

A volunteer's perspective as part of a busy integrated brigade.

After a few years as a volunteer and coming from a rural brigade (Bannockburn) into a busy integrated urban brigade (Geelong City), I was told it could be a difficult transition and possibly a place with some animosity. Regardless of stories, I like to take my interactions on face value and gather my own intel. What I discovered is it is all about attitudes.

Yes there are some volunteers within the CFA with the expectation that staff are there really to support volunteers and there are some staff with an attitude that volunteers are unprofessional and not needed.

However at Geelong City, the real thing I did find was a team. This team has the classic makeup of key players, a strong on field depth, reserve supporting players, officials and behind the scenes people. They all come together and they all have their skills which support each other.

One of the points I bring up with new volunteers in our team is; as part of an integrated brigade volunteers are there to support the on field team or in other words Our brigade - volunteers are there to support the career staff

The value of having volunteers within an integrated brigade is varied. This can be actually on the fire ground providing a surge capacity when incidents do happen, through to assisting in the background by acting as a backup/resource for the wider group or region. The value can seem small but nonetheless important like responding to the station when appliances have been committed elsewhere.

Sometimes the value is also not clearly observed, an example of this would be volunteers as the class of students for inexperienced staff to practice skills in mentoring, training and management. On the reverse side volunteers get access to some of the best trainers/mentors, training, equipment and scenarios which make them a better resource when called to assist.

History & Culture

When you walk around the Geelong City Fire Station you see some amazing images and artefacts of the history of the brigade. The history of volunteers and staff going back over the past 160 years provides a sense of pride and responsibility in continuing their legacy.

The names on the walls demonstrate a team of staff and volunteers have served the city of Geelong and their community since its earliest beginnings.

When I look at them I see groups of firefighters expecting that we will continue their proud tradition regardless if we are staff or volunteers.

Current practices

Within our brigade there is a small and dedicated group of volunteers who provide the following capacities

- Surge capacity and direct response at incidents within the brigade primary area
- Crews /additional numbers for strike teams, supporting and enhanced responses
- Manning the station and backfilling appliances when staff are engaged at incidents
- Short term coverage whilst staff are recalled
- Providing transportation and relief crewing for operational response
- Providing additional resources to the district for large fires

There is an annual training package developed by the staff and volunteers that targets key requirements in providing an operational response. The training also ensures the volunteers are kept at a consistent level of competency to work efficiently with staff on the fire ground, performing a number of roles.

In addition there is a number of specialist response roles developed within the brigade that we gain accreditation in and respond to including.

- Road Rescue Assist
- Technical Rescue Assist
- Rope Rescue Assist
- Ladder Platform Assist
- Tanker Response

For these roles volunteers are assessed by our staff using an agreed training package. Volunteers who are qualified then become assistants at incidents where these resources are deployed. In doing this we provide an additional skilled resource to the career staff already responding to the event.

I see this as the core types of roles for volunteers moving forward with our and other larger integrated brigades.

Interoperability of career firefighters and volunteers - the road ahead

It is my belief that in supporting the career staff in their delivery of primary response and in providing niche roles within the brigade, volunteers can continue to be an important component of an integrated brigade.

As volunteers we need to understand our role within the service delivery, understanding when our assistance is useful and standing up and accepting the responsibilities being a team member requires.

For career staff I hope they see the value and increase in team capability they achieve when engaging the volunteer members.

Being part of this team also means some traditional lines are blurred. As volunteers at Geelong City we are fully supportive of the staff and their career choice, we make it clear to all our role is not to cause any issue with their livelihood and we maintain clear communications to ensure this.

We also operate in a wider environment that is volunteer based, we encourage our team to engage within the group, region and state volunteer association to provide our voice and perspectives.

My goal within our brigade is to continue the proud traditions built over the past 160 years and ensure a united team of volunteers and career staff continues for many years to come.

Regards,

Jeremy Egan

2nd LT Geelong City Fire Brigade