. Parents also note the lack of toys, games and movies at some stations make it hard to entertain children. These factors make social activities and events less attractive to parents.

Families' experiences of activities and events

Volunteers and their families particularly value the Christmas parties. While these events are aimed at children, the whole family benefits from attending.

Some volunteers and families note an absence of activities and events for teenagers. Teenagers only become involved in brigade life if they sign up through cadet programmes or become volunteers.

Due to the gendered makeup of the brigade, some male partners feel awkward at brigade events and activities. This is mainly due to the division of volunteers and 'wives' at these events. Male partners do not feel like they belong with the volunteers' group. They also feel awkward socialising with female partners.

Some families feel organised events create pressure and stress for organisers as well as an obligation for families to turn up. These families prefer informal events such as Friday night drinks where they can turn up and leave as they please. A number of volunteers and their partners comment positively on regionally organised events, as they did not need to organise them, and did not feel obligated to attend.

Best practice interventions to support families

The literature suggests several interventions to support the families of fire and emergency services volunteers. These interventions are intended to minimise the conflict between volunteering and family life. Brigades are implementing some but not all of these interventions.

Providing information to families

Studies recommend that brigades and other emergency organisations should provide the following information for families:

- the increased demands on family members from volunteers being involved in emergency services^{26,27}
- typical reactions to stress and the support services available²⁸
- training and procedures that protect the welfare of volunteers²⁹
- the importance of prioritising family ahead of brigade responsibilities and suggest including this information as part of volunteer training³⁰.

Involving families in training and induction

Several studies suggest involving families in training and induction.^{31,32,33} The New South Wales Rural Fire Service suggests including female volunteers in training who have taken a break for family reasons. The research states that this makes it easier for them to re-join. The New South Wales Rural Fire Authority recommends that brigades distribute calendars to volunteers. The calendars would include social activities, training, and community events. This would encourage brigade members and their families to stay involved at a level.³⁴

²⁶ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Volunteer work life balance: Recommendations for emergency service agencies*. Melbourne: La Trobe University (2009).

²⁷ McLennan J et al. (2010) Issues Facing Australian Volunteer-Based Emergency Service Organisations 2008-2010

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ NSW Rural Fire Service.

³⁰ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Volunteer work life balance: Recommendations for emergency service agencies*.

³¹ NSW Rural Fire service.

³² Cowlshaw, Sean, Jim McLennan, and Lynette Evans. Volunteer Firefighting and Family Life: An Organisational Perspective on Conflict between Volunteer and Family Roles.

³³ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Volunteer work life balance: Recommendations for emergency service agencies*.

³⁴ NSW Rural Fire service.

Hosting social activities and events

New Zealand and Australian literature note the importance of including the families of volunteers in social events.^{35,36} By participating in events and activities, volunteers and their families build connections with other members of the brigade and their families.

Developing support systems

Sources recommend encouraging families to help each other during busy periods for the brigade.³⁷ Studies also recommend assisting communities to develop their own support systems and local networks of families.³⁸ A study notes that communities are not homogenous and therefore a one-size fits all uniform approach to supporting families may be ineffective. The study suggests using an Asset-based Community Development approach. This would involve bringing people together to identify assets within the community and develop their own individualised solutions to community problems.³⁹

Economising demands on volunteers' time

An Australian study suggests that fire services could decrease strain and pressure on volunteers. This could be done by introducing systems and process to ensure that fire stations are as economical as possible with making calls on volunteers' time for incidents, training and meetings.⁴⁰

Encouraging managers to support volunteers

One study suggests that managers of volunteers or regional personnel could identify volunteers who are overloaded and help them to achieve a better life balance. This could include encouraging them to take short leave periods or switch to less demanding duties.⁴¹

³⁵ NSW Rural Fire service.

³⁶ UMR Research Limited.

³⁷ NSW Rural Fire service.

³⁸ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Volunteer work life balance: Recommendations for emergency service agencies*.

³⁹ Cowlshaw, Sean, Jim McLennan, and Lynette Evans. *Volunteer Firefighting and Family Life: An Organisational Perspective on Conflict between Volunteer and Family Roles*.

⁴⁰ McLennan, Jim, Adrian Birch, Sean Cowlshaw, and Peter Hayes.

⁴¹ Cowlshaw, Sean, Lynette Evans, and Jim McLennan. *Volunteer work life balance: Recommendations for emergency service agencies*.

Research background, objectives and method

Background

We undertook this research to identify practical solutions to help families support volunteers to serve their communities.

New Zealand's fire services are dependent on volunteers, with over 80% of staff being considered volunteers. Previous research has indicated that work and family are the two main reasons that volunteers leave the fire services⁴². However, there is limited research on how families support volunteers to serve their communities, and the impact on families from having a family member volunteer to the fire services. There is also limited research on best practice support for families of volunteers so they can support volunteers to serve their communities.

The research was funded under NZFSC's Contestable Research Fund. It was conducted between September 2016 and April 2017. The research was undertaken during the transition from NZFS and NRFA to FENZ.

Research objectives

The research objectives were to explore and understand:

- Interventions to support and strengthen families of volunteers.
- The role of partners/families in supporting volunteers
- The impact volunteering has on partners/families
- The perceptions and experiences of family-focused programmes and activities
- Best practice in relation to strengthening and supporting partners/families.

⁴² UMR Research Limited.

Method

We undertook a mixed method approach to the research. The research activities were undertaken in the order set out below. The research was undertaken collaboratively with the NZFS Research Sponsor who signed off research tools, participated in data collection and analysis.

Desktop review

We undertook a desktop review to identify the existing body of knowledge. The desktop review was a brief scan of literature. Articles were supplied by the NZFS library. The scan included journal articles and grey literature from New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom from 2006 onwards. We also included a 2001 report, as it was one of the few sources of research available on the impact of volunteering on volunteers' families.

Site selection

We conducted the research in Region 1 across fire areas 1-5. We selected this region because of the diverse population and the pressures families are under in this region, such as housing affordability in Auckland and unemployment in Northland. We selected brigades that had a high number of callouts, as impacts would more likely to be visible. We included NZFS and NRFA brigades in the research. NZFS and NRFA regional managers were involved in selecting the sites. Thirteen brigades took part in the research. NZFS brigades were Dargaville, Kawakawa, Kaikohe, Onerahi, Pukekohe, Silverdale, Tuakau, Waitakere and the Auckland OSU. NRFA brigades were Karikari, Orere Point, Rawhiti and Whananaki.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research identified how families support volunteers to serve their communities. It identified the impact of volunteering on families, and perceptions and experiences of family-focussed activities provided by NZFS and NRFA. It also identified possible solutions that FENZ could implement to make the organisation more family-friendly.

We worked with CFOs to recruit participants. We asked CFOs to identify families across a range of ages, ethnicities, family structures, life stages, roles and length of service. We ensured that families with young children were included in the research as this life stage is an obvious pressure point. CFOs informed volunteers about the project and provided us with contact information.

We undertook three focus groups and nineteen in-depth and paired interviews with volunteers and their families. Participants included:

- 27 family members of volunteers (24 female partners, 2 male partners, 1 teenage son)
- 29 volunteers (21 male volunteers, 8 female volunteers). Eight of these volunteers were couples in relationships with other volunteers.

Focus groups and in-depth interviews were 90 minutes long and 60 minutes long, respectively. Interviews were taped with participants' permission. Participants received koha of \$60 to acknowledge their contribution to the research.

Quantitative research

We asked volunteers to complete a short self-completion survey. The survey was developed after the qualitative research had taken place. The purpose of the survey was to quantify the impacts family members and volunteers raised in the qualitative research. Family members were not asked to complete a survey, due to challenges accessing them.

We sent surveys to the following NZFS brigades; Dargaville, Kawakawa, Kaikohe, Onerahi, Pukekohe, Silverdale, Tuakau, Waitakere and the Auckland OSU. We sent surveys to the following NRFA brigades; Karikari, Orere Point and Whananaki⁴³. A total of 190 surveys were sent out and 159 surveys were returned. The response rate is 84%.

The questionnaire asked volunteers to rate on a five point scale the extent to which their volunteering impacted on aspects of their daily life.

- Made their family feel proud of what they are doing for their community
- Made their family feel part of their community
- Gave their family new friends through the brigade
- Made it difficult to plan for or disrupted family activities
- Disrupted their family's sleep
- Made their spouse/partner anxious for their safety
- Made their spouse/partner pick up more of the household and/or childcare duties
- Took them away from spending time with their children
- Made them moody, irritable or depressed at home
- Put financial pressure on their family

Design workshops

We conducted two workshops to design practical solutions to the challenges families experience supporting volunteers to serve their communities. The first half of the workshops was dedicated to presenting the findings of the qualitative and quantitative research to volunteers and their families. The second half of the workshops was asking volunteers and their families to identify possible solutions to the challenges families experienced.

Workshops were held in Pukekohe and Kawakawa. Twenty five volunteers and family members attended the workshops. Most participants had been involved in qualitative and quantitative research phases. Workshops lasted two hours and refreshments were provided.

⁴³ Rawhiti were not sent surveys as the brigade was a late addition to the qualitative fieldwork and the sample frame for the quantitative research had already been finalised.

Analysis

We transcribed the interviews, focus groups and workshops. We entered survey data into excel and generated tables. We held analysis workshops to identify patterns and themes and draw conclusions. We also tested assumptions with NZFS and NRFA regional and area managers. We selected supporting evidence for the research themes, for example, quotes, statistics and examples. We wrote this report against the research objectives.

Caveats

This report represents the views of volunteers and family members who participated in the research. These views were drawn from 13 brigades in Region 1 and may not represent the views of other brigades and regions. The survey was only completed by volunteers. Family members may have responded differently to the survey. However, key themes described in this report were consistent across the data sources. This consistency increases the dependability and rigour of the findings.

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