



# ▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

## Adult learning through fire and emergency service organisations in small and remote Australian towns

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▶ **PUBLIC SAFETY ORGANISATIONS** play a vital role in preventing and reacting to fire and emergencies throughout Australia. They put considerable effort into training volunteers. This report investigates how literacy levels affect volunteers' ability to meet increasing community expectations, and considers means for them to learn valued literacy and communication skills.

Rural fire services and state emergency services usually maintain headquarters and regional offices to coordinate training. Drivers for change in their training practices include the training needs of diverse regions, the diversity of employees and volunteers, new emergency response technologies, and changing community and legal pressures.

A study was conducted of 20 fire brigades and state emergency service (SES) units in small and remote communities across five states. Surveys were distributed to registered members in each brigade or unit, yielding 329 responses (73%). Over 80% of respondents were male, and over 90% were unpaid fire or state emergency service volunteers.

The brigades and units themselves were found to be important adult learning providers, the majority (60%) of all respondents attending training at least monthly. Common forms of training were technical (85% of respondents), emergency response (83%), team and leadership (66%) and other communication skills (60%).

Where locations also had local technical and further education (TAFE) or adult and community education (ACE) organisations, these tended to show limited knowledge of, and few training links with, the corresponding public safety organisations. This is partly

because the learning organisations tend to have female employees, whereas most emergency volunteers are male.

In the area of communications, 30% or more of respondents ranked their skills as 'low' for using computers, leading meetings or briefings, and public speaking. Often, the number of people rating particular communication skills as 'highly important' to the brigade or unit exceeded the number rating their own skills as 'high'.

While nearly 80% of respondents would like to improve their communication skills, only 15% agreed literacy was an issue for them, although other evidence suggests this is an understatement. A large majority expressed positive feelings about being a volunteer and their unit's place in the community.

Volunteers are enthusiastic about learning, but older members resist formal training, believing it may be too difficult or will not recognise acquired skills. Most members believe that because these are team organisations, it is important that the 'team' have the full range of skills, rather than each individual.

Volunteers believe their organisations play important social and community roles. Registered members use acquired skills across the community, while spouses and partners gain skills through their support role. This all contributes to the development of 'social capital', or the skills and networks that result from collective, civic activities.

The report suggests the bonding that occurs between members is invaluable when they are responding to emergencies, and enables them to do so quickly and efficiently.



Strategies for further literacy and communications development should note the volunteers' strong preference for practical onsite training delivered by their own organisations. However, local partnerships with adult learning organisations can be strengthened.

## ► Messages for policy and practice

Rural fire and emergency organisations are important community locations for adult learning, particularly for men or for those with limited formal education. Volunteers are keen to learn directly relevant skills.

While some volunteers are attracted to the idea of skills and qualifications, others (particularly older men) may be deterred by the perceived imposition of higher training requirements. Given that the organisations struggle to attract, train and retain skilled volunteers, barriers should be minimised.

At least 15% of volunteers can be expected to have difficulties with training because of limited communication or literacy skills, and this may grow with increasing training and assessment demands. In re-developing training and materials, 'hands on' training best suits most volunteers.

Literacy development in itself is not core business for the organisations, and to some extent a fire or emergency team can make up for individual skill gaps. However, the study reinforces the importance of accurate communication skills in emergency work, and the interest that volunteers have in developing these skills.

The learning that occurs through widely dispersed fire and emergency organisations contributes broadly to rural and remote communities. In essence, they are a kind of local adult learning organisation, although not widely recognised as such by volunteers or the community.

These organisations are willing to further the communication skills of their volunteers. However, they prefer that any such training be funded, directly relevant to the organisation's role, delivered primarily through existing structures, and undertaken locally.

*Adult learning through fire and emergency service organisations in small and remote Australian towns, by Christine Hayes, Barry Golding and Jack Harvey, can be downloaded from the NCVER website at <[www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1497.html](http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1497.html)>.*