AFTER THE fires

RESULTS FROM QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

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Steve: *I'd say we were mates when we went there, and we're potentially closer mates having been there. I look around at these guys and many that went and put themselves on the line, it gives you, I don't know respect to the people that are doing it. Everyone was touched by it. So, everyone's bound together almost more sort of thing. It almost made you feel more part of the community, like one big family. There's only one time we don't get along and that's football … But after the game we're all mates.*

Ross: *It helps you to know that if you had to go out again that you'd know that you had people who have got your back. I feel so proud of those that have lost everything, but they'll still smile at you in the street. I still get very emotional on how close I come to losing all my stuff and the town, but it's still standing here. Most people out there are so fricking strong and beautiful, they're an inspiration to everyone. It just happens.*

Brian: *Everyone that was on the trucks fighting fires, saving houses and livelihoods out of people they know. So now they're back rebuilding what they saw being lost, so the cycle just keeps going around and around.*

Ross: *You haven't got different people coming in to do different jobs; we're all here, we all owned it, we all lost it, and now we're all rebuilding it.*
Interviewer: So, so what do you think you still need?

Steve: *Footballers.*

Ross: *Six-foot-six ruckman [group laughing]*

[Focus Group 1, South Australian (SA) CFS Volunteers]

Contents

Please note: This document contains content that may be distressing for some readers. If you find yourself in need of assistance, please seek support from trusted family, peers or services.

Executive Summary

A warming and drying climate has changed weather patterns throughout the world, leading to an increased risk of extreme fire seasons in Australia (van Oldenborgh et al, 2021). The 2019-2020 bushfire season in Australia is described as the 'Black Summer' due to the unprecedented magnitude, duration and intensity of the bushfires, which started earlier than expected and were far more widespread and destructive than usual. All Australian states and territories were affected, with the most significant impact felt in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland. In total, 33 lives were lost, more than 3,000 homes were destroyed, wildlife was decimated, and over 20 million hectares of community and farming land and national parks were burnt. Governments and communities have to consider how we respond to increasingly frequent and severe events such as the Black Summer fires.

The following report is based on interviews and focus groups conducted 6-12 months after the 2019-2020 bushfire season. These were undertaken with 29 first responder volunteers across Australia who helped to fight the fires and 15 community volunteers contributing to the recovery effort, capturing their experiences and views from a mental health and wellbeing perspective. They lived and worked in the communities most closely affected and their insights into the fires and their impacts may be helpful in understanding how to better prepare and support the ongoing mental health and wellbeing of volunteers supporting bushfire prone communities.

These insights relate to preventative measures and actions that agencies can take to support and promote mental health of all their members, especially younger volunteers and those who have more recently become volunteers. They also indicate the importance of increasing individual and organisational awareness and response to the potential mental health concerns arising from cumulative exposure to trauma, not only from major events but also from a career of routine exposure to potentially traumatic events.

Findings

We found many strengths within participants' existing services and the ways in which they supported each other's mental health. For firefighter volunteers, the unique nature of their experiences, the strength of the camaraderie that resulted from those experiences, their commitment to protecting their local communities and their love for what they do motivated many to continue volunteering. The strength of informal peer support, particularly the informal rules about protecting new and young members, was highlighted. The extreme situations and the qualities that they saw in themselves and others at these times gave them a sense of value in their contribution, and a stronger belief in others.

> We need to work out how we can actually sustain the positive lessons that we have learnt … It's not just about recovery from the bushfire; it's saying what sort of society would we like to live in, and people are beginning to ask …and think through those questions, and that's really heartening. [Frank, SA Past CFS, Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 20 years]

These experiences and lessons are summarised in three themes below, with greater detail about the findings and recommendations provided in the full report.

Note. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

Theme 1. Experiences and impacts

Volunteers spoke about their experiences in the face of the fires; some of their accounts were harrowing. They described the fires as traumatic, extended and extreme; a situation that no-one was prepared for and not possible to simulate in training. Hence, across the spectrum of the experienced and those newer to volunteer firefighting, all experienced significant impacts on their mental health and wellbeing that were apparent long after the fires. For many, the impacts were cumulative and arose from many years as a volunteer. They spoke about living in and fighting the fires on their doorstep and the sheer exhaustion they experienced amidst a fire path that was perceived as inevitable. They spoke about travelling interstate to support other communities fighting the fires. In the context of talking about their experiences, volunteers made several comments about operational issues in the context of their mental health. This was particularly apparent where operational issues created or exacerbated unresolved challenges to doing their role. This then impacted negatively on their ability to debrief, contributed to cumulative stress, and impacted negatively on their longer-term mental health and wellbeing.

Several volunteers emphasised the loss of control that they felt, linked to the chaos and confusion in the midst of bushfires perceived as beyond anyone's control. Several participants described how they continued to feel the impacts on mental health. Several recounted near-death experiences and the aftermath that stayed with them, in the form of flashbacks, depression, anger, disillusionment and physical health complaints. Many spoke of the camaraderie and the strength of their shared experiences during and after the fires.

> …so just jump on a truck and then the days roll one after the other, but yeah. It's all a blur really. …at the end of it and then you fall …. My friends lost their house while they weren't there. They were on the truck somewhere else, but you know, you'd hope someone else is maybe coming up behind you and they're at your house. But at the end of the day, it was just too big. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 8 years]

> I don't think any of us were quite prepared for that fire. Our captain and one of the Lieutenants with probably 50 years combined firefighting experience with those two and they'd never seen anything like it … There are some things you just can't create in training … we practise burn over drills each year; however, those drills are all linked towards us all being in the truck, none stuck outside which we all were … you probably go to hell to be honest. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

Theme 2. Coping and recovery

Many volunteers described how they continued to feel the impacts of fighting the fires on their mental health, particularly with seeing the reminders all around them as firefighters and members of their communities. They recounted their heavy reliance on informal peer support and the central role played by their families; although the potential for families to experience vicarious trauma in their role as confidantes was not mentioned. This meant that families and their potential mental health needs were largely invisible. They also talked about their experiences of formal and informal debriefing, and their use of more formal supports for mental health and wellbeing. They spoke about recognition and acknowledgement of their roles and their skills and experience as core to their mental health. They spoke about how their own wellbeing was integrally tied to the wellbeing and cohesiveness of their communities.

> And I can't – I can't go to a fire now … I've lost too many houses; I've seen too many people lose everything- I can't do it anymore. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

> I had an incident recently where out of the blue I was just a mess. … I had an appointment with the psychologist and when we thought back and thought it through, we had been doing some VA training – got hot as all hell and we think it was kind of like the body saying the last time you were this hot, this and this and this happened sort of stuff, and suddenly I am feeling crap again. … we were pretty convinced that they sent us down to die. [Colin, CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 13 years]

> We're all here, we all owned it, we all lost it, and now we're all rebuilding it. [Ross, CFS Volunteer, aged 60s; experience: 52 years]

> It's not just about rebuilding fences, it's about rebuilding lives. [Jess, SA Community Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 1 year]

> There were only two in our brigade that had seen Ash Wednesday, so most of them were a bit on the green side … so they get thrown in, they see houses burning down and people injured … afterwards, we sat them down … just go and talk … this sharing is – it was very significant. … I can remember one fellow saying how he had to take charge of the appliance. Well, he hadn't done that before … he had all this responsibility. Really, we're not talking about playing marbles here, we're talking about people's homes burning down … he was scratching gravel a bit. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience: 60 years]

Theme 3. The role of volunteer organisations to better support volunteers

Twenty years ago, few fire and emergency service agencies formally supported the mental health of their staff and volunteers. Greater awareness and understanding have led to a range of supports being introduced; however, further improvements can still be made. Additionally, as the duration and intensity of the fires that emergency services personnel are facing increases, it is critical that the structures, organisations and supports also evolve to reflect the increasing demands of the role.

Whilst many of the lessons described in this research have been spoken of in previous reports and research, the insights from these volunteers provide a richer picture of what is needed to support the mental health and wellbeing of volunteers and why. **Our research highlighted the importance of understanding *why* the interaction between volunteers, families and communities is integral to the volunteering experience and their ability to heal**. Formal relief efforts and services, and improved organisational preparedness, training and supports must sit alongside recognition and support for the many valuable and effective informal support structures that exist in the individual brigades and local communities in which volunteer firefighters perform their role. Supporting volunteers' mental health also means supporting their families and communities that are affected by fire and other emergency events.

Recommendations

Several recommendations are derived directly from the experiences and expertise of volunteer participants involved in this research. The recommendations highlight that a range of interconnected processes are needed to support an individual's mental health within the wider context in which they live their lives – their local community - informed by and underpinned by three core requirements:

1. Acknowledging, enhancing and making use of the strengths of existing support networks and also the importance of fostering cohesive community environments.
2. Scaling up training and support resources for volunteer agencies to ensure the sustainability of volunteering.
3. Improving collaboration and coordination between different groups (firefighter volunteers, paid staff, community volunteers) before, during and after the fire season.

A full description of recommendations arising from this research appear in detail at the end of this report. The key recommendations are summarised below:

1**. Improve acknowledgment and refinement (via upskilling where required) of existing informal mental health supports/networks currently utilised by volunteers (i.e., the hot-debrief, formal and informal mentoring roles, and peer-to-peer and family support). (R-1)**

- Services more explicitly recognise the value of informal peer debrief that occurs within volunteer crews by encouraging and supporting local volunteer leaders to activate this peer support as an explicit part of their job description. (R-1.1)
- Include trauma-informed care training for peer workers as an explicit part of their job description. (R-1.2)
- Ensure that follow-up support services are delivered face-to-face, where possible, as the preferred option and minimise phone follow-up; and that it is delivered by those who are known and trusted by the volunteer, and by individuals with 'local' knowledge, skills and understanding of the ESFR organisational culture and structures. (R-1.3)
- Follow-up with volunteers beyond the initial critical incident period after significant fire or other events as a matter of course, to protect against cumulative trauma. (R-1.4)
- Visit volunteers on leave with mental health problems 'in place' or at home, and consult with/include their families, where possible to ensure their needs are assessed holistically, seeing the person in the whole context of family and community. (R-1.5)
- Enable volunteers to seek formal counselling support outside of organisationally provided services (and financially compensate) to ensure privacy and confidentiality, and foster help-seeking early for mental health concerns. (R-1.6)
- Many volunteer firefighters are supported primarily by their families. Friends and volunteer peers are also crucial supports, especially for those who do not have family support. These may be regarded as informal volunteers – they too should have access to mental health support, formally supported by organisations. (R-1.7)

- Consider a 'Community of Practice' or similar forum, especially for those volunteers in leadership roles (e.g., brigade Captains and more experienced firefighter volunteers), where those providing informal peer support and debrief can support each other's mental health, wellbeing and role development. (R-1.8)

2. **Reduce administrative load on operational volunteers through a review of administrative structures and the recruitment of agency specific administrative volunteers. (R-2)**

- Review brigade structures to reduce the administrative load on operational volunteers. (R-2.1)
- Given some volunteers do not want to perform operational roles (due to preference, capacity, step down due to cumulative stresses) but still want to make a contribution, recruitment of volunteers specifically for these non-operational roles could be considered. (R2.2)

3. **Support greater recognition of the skills across the sector to allow volunteer and paid personnel to work together side by side in relation to training, disaster preparation and campaign coordination and communication. (R-3)**

- More opportunities for paid and volunteer staff to connect and share training and support when preparing for fire seasons and campaigns in order to improve trust as well as build relationships and respect. (R-3.1)
- Improved use of handovers to key people on the ground, especially during campaigns to avoid confusion and chaos, and improve communication about the fire situation and status between shifts on the fireground. (R-3.2)
- Keep established crews together, wholly or at least partially, where possible, when on campaigns. (R-3.3)
- Greater consistency in firefighting equipment across borders. (R-3.4)
- Ensure volunteers have adequate accommodation and other supports whilst on campaigns (where possible and practicable), especially given many volunteers are retirement age and may require added supports for sleep and rest to recover physically and mentally at the end of each shift. (R-3.5)
- Ensure organisational management and politicians keep their promises to ESFR volunteers and their local brigades. (R-3.6)
- AFAC, through its role in implementing uniform accreditation standards across the sector, consider how volunteers can be supported to maintain their training and accreditation at the same or similar level to paid firefighters. (R-3.7)

4. Improve financial compensation from the government for loss of income/earnings incurred as a consequence of volunteering, particularly during a major bushfire campaign, to alleviate other sources of stress on individual volunteer first responders and small communities. (R-4)

- There is a compensation scheme, but how it is applied and participants' knowledge of it appears to be inconsistent. Hence, the process of how to apply needs to be clearer. Volunteer organisations need to support volunteers to make claims rather than leaving this to individual volunteers. (R-4.1)
- Government review how firefighter volunteers can be financially compensated for loss of earnings. The following should be explored:
    - Remuneration should only apply when state governments require that volunteers be available to deal with an emergency.
    - Any registered emergency services volunteer to be given leave on full pay whenever their services are required. (Employers to recover their costs from the government.)
    - Self-employed volunteers to be compensated at a rate commensurate with the industry standard. (R-4.2)
- The nature of some rural communities is changing, and many people commute to the large urban centres for work or study, especially younger volunteers. This means that in an emergency there is a shortage of people to act as first responders. Consequently, many available first responders are older. To ensure that fire stations are well staffed during catastrophic days, all volunteers to report to their station on those days (or at very least be available). This requires a review of compensation. (R-4.3)

5. **Investigate ways to improve training for severe events, via the development and implementation of virtual reality technology training to better prepare volunteers for their role and for large-scale campaigns; particularly, to prepare them for the realities of extreme fire behaviour and potentially traumatic events, and practice working together in high stress and time critical situations. (R-5)**
    - Government and ESFR organisations to invest in fire training that uses virtual reality technology to give volunteers a more accurate scenario of what they may expect in their role given varying conditions and landscapes. The prime aim would be to give first responders a sense of the challenges that they will face, to better prepare them emotionally, in addition to better practical preparation for the role. (R-5.1)

6. **Introduce additional mental health training for ESFR volunteers and communities impacted by disasters. (R-6)**
    - Enhanced and expanded training and psychoeducation for disaster prone communities in relation to community orientated disaster preparedness and fire safety planning, what to do during the fires from an individual and community orientated perspective, as well as the roles and responsibilities of all community members throughout the recovery period. (R-6.1)
    - Mental health first aid training needs to be made widely available to communities that are likely to be impacted by bushfires and other natural disasters; prioritised for volunteer ESFR first. If communities are well versed in mental health first aid, then they are better placed to develop strategies to pick up the needs. (R-6.2)
    - Acknowledge the value of experience and length of volunteer service and maximise that expertise in all training and mentoring of newer volunteers. (R-6.3)
    - Training should be undertaken by lived experience peer facilitators from the local community who have 'local' knowledge, skills and an understanding of the ESFR organisational culture and structures (experience of recovery and management of mental illness, self-harm and/or suicidality is also an advantage). (R-6.4)
    - Regular face-to-face mental health and wellbeing training which covers all aspects of the role and is staged according to the age and experience of the volunteer. This training, in the aftermath of a campaign and the everyday volunteer role, also serves as an opportunity for formalising the strengths of informal peer debriefing and early intervention in relation to mental health symptoms. (R-6.5)
    - Include members of volunteer farm units in any training and support, and community debriefing, alongside firefighters from the paid and volunteer organisations. (R-6.6)
    - Ensure a full scope of training that also acknowledges volunteers' role in attending to MVAs. (R-6.7)

7**. Implement local community logistic support capabilities, drawing on a register of identified local community members' expertise and knowledge (e.g., drawn up by local service clubs and agencies in collaboration with local government), to support volunteer and paid ESFRs at commencement and during a major campaign, and alleviate high stress and time critical situations. (R-7)**
    - Engage with the community in planning and preparation for fire events so that the benefits of local knowledge are maximised. For example, Local councils could map resident expertise of individuals in rural communities in relation to skills, knowledge of local terrain, facilities and resources as a preparatory activity that can be called upon readily at the critical early stages of an event rather than leaving it to be 'discovered' by chance during or after a natural disaster event. Relying predominantly on 'external experts' can undermine local mental health and resilience efforts during a fire event and be a missed opportunity to support sustainable mental health and wellbeing in the months after the fire event by promoting naturally occurring local leadership and expertise.
      Community volunteers could:
        - Provide early access and support to the establishment of staging areas
        - Ensure interstate crews are supported
        - Set up R & R facilities
        - Provide a central point of support for various services deployed: police, paramedics, etc.
        - Provide a buffer for crews from journalists
        - Provide community support places of refuge
        - Follow up on additional services required, e.g. vets to put down injured life stock. (R-7.1)

8. **Recognise firefighter and community volunteers' mental health and wellbeing is embedded within the broader wellbeing of local communities; hence, the importance of fostering local community cohesive environments. (R-8)**

- Ensure efforts to build or maintain community cohesion are explicit goals in the recovery effort. (R-8.1)
- Consider whole of community simulation to prepare for the fire season in rural areas, not just drills for emergency services. (R-8.2)
- Ensure clearer communication and access plans to public buildings/facilities are developed ahead of each fire season in the event that fires start on public holidays. (R-8.3)
- Through clearer communications, ask people to think, learn and prepare their properties better before they evacuate. (R-8.4)
- There needs to be a long-term ongoing commitment to empowering communities to look after themselves, once the intensity of critical events and response through external support provision has passed. Just as we do not disband our volunteer fighters after the disaster, so we should not assume that we can fix things 'quickly'. (R-8.5)
- Ensure volunteer firefighters' needs are assessed holistically, seeing the person in the whole context of family and community. (R-8.6)
- Introduce more family support services using local expertise and peer-led input, and maximising existing informal family networks within brigades, including more access to mental health support and education for families. (R-8.7)

Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups

Introduction

Ongoing warming and a drying climate have changed weather patterns throughout the world. In Australia, this has led to an increased risk of extreme fire seasons (van Oldenborgh et al., 2021). The 2019-2020 bushfire season in Australia is described as the 'Black Summer' due to the magnitude, duration and intensity of the bushfires, which started earlier than expected and were more widespread than usual. All Australian states and territories were affected, with the most significant impact felt in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland. In total, 34 lives were lost, more than 3,500 homes were lost, wildlife was decimated, and almost 20 million hectares of community and farming land and national parks were burnt.

The 2019/2020 Bushfire season is generally viewed to have begun in September 2019 and ran through to March 2020, with December 2019 and January 2020 generally understood as the most intensive period. The fires sparked public debate in Australia concerning the need to review policies about how we live with the existential threat of disasters (Bowman, 2021; Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, 2021). In order to make informed choices about possible policy settings it is important to have an understanding of the experiences of those who were impacted by the fires.

This qualitative descriptive research was undertaken by Professor Sharon Lawn at Flinders University for the 'After The Fires' national project in collaboration with University of Western Australia and Military and Emergency Services Health Australia (MESHA). Its purpose was to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of first responder firefighter and community volunteers who were involved in the 2019/2020 bushfires, from a mental health and wellbeing perspective.

This research is part of a larger mixed methods prospective longitudinal study funded by the Medical Research Future Fund. Not only will it provide vital information to governments and organisations about the organisational, personal and trauma-related factors that can promote or worsen mental health over time, it will also identify what has worked and potential solutions (e.g. training, operational factors), from the perspectives of volunteers themselves, in assisting first responders and their communities both during and in the years following the 2019/20 bushfires.

Priority was given to geographic areas and responder groups most directly impacted by the fires. Initially, this research was planned to be a series of 8 focus groups (4 in South Australia (SA) - 2 Kangaroo Island, 2 Cudlee Creek; 2 in New South Wales (NSW); 2 in Victoria (VIC)) with up to 32 participants, and a further 8 focus groups with families and those who played support roles to volunteers and other first responders during and in the immediate aftermath of the fires. However, the COVID-19 Pandemic meant face-to-face groups and interstate travel were severely restricted or banned for several months during the project period. Therefore, the decision was made to undertake predominantly in-depth individual interviews, conducted electronically. This enabled us to then also include potential participants from Queensland (QLD). As restrictions eased, some face-to-face focus group research became possible.

Beyond this report, the intention is to invite all individuals involved in the qualitative study to be interviewed again 6 months following their participation (in the second half of 2021) in order to explore the longer-term impacts of the fires.

Ethics approval for the qualitative study was granted by the University of Western Australia (Ref: RA/4/20/6214) and Flinders University (Ref: 2820).

Methods

Focus groups and individual in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken between September 2020 and April 2021; that is, approximately 6-12 months after the end of the 2019-2020 bushfire season. Professor Sharon Lawn, who is a member of the research team with mental health clinical and lived experience expertise, conducted all interviews with participants. Participation was open to volunteer firefighters and community volunteers who were 18 years or over, at any stage or length of their volunteering experience, who had been involved volunteering during the 2019/2020 bushfire season or immediately after as part of the recovery effort. Participation was also open to family members of volunteers; however, none came forward to be interviewed, other than those who were also volunteer firefighters. Participation was open to volunteers from across Australia, recognising that many firefighter volunteers joined campaign efforts outside of their own locations.

Participants were recruited via direct contact with volunteer firefighter organisations that agreed to participate and distribute flyers to their members, and with the support of key Project Advisory Group members' liaison with their networks. Participants were also recruited via radio media about the project, snowball sampling/word of mouth, and the researcher visiting SA communities and community events specific to bushfire recovery. Each of these latter recruitment methods proved most useful. COVID border restrictions precluded the researcher from visiting other states for recruitment.

An interview guide was developed by the research team in collaboration with the research Project Advisory Group, designed to explore volunteers' motivations for volunteering, experiences of volunteering during the 2019/2020 bushfire season and beyond, impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, experiences of help-seeking and sources of support, and the role of their volunteer organisations. **(See Appendix 1.)**

Focus groups were undertaken face-to-face (1 – home of a volunteer / 1 - CFS station), and all interviews were conducted electronically via phone or zoom, for convenience and due to COVID restrictions on travel, and either during the day or evening according to participants' preferences.

All participants received a Participant Information Sheet prior to providing their consent to be involved in the study. Focus group participants provided hardcopy signed consent and Interview participants' verbal consent was recorded prior to commencement of the interviews. All focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded with consent from all participants, then professionally transcribed. All participants received a small honorarium for their time.

Thematic Analysis was used to analyse all qualitative data. This involved the researcher manually open coding all transcripts then organising the coded data into theme areas, informed by the interview guide and in consultation with the research team during the process to enhance rigour and decision-making. It involved Clarke and Braun's (2013) six steps: 1. Familiarisation with your data through reading and re-reading the data and noting ideas. 2. Generating initial codes across the data set and collating data relevant to each code. 3. Searching for themes by gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. 4. Reviewing themes and generating a thematic map of the analysis. 5. Defining and naming themes. 6. Producing the report (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Pseudonyms are used for all participants. Many participants came from small communities; therefore, their specific roles, location names, and other contextual information that may lead to participants being identifiable have been changed or omitted. Given some important differences between the volunteer firefighter and community volunteer role during and after the 2019/2020 bushfire season, descriptions of their experiences and impacts are grouped separately, where appropriate.

NB. Direct quotes from interviews include - participant pseudonym to preserve anonymity, volunteer type, age range, length of volunteer service. Some quotes from participants are necessarily long to ensure that their experiences and the context of those experiences were fully and respectfully captured.

Results from Interviews and Focus Groups

These results are about the stories and the people who shared their experiences of volunteering in relation to the 2019/2020 Bushfire season. However, many spoke about these experiences in the context of decades of volunteering and an accumulation of previous experiences of volunteering, including Ash Wednesday, Black Saturday, and other fire seasons and major fire events.

Of the 44 people who participated in the qualitative component of the After The Fires project, 29 were fire-fighter volunteers and 15 were community volunteers. This included 2 focus groups (13 individuals) and 16 individual interviews with Country Fire Service (CFS), Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Rural Fire Service (RFS) volunteers, and 15 individual interviews with community volunteers. Focus groups were 90 minutes in length and interviews ranged from 60-120 minutes.

Fire-fighter volunteers ranged in age from 22-80 years (15 [51.7%] were 60 years or more), 27 (93.1%) were male, and 5 (17.2%) also disclosed that they were defence force veterans. All lived in the areas where they volunteered, and years of service ranged from 4-60 years (10 [34.5%] had served for 30 years or more). Whilst specific role and rank are de-identified for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, it is noted that 14 (48.3%) participants had or currently held senior operational roles within their service, many of these in active roles on fire trucks with their crews. Volunteer firefighting was intergenerational ('in their blood') for many participants; one or more family members of 21 (72.4%) fire-fighter participants were also volunteers, many in ancillary roles (such as call centres, incident control, training) or as cadets; sometimes, the whole family unit was involved. Several participants were retired, although several were elsewhere employed or self-employed, usually in fulltime roles. Outside of the 2019/2020 bushfire season, time spent in the volunteer role varied depending on participants' location, station type and role, and availability, ranging from 2-20 hours per week. During the 2019/2020 bushfire season, several fire-fighter participants volunteered for many days and weeks, either intermittently or continuously.

Community volunteers ranged in age from 40-75 years, 8 (53.3%) were female, and 3 (20%) had been past volunteer fire-fighters. Most (n=13, 86.7%) lived in the areas where they volunteered, and years of service ranged from 1-30 years. Several community volunteers were retired or worked part-time; some were employed or self-employed. Time spent in the volunteer role during and/or after the 2019/2020 fire season varied and was difficult to measure given the diversity of their roles and ongoing recovery efforts within the community where they also lived. Some community volunteers enacted their volunteer role informally merely by being present in the face of the need that presented itself. The contributions of community volunteers were substantial and ongoing.

Calculating the economic value of volunteers tends to focus on their formal contribution within a well-defined hierarchical organisational structure (Bowman, 2009). The scale and economic value of volunteer work is difficult to estimate. This volunteer effort produces a wide array of impacts – on the volunteers themselves, on the beneficiaries of their activities, on the organisations through which at least some of the activity is organised, and on the quality of life more generally in the societies in which the volunteers operate (Salaman et al., 2011).

Thematic Map

Results from the interview and focus groups are organised into 4 main themes, with a number of subthemes:

1. On being a firefighter / volunteer 'It's a Community'
    - 1.1 Motivation to become a volunteer
    - 1.1 Motivation to continue to volunteer
    - 1.2 Navigation between other roles and volunteering
    - 1.4 Preparing others to be volunteers

2. Experiences and impacts of the 2019/2020 bushfire season and beyond
    - 2.1 Being there – chaos and trauma
    - 2.2 Logistics – being responsible amidst the confusion
    - 2.3 This time it was about my home, my family and my community

2.4 The physical demands of the role
2.5 Home and away- campaigns and volunteering at home
2.6 Coping with anniversaries, other triggers and community impacts
2.7 The role of media coverage of the bushfires and its impact
2.8 Longer-term impacts - view of self and others

3. Coping, help-seeking, and sources of support in the volunteer role
   3.1 Mental health and coping after the fires
   3.2 The primary role of families and peers as sources of support
   3.3 Critical incident debriefing processes and services available to volunteers
   3.4 Seeking more formal help for mental health
   3.5 Community volunteers' ways of coping
   3.6 Finding meaning and purpose - making sense of their experiences after the fires

4. The role of the volunteer organisations
   4.1 Not feeling valued for their contribution
   4.2 Unrealistic expectations and problem with bureaucracy
   4.3 What is needed to better prepare new volunteers for their role
   4.4 What is needed to better support volunteers during and after the fires

Themes

1. On being a firefighter/volunteer - 'It's a Community'

Almost all of the volunteers interviewed lived in the communities where they undertook their volunteer roles, and the majority were in small regional or rural communities where most people knew each other or where there was at least a clear sense of identification with that location by most who lived there. Volunteering was woven into the fabric of their lives as community members, and many had spent all or most of their lives in these communities. Many were heavily vested in the community as farmers, local business operators and long-term residents with extended family raised in the communities. This was their home.

The role of volunteer fire-fighters is diverse. As 'locals', they are often the first on the scene and serve roles as important response to a potentially broader range of community needs than metropolitan firefighters, and particularly where there may not be other emergency service organisations (such as SES or Ambulance) located in their area. For many of those interviewed, this also included attending road accidents. With this diversity comes the potential for adverse impacts that are unique to these communities, as Nick and Daniel explained:

> That's obviously a greater risk being in an area, volunteering in an area that you live in. There is a high chance you're going to come across someone that you know. It's happened to us before as well. We had a car accident that we went to where one of the ladies, she was deceased when we got there, she was a volunteer within our service as well. Everyone sort of knew her and I think that impacted people a lot more than they realised. [Nick, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 11 years]

> Yeah, we do; we do MVA's [motor vehicle accidents], structural fires; last week we did a beach drowning, we had to pick up and bring the body off the beach and bring it up. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

The role of community volunteers is equally diverse. Many of those interviewed as 'community volunteers' were ordinary everyday members of the community who were actively involved in volunteering in their community prior to the 2019/2020 season and rose to the need presented by the 2019/2020 bushfire season because it was on their doorstep. Many performed vital roles during the fires, providing practical support (such as catering and logistics) in command and control centres to those fighting the fires, and to 'refugees' in relief centres, and as key to communications to other community members during the fires and afterwards. Many continued to be heavily engaged in the recovery effort after the fires, and were joined by others in

diverse roles that included sorting supplies coming in from donations (food, clothes, tools, etc), distributing stock feed and food parcels, organising community events and fundraising, re-building fences, emotional support and outreach to farmers and other affected community members, rebuilding community facilities, coordinating preparedness efforts, community training and information, and so forth.

Increasingly research is acknowledging the important role that informal volunteers play in disasters scenarios: "Unaffiliated informal volunteering is a powerful force for inclusion, innovation, and support for communities in crisis. It is a strong force for good, and in many communities helps fill gaps official systems cannot fill, because of their mandates, capacities or operating constraints" (Yumagulova & Handmer, 2021, p.5)

Participants in more rural locations often did not distinguish between their role as member of a community, their trust in each other as members of their community, and their role as volunteer firefighters:

> Several mates are involved in the footy team and they're in the same group with their truck; so, they're like a well-oiled machine because they have that unspoken communication because they just trust and know each other. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 8 years]

> John: There's this perception out there, we've got to throw in all these mental health workers and therapists and counsellors and, there's a time and a place for that stuff for some people. But it's actually the community isn't it, it's each other that gets you through.
> Steve: Yeah, well the community's the reason I'm still here; the fires just cemented it …
> Simon: Well I know if shit hit the fan any one of these guys would step up to the plate with you, everyone looks after everyone and wouldn't even hesitate. It's a real strong community here – I can ring any one of these guys and they'd be there like that to help you. I've found my place. [Focus Group 1, SA CFS Volunteers]

Other participants spoke of the 'community politics' that can also be present, and how it can be integrally connected to, and difficult to separate from, the volunteer role in small communities:

> Each group's different, each brigade's different. Like one brigade will behave in one manner and the other brigade will be a totally different system … Look, it's worse in a small town. A partnership breaks up and they've both been with the brigade and … it can polarise, and this one thinks they're wrong or this one thinks they're wrong and if you try and stay in the middle then everybody's wrong; so yeah, it gets hard that way, there's no secrets in a small town and there's plenty of people that won't let the truth get in the way of a good story and that doesn't help at all. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

> Steve: It's XXXX, nothing's private-
> Adam: Everyone knows. You think it's private but every, everyone knows about half an hour later. They all know. Well actually - Half an hour before it happens!! (All laughing)
> Ross: Sometimes your mates come to you and tell you something about yourself you didn't even know yourself, because they heard it in the pub. [Focus Group 1, SA CFS Volunteers]

1.1 Motivation to become a volunteer

Volunteer firefighter participants' motivations for becoming a volunteer were varied. For most, it was a way of contributing to their community, becoming involved and accepted as a new member of a community, a natural part of being in that community and 'just what country people do'.

> When I got involved with Ash Wednesday and saw what the volunteer fire service did, I thought one day I am going to join and when we moved here about 30 years ago … I just felt it was something good to do for the community and always enjoyed helping people and seemed a perfect way to get involved with the community … We live in a wonderful community here; everybody pitches in. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

> I wanted to integrate into the local community but also volunteer…I thought I had something to offer. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

> Steve: That's it, fires going, tools down.
> Alex: Bloody oath-
> Aaron: That's how everyone is. [SA Focus Group 1, CFS volunteer]

> When I was a young fellow, I followed my dad down to the fire thing, and that was when I first joined up, and dad wasn't a member but on bad days he would go down and help out, and I sort of did the same, and I just stuck with it…it's just sort of part of being a member of your community too, I think. You know, we all get tangled up in coaching footy teams and things like that, and it's just a natural part of life, especially when you're living in these rural areas, yeah. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

> My father and grandfather were both returned soldiers. You just went and did it. … It's just how the community is here. [Adam, Focus Group 1, SA CFS volunteer, age: 30s; experience: 5 years]

> In the early days everybody knew everybody and anybody new who came either joined the fishing club or the fire brigade. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

> I've been a volunteer for so long it's second nature for me. As I said, I'd feel lost without it to be honest…And, as I said, returning the favour is – it's a give and take relationship we have with the neighbours. [David, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 26 years]

> So, my neighbour when I bought a block of land here … was a first officer and asked me to join and I thought it would be a cool way to meet the locals… it turned out to be sort of the least possible effort that I could put in to being sort of a worthwhile member of my community there. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

> Colin: Country people volunteer and so this was my way of contributing to the community.
> Patrick: I just think because country people like to help each other.
> Adam: … I wanted to be a bit of a role model for the kids as well….
> Paul: I thought it was going to be quite exciting. I like the running around in big trucks and I like a bit of adventure and it seemed to tick those boxes and yes helping the communities is a great thing to do. It's a personal satisfaction. [Focus Group 2, SA CFS Volunteer]

It was also an implicitly understood responsibility that came with living where they live in rural Australia:

> Well, here it's just full of vegetation and that's it, it's just a good idea to get educated even if you don't want to jump on a truck, you know. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 8 years]

> The fact of the matter is that the young … of the community needed some excitement and so the, as well as playing football, well, you could join the fire service during the summertime, and so it was an adrenaline-filled sort of aspect. … you come to the realisation fairly shortly that we're all, this isn't just a good thing, it's a tremendous thing and a necessary thing, and so your gift to your community becomes a little bit different and you mature. There's actually an imperative because you're living in amongst those areas. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience: 60 years]

Some participants saw volunteering as way of gaining skills for life or of using their existing skills to contribute to and give back to their community:

> I was basically looking for something to do at the end of, well to do parallel to and then after high school. … I haven't really been much into sport so I thought it would be good for me to do, to learn some practical skills and hopefully become a bit more, a bit more capable with that sort of stuff. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 4 years]

> In 1994, we got some really big fires up here … I thought, I can go out and help, you know I'm fit enough and young enough, so I ended up joining a brigade where I had a couple of mates … the company I worked for, we used to train you know our own people and I used to do a lot of the triaging, I guess a bit of a skill there where I could … and you know a lot of those skills have moved into the fire brigade where you could use them skills you had in teaching people. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

Community volunteer participants' motivations for becoming a volunteer were also varied. For most, it was about making a contribution, seeing others in need and wanting to help, and being aware that they had skills to offer, as part of a spontaneous community response:

> It's not just about rebuilding fences, it's about rebuilding lives. [Jess, SA Community Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 1 year]

> [Being part of organising a community fundraising event] I don't think that it was too difficult for anyone to have a strong sense of empathy and grief, shared with those who had lost everything – for me, it was just a sense of just dropping everything to do whatever I could to help…. just going down to the recovery centre and offering my services. A friend had said, 'oh, hey, why don't we just start raising money for the community to use.' … we helped by using our skills of what we do. Everyone has different things to contribute. [Liz, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

> So, people just found themselves volunteering on the day because everyone was pitching in. … We were flat out trying to get ourselves organised because we had to evacuate twice. …the first thing that we did, we put a Facebook out to raise funds for one of our neighbours who got burnt in the fire. … But I think that's common for a number of people, they just see a need and act on it. … Like there were people that were just spontaneously doing something. A woman down the road she immediately set up a Facebook page to raise funds. You know she just did that so that really strengthened my belief in the power in the community. [Frank, SA Past CFS, Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 20 years]

> In the past been a nurse and I'd also worked in mental health I was very aware of the fact that a lot of people would be walking around feeling pretty lost with everything that had gone one. So even though I wasn't a trained counsellor, I was also keeping an eye on people that I thought may be exhibiting signs of really not coping too well. So yeah, and I think I just was a human being, my heart went out to people who'd just lost everything. … I had some practical experience and was like okay so what can I do on a practical level … And being the partner of a veteran as well, I think I have a unique insight into the PTSD aspect too. [Julia, SA Community Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 20 years]

> [Having seen the Ash Wednesday fires] It was the knowledge of what fires can do and the knowledge that people aren't aware of that, and I think once you are aware of the devastation … You try to engage with them to …make a difference to their understanding to keep them safe. … and you are around like-minded people and it's almost like a service or a calling and you feel comfortable because you have found similar people because you feel safe in belonging … so there is safety in being around capable people …It's a comfort. … Like a fraternity. …you are all sharing a knowledge of how bad things could be if you weren't there. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

For some, the main motivation was personal, related directly to their connection with people and place:

> I was born over there, and I have got relatives there and one of my relatives went to front the fire and his wife was on the end of the jetty wondering whether she would see him next morning. It was one of those situations … Even though you are not living there, it's something about the community connection, it's in your history and in your blood almost. [Geoff, SA Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 10 years]

Other participants just found themselves in the volunteer role through their everyday roles in the community:

> The shop is sort of a central location … people have to come in over the counter, so basically everybody that collects the mail here within the area, I meet and talk to and you know, make sure they're okay and everything… I had other connections through Lions Club and was also involved in a number of other groups and contacts and … that meant that I had a, you know, a network of people … I just opened up the shop … basically we didn't have any power for about four or five days after anyway, so I just opened up the shop and said come in and have a cup of coffee. It can only be plunger because I've, I didn't have the coffee machine working and it was just on the gas. And so we just you know, made it an opportunity for people to sit down and chat and talk and so on … And you know, anyone that becomes a listening person; you're a confidence keeper as well … the other day somebody came in and I said 'oh are you okay, you look a bit flat' and she nearly burst out into tears … so I just came around the front of the counter and gave her a bit of a hug … it's all being a part of a community. [Terry, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 20 years]

For many, it was the strong desire to be part of something meaningful, and to join with others for a common purpose; a natural response that 'just happened' and for which they didn't necessarily want accolades:

> The camaraderie was superb so why wouldn't you do it. …Well, it's all the local community, even those that weren't directly involved. It was sort of like they got a feeling that they need to become

involved. You know when you have a 90-year-old lady who comes up and brings her little biscuits and tarts and stuff like that it's very heart warming. It all about meaning and purpose … It's ordinary people who just stand up. [Geoff, SA Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 10 years]

I see the human need … and I just feel compelled to make, or to reach out to those, the most affected people. So, it's just a part of who you are. … and also, when people come around you and also support you it motivates, even after that fire you know late last year … many other people came in and said 'okay now can we work together? …I remember the day after the fire, this couple came with a lot of toys and they asked me 'Do you want toys?' … and then a lot of people came and collected all these brand-new toys and packed in different boxes and then we delivered to the SES volunteers and also the people who lost the houses too … these kinds of things just happened. [Chris, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 30 years]

I feel fulfilment in the role as a human being … reaching out and helping another human being it gives you satisfaction but it also, it also gives me a kind of nourishment. … I was helping people you know building fences but later I found out after you know a few days of work, it actually helping me … to grow in my faith and also as a human being when I reach out. [Chris, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 30 years]

1.2 Motivation to continue volunteering

For firefighter volunteers, the unique nature of their experiences, the strength of the camaraderie that resulted from those experiences, and their love for what they do are what motivated many participants to continue volunteering. Their comments highlight the power and positives of their shared experience in creating a community 'tribe' and helping these people survive and heal and remain attached to both their brigades and their families:

Paul: I think what has kept me there is the team and the camaraderie that comes – there is not many other people in my life. I've been into these sorts of situations with these guys and that really kind of makes you … you go through something together and it really binds you together. I think that's what's kind of kept me going back to the brigade and keep putting in. …Many of my friends who I have known for years and years and years, but not one of them probably I have ever relied on my life is actually dependant on what they do, and that's something that does happen in the CFS.
Ross: Fires here are where you learn how to fight fires. Because it's country, it's bush, it's scrub, it's grassland, it's every facet of firefighting that you can get.
Adam: There's a role for everyone and I think it's a diversity as well. Like you can be doing training; you can be holding a hose; there are many different roles aren't there?
Richard: What makes us keep going back is that buzz about it, particularly at the moment we've had so many new people and the enthusiasm of the brigade is awesome. Those days of just dealing with admin and shit sort of stuff you have to deal with, and you think I don't really want to keep doing this, and then you go down and you meet new people – everyone is keen – everyone is working together and it's that sort of buzz that you go actually I really like that part of the job. [SA FG 2, CFS Volunteers]

I love it; I love going and talking to all of them. They've all got different walks of life. We just all – I don't know – it's quite funny when my kids were little, they just used to say … Come to our place and it was a fire ground radio where we could hear what was going on. … my children, my grandchildren, have just grown up with it. … It's just all part of – I don't know we just do it. [Trish, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 30 years]

For others, it was their sense of responsibility to the community and to others, of showing commitment and 'seeing things through' that motivated them to continue:

…But you know, the road crash crew, I've had some friends on that that are, we had a bad accident a few months ago where someone died and look there's a couple of lads that yeah, what they went through, it's not really fair just for those guys to keep doing it. So, the more you know, you can dilute it down a bit. … They choose to do it, but at the end of the day you'd like to say that you've done your bit too. …yeah, it's a good little community. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 8 years]

Look, it's my job to keep my crew safe right. It's my responsibility that they don't die in a fire ball. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

> I'm just a person that commits to something, and then once I commit to it, although if you upset me – … I have always been highly motivated, and you know I will keep going until somebody takes over as captain and I drop back into the brigade and just watch over them and guide them and advise them, but my time will come no doubt as it does to everyone, you know, but what motivates me to do it I don't know … I can't half join something … you get in and you help … most fireman are retired by 60 but I have no intention of retiring yet, but the time will come … but I still love it. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Other firefighter participants emphasised the value of volunteering to themselves, as role models for their children, and to enhance the sense of community cohesion:

> I guess there's a bit of the camaraderie, because I'm new to the district, I've met some really, really good people and they've been really welcoming plus it's just a sense of just having to help out the community but also – yeah, we were caught in that fire storm, but we also saved countless houses and … and we weren't the only ones there …and that's a great feeling to know that you've done that and made a massive change or a massive impact on people's lives not only in that specific point in time, but ongoing. And I guess you've got to be a certain type of person, Sharon, that – you know, I've got photos of us driving, … of just massive columns of smoke, most people were driving the other way trying to – sure we were in a fire truck, but there was a lot of people getting out. Yeah, it's a particular experience; it's not something that everyday people would have at all. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

> People don't realise how unifying CFS actually is for a lot of people across the state. It actually makes people feel like they belong to the state…It's a community…In the country like I said, you see people lose their living. And people just chipped in. And then you had all these volunteer organisations, complete strangers just coming up out of nowhere … It brings out the best in people. [David, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 26 years]

> It's something you can share as a family and as parent and child; it's a pretty special bond I guess of experience. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Community volunteers had similar motivations for continuing to volunteer, particularly emphasising how it occurred as a 'natural' part of living alongside others and making a contribution to helping the people in their rural community.

> We don't distinguish between that because both of us sort of see the need to keep this community healthy and we see the stresses on people and we want to make sure that those people are supported and so the result when we see something that needs to be done, we just go ahead and do it. … people come up to you with issues and you sort of say 'there's a broader issue let's do something about it.' [Frank, SA Past CFS, Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 20 years]

> It's always been my feeling that you give back as well … So yeah, it's a way to connect with people and it's a personal connection because they see me on a daily, weekly basis or whatever it might be, yeah. [Terry, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 20 years]

> [Jesus] was there in the community, and I believe that is the role of everyone. [Chris, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 30 years]

> It's just being aware of how people are feeling and how they're coping and so on as well … because you see them, some people on a daily basis you can see the changes and you can see you know, how they're feeling and you just say you know, 'Is everything okay?' … and you try to give them, you know, just a place to sit down … so they can have somebody to talk to if they wish that … just checking in and make sure that they're all good. [Terry, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 20 years]

> I have much better understanding of how quickly a fire can travel … and the damage it can do. And I think when you actually hear somebody that's actually said, they can see the fire a kilometre away and the next minute it's on them, you – and you're standing there looking across to where they're looking at – pointing the valley – I think that's a different level than seeing it on TV … And this was somebody's house and then you met that lady and she just hugged you all because she was so pleased that we were there to help her. [Jess, SA Community Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 1 year]

1.3 Navigation between other roles and volunteering

Several participants juggled the volunteering role with other paid employed or in running their own business or farm. They spoke about the significant time commitment and financial challenges in volunteering, especially during the height of the bushfire season.

> We had one joker here…now he had the local panel beater's shop…he had one, two, three – three of his staff were also members in the fire brigade. And he reckoned it cost him a small fortune, because they get a call out, and he basically had to shut his business down because they'd all come down to the fire shed. And he was saying over the year he reckoned it cost him about 40 thousand a year. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

Several participants mentioned concerns about the advancing age of many volunteer firefighters and how many small rural communities relied on older retired community members, given the physical demands of firefighting.

> The average age of the local brigades – we've just had an influx of new members since the fires and we've got some young people in that are only in their mid-40's, but the rest of them are all tending to be a bit older because the younger ones they have to go to the cities to chase Uni or prefer to get jobs and … around here too it's a very surfing prone area. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

> Yeah, so, and when you get in these little country places…a lot of the people that live there, work in other areas, like they'll come down to town [city] to work or whatever. So, it really is reliant on the fellas that are in the town to turn out to any jobs…[recounting 5 CFS colleagues all in their late 70s and 80s] So, the jokers that were actually turning out during the day was the old and bold, because most of the young fellows were working away from town. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

> My employers are very understanding, my university is not … trying to get special consideration for the RFS has been a real uphill battle and I think while I'm fully appreciative of universities wanting to protect themselves of being taken advantage of by fraudsters, I think there is a point at which inflexibility in supporting volunteers is actually a public safety concern because if you aren't able … if you have brigades of semi-retired or retired people and employers and universities and what have you don't allow their staff or students who aren't retired or semi-retired to volunteer … you end up with fires being fought by people who perhaps - and that's not safe for them and not safe for anyone. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 6 years]

James, who was both a CFA volunteer in his rural region and Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS) member in the nearby urban centre, spoke about the challenges of juggling two different sets of expectations as a firefighter:

> Basically, I hand over my pager to the next officer that comes along on whatever shift it is with him or her and then I grab my CFS pager and that sits in my pocket, and then I come home and I am on call …. it's been interesting the MFS was reluctant to – the CFS members go to these sorts of bigger fires as a CFS person – if we have to – if we are due to go on shift we have to go on shift. So, we've got to put the MFS first because we are trained to support these bigger communities, these larger community in the metropolitan area, but it's changed a little bit over the last year or two and I actually got four nights off and what we call special pay – so not out of my sick leave or any leave. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Frank and Rob spoke about how sacrifices had to be made in running their family farms and the competing responsibilities in their volunteer roles that impinged on them, their farms and other family members:

> I suppose the farm suffered to some degree because of what I did, because I took on more leadership roles … it gives you a greater degree of responsibility and so that's when my son started to drop off a bit because he had to sort of carry on and look after the farm. … Somehow or another, you're juggling, and I guess that you become devoted to the service … it's what you make your priorities of life. I gave up sport to devote myself to the service … and we didn't go off for holidays at summertime because we realised that there was a duty to be around, especially when a hot day came up. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience: 60 years]

> That's one of the reasons why I had to give up … it created an impossible situation…. Yeah, people who have got a dairy farm for example can't say 'Well we won't milk the cows this morning because I've got to fight a fire.' [Frank, SA Past CFS, Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 20 years]

Rob also spoke about other businesses in his small community, the inter-dependencies that exist due to limited access to services in rural areas, and the consequent impacts of juggling volunteering on community members:

> I guess that for many businesses, there is almost a shared role … that you sort of back up someone else to let them go, and as a consequence – let me give you just an example. In a little country town, there might be a garage and he's servicing the community vehicles and what have you, well, if he goes off chasing off, to leave his business for a couple of days if the – or even an afternoon – that means someone's car doesn't get serviced. So, he probably will allow one of his staff to go … while they don't volunteer, they support the volunteer system … That is the real issue and that's not easy sometimes. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience: 60 years]

Bob was one of five volunteers who had disclosed prior membership of the ADF. He described how he juggled both roles during that time:

> Now when I went to the local CFS there was a couple of old blokes there that I bumped into when I first got there, and they sort of said, 'Well we know you won't last, but you know, you come in and join up, because you army blokes are all the bloody same – you know, you'll be gone in a couple of years and in five years' time, we won't even remember who you are.' … In some locations it was a little bit like that because the army personnel tend to move on a fair bit. But I was just lucky … My boss said 'Yes, as long as it doesn't interfere with your work out at the army base', and then I got posted to the city, and my boss down there said, 'Yes, there's no worries, as long as you keep us updated and we know exactly what's going on', because the army is fairly strict about people turning up for work. If you don't turn up for work, you're classified as service without leave, and yeah, you end up in a bit of strife. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

1.4 Preparing others to be volunteers

Participants were asked to describe how they prepare others to be volunteers in their organisation. Several participants' responses suggested that preparing new and young volunteers for the emotional rigours of the role (and preparing less experienced members to step up into more leadership roles) was largely an informal process, drawn from experience and incidental people skills of those in training, leadership and informal mentoring roles. These informal 'rules' for protecting new and young volunteers were a strength that was common across all those interviewed and across regions. All agreed that it was difficult to produce the required 'real-world' scenarios during training that volunteers would face in their role. This meant that exposure whilst 'on the job', then processing the learning sometime after the event or incident had occurred, was relied upon.

> So, when I'd run the training, I'd tell them, 'There is one person only who is your prime on that fireground, and that's yourself. Like you look after number one, you look after yourself, and then if you've got anything left over, you look after your mates, and if we all do that, we'll all come home at the end of the day. And if it gets to the point where you're starting to wear down or you reckon that there's a bit of a problem, then you come and you talk, and we'll find another job for you, and we'll get someone else to take over from where you were and you can go off and do another job, which is just as important but not going to wear you down.' [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

> Without good leadership, and sometimes we don't have good leadership because we're stretched on those big fires, you can't do lieutenant 1-2 in the truck every shift; and we try to keep the experience up, but you know they face some harrowing type things. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

> Some of the situations you just can't prepare people for. You can't put someone in a room surrounded by fire in a training scenario. Or you can't – it's all good to show people photos of bad trauma, but until it's there in front of you, it's a completely different situation. It's harder to prepare people for that. I don't know how you approach that better. Probably for some people, maybe they need more talking to about what they will be experiencing and maybe how to deal with that better. A

lot of the training courses you get, it's a bare minimum of – it's like giving you a toolbox with all the basic tools that you need and then you've got to apply them in a real-world situation yourself. [Nick, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 11 years]

We are pretty cautious in that … we let them come to training for a while and just let them feel what it's about and what it's like, and some of them come for six months before they join … we take them out in the truck and we find some old PPE and we put that on – we do all sorts of things with them and when they're keen they then put their hand up and they do level 1 FF1 and then they can ride on the truck then to call out, and they get a pager and we give them the phone app that we use and then they can be responding in the appliance. So, we're cautious with them … At the end of the night if we might take our uniforms off and we might have a beer and a bit of a chocolate biscuit or something at the end of the night or an ice cream out of the fridge because we try and keep the fridge stocked, and it's all fun – everything is fun. We go and have a barbeque and we make some money at the running races. It's all laugh and fun and then, all of a sudden, they get hammered on a job and they realise that – and I've lost people because of it – it was too much for them. Others have committed and others grow. So, it is interesting, it's not all a picnic all of the time. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Keeping it very friendly and tight, and collegial like that helps with their emotional wellbeing as well…. And we've got rules in our brigade about looking after, particularly the young ones. We have, if we go to a motor vehicle accident, we've normally got a pretty fair idea of what we're going to see when we get there, so we won't take any of the real young ones with us. We'll take some of the new ones, and we'll give them tasks outside the actual area, but they're still getting – you know, they're still getting their callout …and you sort of work them into it slowly, slowly, slowly. So, they still feel that they're part of it, they've still got a job, but they're not getting thrown into the, you know, the blood and guts straightaway. [Michael, VIC CFA volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 48 years]

I always tell them 'You never put your guard down. You know whether you are in a house or if even when I am teaching on the fire truck, you never get complacent and think oh, this fire is not doing anything because you just don't know. It can flare up; it can come back; it can do anything to you… and if it turns dark you need to get out of there … You need to be – get back to the truck and you've got to get out of there.' Well, it happened – I had two of them on the truck that day when it happened to us and, when we finally got away, they went … 'You used to say that – now we've just experienced it.' … [recounting an earlier fire season] I always pushed that if a fire is coming and the safety barrier is say 500 metres from the fire and the fire front is coming and there's a truck that is 100 metres close to you rather than go all the way to your own truck, you get on that truck, but you've got to tell me you're on that truck. Well, that happened to one of my members and he's going … 'seven died, don't panic, I'm all right, and I am going excellent, and when we got back out we were safe and he went 'I'm glad you said that because I probably would have run all the way back to your truck.' I said, 'Well you wouldn't have made it' and he went 'I know.' So, they're the things that I personally throw in kind of like discreetly, and I don't throw it all at them at once … you can't sit them down and go blah blah blah blah all at once. [Trish, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 30 years]

There are some situations, I guess, during a fire that you just can't train for. … the one thing we don't train for, and that is to see a great flame of – a wall of flame coming towards you, that almost comes from experience, so therefore those who have experience within the brigade need to be showing some leadership towards those who are new. … When you've been through two or three really hazardous situations, you start to become, well, what is safe and what isn't, and those who don't have much experience aren't in that position to assess that. … I guess if you're a leader, you've got to show some discipline … you don't want to be seen to be panicking, so because if you panic, then in actual fact, others panic, so it's important to sort of get a handle on things and probably, should we say, keep the fellows underneath you as informed as much as you reasonably can, keep them engaged and basically, I won't say, hold their hand precisely, but certainly be looking after them because, after all … Their safety is your responsibility … Sometimes I wonder whether we wrap people in cotton wool a little bit too much and we need to expose them a little bit more to the realities of life … It's a tricky balance, the exposure and the … how much you put people in it … (recounting a traffic accident attended by a female cadet) there was these girls hanging on to this woman who was cradling her baby, all crushed up. I suspect that girl learned more then about life for a very, very long time. It was a lesson. …. It's awful but, by God, it teaches you (tearful) … I just find these incidences really – well, they're very, very special – I said that a bit badly, but- … I often say to people in our brigade, you will learn things out of life that you wouldn't learn otherwise, and so – and you will see things you wouldn't see otherwise. So, it's – I think that in one sense, the working in emergency

> services has got good life building skills. … I think it is character building. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience: 60 years]
>
> Well, you just have to take them out, train them, train them, train them…a lot of that's all done through the brigade. But you get a lot of the old hands leading the young blokes there. You can give them the reassurance that they can do it…And as I said, it's all a shock for them, because they don't get that experience anymore. They just do hose drills. But you don't do actually any live burns. And that's a real problem …they have this mindset that they're going to go there for maybe a few hours, and then come home…Some fires aren't going to disappear after a few hours…we have to prepare for that. And I said, the military gets you ready for that, the way they train. [David, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 26 years]

Preparing new volunteers for the rigors of the role also meant preparing their families, as Trish explained:

> Well, I say to my members when they join, 'When you go home to your wife, when you first join – when you go home after your incidents don't say exactly what happened. Don't make it what you really saw or what really happened. Downplay it. Don't give her too much information? … because she won't let you go out the door. You will be resigning.' [Trish, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 30 years]

Participants also talked about the nature of the role and the inevitable uncertainties that all volunteers were likely to face in the role, including newer volunteers.

> Well, look, I suppose that you realise that fires are inevitable and, as a consequence, probably as the summer period comes along, you prepare yourself to some degree for that role. You can't prepare for a motor accident, I suppose, but you are ever aware of the fact that you may well be called … they're not just standard sort of incidents that we go to … let's face it, on the main thoroughfares in the State, whether it be the Sturt Highway or the Barrier Highway or the road across the Nullarbor, the main drags where those people have to sort of front up to, well, they're not quite sure what they'll find when they leave the station. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience: 60 years]

Some participants talked about their own experience as newer volunteers and of new volunteers to their brigades, and the limited preparation that they and their peers felt when confronted by the 2019/2020 bushfires.

> I probably wasn't prepared for the fires…I don't think any of us were quite prepared for that fire. Our captain and one of the Lieutenants with probably 50 years combined firefighting experience with those two and they'd never seen anything like it too. I'd experience with plenty of grass fires, plenty of holding containment lines etc., etc., but never in the face of a wildfire. There are some things you just can't create in training …Yeah, look obviously we practise burn over drills each year; however, those drills are all linked towards us all being in the truck, none stuck outside which we all were … I don't think that you could ever train someone for the specific set of circumstances we faced … you can stare at the videos, but until you've got a wall of a grass fire approaching you at sort of 60k an hour and you're standing there in tall long grass with a hose –don't get me wrong, you can spray them down pretty quick – but some more training along that line …it's very hard to get all the volunteers through that kind of training, I understand logistically and how complex and costly it would, but that would be certainly something I think. Because, at the end of the day, when you're in this situation it comes down to experience. It can make all the difference …but yeah, look you've got to be careful not to glorify the things that we went through, if you're going to use this scenario as a training tool and I know people always talk about it, first responders being heroes and certainly not the way we feel, we don't do it for the adulation …I think if you did you're the wrong type of person to be doing it if you want to seek that kind of glory … And also, the reality that a lot of the time you can be sitting in the truck eating muesli bars waiting for things. 'Hurry up and wait' …When you count the strike teams thereafter and they're all fairly mellow, you'd go out and you'd spray down the containment lines, you'd have your big lunch prepared by the locals, you'd have your eight hour shift and you'd rotate through and it's all very organised and regimented; but to be there when the fire came through I believe is probably something that I won't experience again just statistically, it's unlikely … in actual fact it was only when our Captain hit the distress button on the radio which just, that just cuts all radio traffic apart from your mayday call, and certainly everyone knew that had happened because you don't hear it very often; it's a life and death kind of call that you make. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experience:4 years]

> Now we had two new people on the truck that day. There were errors from a few people, and they got caught on the road in the middle of nowhere with the front right over the top of their trucks and they found it frightening, but we had good leaders in the trucks that kept them calm and said, 'We will be okay – just do what I say and you will fine.' You know - curtains down, masks on in the truck - and it melted all the stickers off the truck, all the tape, caught 3-4 trucks on fire and all they were doing was going to a staging area … That really opened her eyes and made her think god it's actually a life risk being in this voluntary thing. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Some participants spoke about their skills in managing people and challenges in managing the diversity of needs of the volunteers, as a consequence of them being volunteers coming to the role.

> You get so many different personalities in there. It's not as easy to manage … One of the biggest issues.… At work [MFS] you go out and you go and do a job and obviously you care for the welfare of the crew, but those crew can do everything that I can do. Everything from the road crash to wearing BA [breathing apparatus] to whatever – they can do it all. With the CFS, they can only do so much and then in CFS too you get people that don't like blood; people don't like too much fire and heat. So, it is a massive workload managing personnel … you even go as far as managing who is on the truck together … I had to be very careful who was on each truck, who was in charge and who was the responsible driver and all those sorts of things. You are managing a lot behind the scenes of this sort of thing. So, it's not easy and then you've got to watch the mental welfare and I know a couple of them do suffer depression and it builds up with them over time. So I have to make sure I give them some relaxation time and obviously I record their names to … teams and professionals and I report up the chain of command, but you know you do have to look after some of them. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Nick talked about the issues that newer volunteers may face in the context of contributing to and benefiting from debriefs after critical incidents:

> We have two different types of debrief that we'll do. So, we'll do what we call a hot debrief. So, at the incident, we'll generally talk about what happened, what went well, and what didn't and give everyone an opportunity to ask questions. Those newer people definitely don't probably ask as many questions as they're still trying to learn everything or feel like they're trying to fit in, so they don't openly talk about things as much. I think it is harder for newer people because you do all the training and they give you a lot of information, but you don't really know how to apply it to every situation, so you're sort of left standing back, feeling hopeless, just to not know what to do. Unless you've got good instructions being told what to do, you've even got that on you that you maybe feel like you're hopeless or you don't fit in and that you shouldn't be there. [Nick, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 11 years]

2. Experiences and impacts of the 2019/2020 bushfire season and beyond

2.1 Being there – chaos and trauma

Firefighter volunteer participants spoke in detail about their experiences of fighting the fires during the 2019/2020 fire season. Some of their accounts are harrowing; all demonstrate significant impacts on their mental health and wellbeing that were apparent long after the fires. Bob's comments capture the cumulative impacts of 56 years as a volunteer:

> I've been to bad fires, lots and lots of bad fires, and it's always been that you knock off and you go home. So, this time the fire came to us. And we lost 13 houses. We had – we had two of our jokers, their truck broke down on the side of the road, the tank had broken down, and they called in and said they were in a bit of strife, and we didn't have anyone to go and get them. So, I took my car, and I went up, and I come within inches of dying on that day ... And then we – was in the evening not long before sunset, and one of the jokers was there and he said, '…I know my house has been burnt down'… and normally you'd have three, four crews at a house fire – we only had one, and we were short staffed, even then, and we went up there, and look, we – oh, we couldn't find this bloody fire. And where I was, at one point, I could see into the house and I could see the inside of the house burning … and there was a box in there, one of those milk crates in there, and it was full of kids' toys … so, I kicked the window in, and I grabbed this box of toys, and I thought- And I dragged this box of toys out onto the lawn … And you know, I drove past that place every day after that for a week, and that box of toys sat out on the front lawn. You know, we had rain, and it sat out in the rain. It sat there, and it sat there, and it sat there, and I might as well have just left it in the bloody house to burn … And I can't – I can't go to a fire now. I – oh, look, I'm happy, I will go to the shed and I will run the

> radios, I would run the logistics to admin, but all of that sort of stuff, I'm still involved with the training and all that sort of stuff, but I will not go to a fire. I've lost too many houses; I've seen too many people lose everything- I can't do it anymore. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

Participants spoke about the 2019/2020 fires as the worst they had encountered, whereas others saw them in the context of a long list of big fires over several decades and varying in impact depending on where they were across Australia.

> Well, we had quite a few go down in this fire; had about a dozen people on oxygen at the shed and we had ambulances there. I brought a few back in trucks and cars and that sort of thing that were struggling with it. Pretty hot fire. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

> For many of the people that were working alongside you, this would've been their first significant big fire like this … Though, I think there were lots of people that were doing it pretty tough and all the people around the village had never experienced anything like this fire. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

> We are lucky in Queensland; the fires that happened in New South Wales and Western Australia and basically down south are much more vicious than the ones we get in Queensland. We don't get the canopy craziness that you have down there. We have got much more humidity and much less oil in the top of the trees. So, it's still intense but it's intense in not a dangerous sort of way, and once you have seen it a few times you know how it behaves. You know it's not going to get crazy out of control. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

Wayne spoke about how living in and fighting the fire on his doorstep became a blur, and the sheer exhaustion he experienced amidst a fire path that was perceived as inevitable:
NB. See Appendix 2 for Wayne's personal account in more detail.

> …so just jump on a truck and then the days roll one after the other, but yeah. It's all a blur really. …at the end of it and then you fall …. My friends lost their house while they weren't there. They were on the truck somewhere else, but you know, you'd hope someone else is maybe coming up behind you and they're at your house. But at the end of the day, it was just too big. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 8 years]

Daniel spoke about taking responsibility during the crisis and making tough decisions that impacted people he knew, and how he continues to struggle and reflect on those decisions:

> Everybody with the benefit of hindsight says, 'You could've done this, and you could've done that', but in the end we did enough to save the village; so that's about it. The only … issue we had, we had a couple of people who were severely burnt and they were on an isolated property and when I heard that this had happened and I put out on the radio that we couldn't get people in there, it was too dangerous to send people in and anyway, some guys just went and got them out; I don't know how they went in and got them out, it was really, really dangerous. And they got them back and they had really severe burns and we had to helicopter them to Sydney. But that decision kind of lays on me a bit, a risk assessment told me that it was too dangerous to send people in. If those people hadn't gone in those people who are pretty close friends of mine may not have survived; so, it's just hard, you've just got to make a decision … if I had to do it again and I'd say the same thing. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

Several participants emphasised the loss of control that they felt, linked to the chaos and confusion that can be part of being in the midst of a bushfire where there may be periods where there is a sense of it being beyond anyone's control.

> I got stuck outside of the truck like a couple of other guys … A member in our team got – when I say badly burnt, he was significantly more burnt than me, all my ears were burnt, I didn't notice until the end of the day. We'd put in another 20 hours after this. …I was burnt up the back of my neck and my ears and the sides of my nose just around here, but of course I didn't know that, nor did I know that the house was being torn apart. It was certainly windy, obviously if you watched the dashcam video you'll see bits of roof jet flying through the air and so on … All our pumps were bashed; the back of the truck was all bashed in from things hitting the rear of the vehicle. So yeah, it was fairly traumatic and at the time – I can't really remember the noise or not being able to breathe to be honest, yeah it was scary as hell; it's not a nice feeling to think that you're about to die unless you're

stuck outside in a fire storm. Looks like the whole world's – you probably go to hell to be honest. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

[Recounting the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires] You know they have dealt with people who have died on them – heart attacks that they died on them – members of the public but still … don't get me wrong – people do die at fires, but not as – everything was happening all at once. People were getting burnt and this was happening and that's happening – there was just so much to take in in a short period of time but that's what happened. No matter what anyone could have done, none of that could have changed. [Trish, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 30 years]

We just kept falling back up the coast because there was nothing that we could do that hindered the fire in any way to be honest. And so, it just kept making its run on the bad days … And then you just gradually crept closer and closer until it was on New Year's Eve that it made a run from the west and got into XXXX, but on the same day the fire broke out from right down past XXXX which is right through to XXXX itself and the predictions were that we were going to lose pretty much every village along the coast. So, it broke out on the morning of New Year's Eve, I think it took out whole of XXXX …. And then this village was isolated for the week with no power, no coms, road was closed, and we would've of course for whatever reason the local Council never closed any of the caravan parks, we still had people coming in for Christmas, so there was over 2000 people in here. And then we had to organise food in and all sorts of things; so, it was a real mission. And then we got them all out on the 3rd and on the 4th another bad day came, and the fire came back through the north-west and then threatened the villages in the other direction; so that was another – we were pretty lucky, we got a couple of strike teams in and we had some air support, but it was looking like we were going to lose any number of houses. I think in the end we lost half a dozen houses, isolated houses out on the ridges that we just couldn't get to. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

It was just, you know, pandemonium. It was just an unbelievable day. We were losing housing at half past nine in the morning which you know was pretty sad. So- and you know we just couldn't- no matter what we did, we couldn't stop the fires … Yeah, well one of the big issues down here over the last, the period was you know the advice from all of the government's was don't go, don't go but they didn't take any notice. Where I live, our normal population down here, but you know it's around about 250, 300 people but at Christmas time it expands to about 5000. So, we had, on the day, we had all of these people and they all basically went to the lake … and a lot of them were in panic mode. You know because they'd never experienced anything like- most of us had never experienced anything like this anyway. It's a really- the problem was then we lost power and communications, we didn't have any power or communications for 8 days. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

Oh, look there was some seriously scary parts in the middle of it and my wife was at home phoning up wondering – constantly asking whether or not they should evacuate, and their house was being showered with sparks and so forth. So, I made the decision that they should probably hang out with the hose because worst case scenario they can run to the beach and they will be safe. So there was quite a lot of stress going on there and it's kind of scary not being home when you know shit is going on at your home, but all of that worked out for us so we were a bit lucky. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

The trouble is, what happened here, what happened right down the coast, there was nowhere safe for people to go because everything was still alive so they had to, they had to get out, they had to go back to Sydney or wherever they came from. So, it was just a real problem, it was you know just the chaos was just unbelievable … as a resident if you went out, you weren't allowed back in again and if you were a resident and you were trying to come home you weren't allowed back in and that went on for about 6 days after the fires so - because there was nowhere to go it was just- and we had trouble with, you know people are terrible. Trouble with looting and stuff like that, we had police law and order people now down here, I don't know what they are in South Aussie but they all dress in black down here and drive black cars. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

We lived with a fire or smoke covered environment for months which in itself was just awful. We get a lovely view out the back of our place…but yeah you couldn't even see that and that was particularly demoralising, I felt – we just knew the whole state was burning, Kangaroo Island was burning, New South Wales was burning – it felt like the whole place was just alight. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

Several participants described how they continued to feel the impacts of the 2019/2020 fire season on their mental health. Several recounted near-death experiences and the aftermath that stayed with them, as flashbacks, depression, anger, disillusionment and physical health complaints. One crew who participated in a focus group described their sense of being 'left for dead' and 'sent down to die', and how this has impacted them:

> Patrick: I have been in the CFS for a long time, and this is the first time I have been affected by it.
> Interviewer: So, what made the difference?
> Patrick: Well, it was life and death; it was so close to death that was the thing and … the thought that ran through my mind that my wife and children can't live without me still cuts me up.
> Colin: I think it's just the closeness that we got out alive, but if could have easily flipped the other way very easily … I don't get flashbacks and I don't get disturbed – you know I sleep really well at night but there are times when I wake up and I just feel really ordinary, and I don't have that spark some days that you would normally have … the brain is still trying to sort stuff.
> Patrick: I'm the same.
> Colin: And I have to really work hard to make sure that I'm still busy, I can still do the stuff I want to do.
> Patrick: Taking the dogs for a walk in the morning and I am wondering I've got a tear in my eye.
> Colin: I had an incident recently where out of the blue I was just a mess. I had no idea, and I had an appointment with the psychologist and when we thought back and thought it through, we had been doing some BA training – got hot as all hell and we think it was kind of like the body saying the last time you were this hot, this and this and this happened sort of stuff, and suddenly I am feeling crap again.
> Colin: Certainly, the time it's taken for a report to come out [14 months later] has etched away at us … we were pretty convinced that they sent us down to die. And that's been our constant theme, and it actually comes down in there that they sent us down to die basically. There is a statement in that book that says they need to be told they are going down there for a burn over … they sent us down there knowing that was going to happen. So that's really stirred me up again …The Chief's letter that came out quite recently.
> Patrick: Knocked the hell out of us.
> Colin: Yeah, really rocked us all because we have been agitating and for him to say we are misinformed and troublemakers … and the reason why we are misinformed is because they weren't giving us the information anyway and so we were beginning to think this pack of bastards is not going to – doesn't give a rats about us. [SA Focus Group 2, CFS Volunteer]

2.2 Logistics - being responsible amidst the confusion

Firefighter volunteer participants also described a range of issues with the various logistical aspects of their role during the fire season and how these adversely impacted their ability to do their role, which then potentially added to the confusion and adverse mental health impacts. This included the use and availability of technology, general communications between service crews and 'chain of command', lines of responsibility, responding to competing community expectations, and liaison with various community and other organisations involved in the response.

> So, there was 76 of them but there was 12 or 13 were really bad, but we came across two trucks that had been burnt over and the communication was terrible. So when you see that out in the fire ground you find a truck that's been burnt out that's quite traumatic and I remember opening the door on two trucks I found and I opened the door thinking I was going to find people inside and everybody had gone, thank god, so they had got them out but then trying to find up through the chain of command where that crew was – had they been looked after? Where was the crew off that particular appliance? It was almost impossible to do and so much going on – so much asset protection and it was just - you were overrun with things you had to do. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

> I haven't really mentioned this to anyone, I don't believe that we should've been where we were at that time and not having the experience of the Captain and the Lieutenant there, we did think that the fire front had passed because we were on flat ground, but as the fire came out of the forest and roared up the valley that's what started this fire storm; it just set on it. So, where we were was maybe 60/70 percent already burnt, but this fire storm just fed on everything further down and just became an animal. So, I had moments of probably thinking that their judgment wasn't great in that circumstance, but then I had nothing to judge it on. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

[At the Command and Control Centre trying to manage the response] For the first 24 hours I had a whole lot thrown at me … I wasn't expecting it to escalate that far because, all of a sudden, I had 250 people plus. Had all these local people coming in there, all the refugees. I had everything thrown at me that day … I was only supposed to be looking after CFS – purely CFS. And all of a sudden, I had SES, SAPOL there, Ambulance, St Johns. I had the welfare groups turn up. I had animal welfare groups come in there. They all wanted a piece of me…And so you're trying to organise logistics for fuel, water, phone, food…The first few hours we didn't know where the fire was. We were getting reports all over the place. We had brigades running everywhere … And I ran two 12-hour shifts back-to-back. So, it was just hard on, because I – I just came on about 11:00 o'clock that morning. And I thought, 'Oh yeah she'll [volunteer colleague] be taking over.' But no, she was in no fit state. So, I just had to keep going … So, I had medical evacuations to do. Yeah, I had a fair bit on my plate. I was getting stressed out … having to deal with the local hospital … the firefighters were being sent there. And they were – they needed hospitalisation or other evacuations, or first aid, or whatever was needed…I had 4 or 5 firefighters went down with heat exhaustion, 2 with injuries, just slipped over and injured themselves. And there were arguments over that, who was responsible? I take responsibility for that. And I have to file it with all the reporting we do in that … I actually went to - we have a pastor there… he's very good; he's actually the brigade chaplain yeah… But he's actually a bit annoyed that nobody called him out when I was calling for trained counsellors and that. But they didn't even call him … I was trying to get the number for the local priest and that for say … who could provide me counselling for these poor people, because I said, they were totally off their face some of them. [David, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 26 years]

People's ideas of what's well prepared can be totally different and during the event there was any number of people who were quite happy to stay and defend and when the fire came, they realised that was too much for them. And this was one of the complaints that we got, that people were ringing 000 and not getting any assistance. Well, I know in the main community point in town they had a board and there were 16 urgent assistance 000 calls on the board and there were no trucks to go to any of them. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

The Council should've closed the caravan parks and they didn't, they kept them open, and people kept coming in. On New Year's Eve I was standing – when I was trying to see if I could get a helicopter in to rescue these people, I was standing on the top of the headland with a caravan camping area behind me, I'm looking across and there's just fire everywhere and behind me is New Year's Eve going strong. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

2.3 This time it was about my home, my family and my community

Firefighter volunteer participants spoke about their experiences of being out in the community fighting fires when they also were fully aware that their own homes were under threat.

Yeah, we've got a five-acre block of land here, and we got burnt out 4.5 acres. They saved all the house and assets but lost all my fencing and trees … I was on a fire truck and 11 o'clock at night I got a phone call and I had to get home and when I was coming home my wife was driving down the road and evacuation. She is safer with me, so I took her back home and she had done really well with our fire plan and then she stayed inside while I fought the fire outside when it came. She did really really really well this time. She didn't do so well in previous fires. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

We were driving around, and we were the only truck in there looking after that town and I remember my mate said, 'Can we drive past my house', and he's just renting, but all his stuff's in there. And he jumped on his roof while he was doing, he put a sprinkler on his roof and while he was doing that, we did another lap around town, we'll come back and get you in 10 minutes. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 8 years]

2.4 The physical demands of the role

Participants spoke about the sheer physical demands of responding the 2019/2020 fires over many weeks and months.

I was on the truck and fighting the fires day and night for quite some time. They came during my days off – I went to work [MFS] at nights – tired though but I did nights and CFS during the day so you do get

worn out – you do get fatigued and sometimes you've got to say 'I'm too fatigued. I've got to … to catch up on some rest.' [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

I'm too old for it … it knocks me around nowadays, it never used to. … I'd work the night, I'd have the next day off, and then the following day I'd just go in anyway. I'd go in and help out the division of command during the day because you know we were taking trucks off the line to go and … I said I can do that, don't worry, you let the trucks get on and do their work, I'll escort these guys around. You know I feel a lot of times when I wasn't supposed to be working, just go and do it anyway … it was valuable because it was a job that needed doing but it also meant that someone else with, you know, fresher legs on them could go out and actually fulfil the other roles that were needed; have the trucks out doing what they should be doing, putting fires out. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

2.5 Home and Away – campaigns versus volunteering at home

Several of the firefighter volunteer participants had experience of travelling in their volunteer role to support large firefighting efforts beyond their local districts and in other states, known as 'campaigns', which could last for a few days or weeks, depending on the fire, their personal availability, and local resources. For some, the decision to leave to fight the fires elsewhere was a difficult one.

Yeah, an issue in the CFS is do I stay and defend my own property and protect my own family or do I go out and stop the bloody fire before it gets here. It's not an easy thing as you can imagine. It's a hard call sometimes. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

There was just enough of us to crew the vehicle that we had, and although we were asked to go on strike teams … I decided it was a bad idea to do that because it would leave not enough of us left here if the situations arose that we were needed. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age; 50s; experience: 12 years]

Participants were asked how volunteering on campaigns was the same or different to their usual volunteering role at home. Their responses were varied, though all agreed that the impacts and the role were different to their usual volunteering experiences. James relished the greater sense of responsibility and purpose whilst away, and David emphasised the different sense of emotional attachment to place and the reciprocity of communities helping other communities as a positive aspect of campaigns. Some participants, like Trish accepted the uncertainty that comes with fires wherever they are; and others, like Justin, found that it was harder on their emotional wellbeing and potentially on their families.

I would prefer to be just in charge of a truck and a crew in the CFS but in the MFS they did tell me what I will do. … I have no choice, so I do sometimes prefer to go away with CFS because I would be in the hot zone, I would rather be fighting a fire than sitting back in a comms centre or whatever or staging area. I would like to be in the action; perhaps when I get older, I might not want to do that so much but at the moment I still enjoy that – I want to do that. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Working away, oh it's vastly different. You don't feel the attachment. But you do feel the empathy for the people, because they are country communities…. [recounting one campaign experience] And we had the locals come up, and they had one woman there, she was in tears saying, 'We thought you'd all forgotten about us, because there was nothing in the media about the fires up here. And it's been going for a whole month…And I said, 'look we've – we expect the same from you, that you'd help us out. The country community that we return the favour.'…You're there to help. You know with the little bit that you can do. You can't do a lot. But like I said, the little bit that you are doing is making a difference for people. And appreciate that you made the effort…when you get the CFS comes up there, it's like they feel the bond with everybody else, because we're from the country too. [David, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 26 years]

I think it helps when you go to other areas … Usually you know you are going to it and it's going to be full on and you are going to be working in it and you just don't know what you want to see and it does I think prepare you to a certain extent. I think I coped with a lot with everything I went through, but as I said my biggest thing is watching my members – I sit there and watch – I mean I am not going to tell you who they are but grown men crying. Oh, I could have done this, and I could have done that. No, you couldn't. You are yourself; you can only do this; you are not a miracle worker, or I am talking about people that are dying and things like that. [Trish, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 30 years]

> I feel as though when you travel long distances away from where you live and then come back it's harder to adjust, I think … to go from a relatively comfortable suburban life to a very regional area was very confronting … that contrast in itself is hard to process. It's very jarring, if you don't live in an area that's used to that. And I think a lot of it has to do with the people you're around so I feel as though when you're volunteering out of area, your family, you're you know back at home who aren't experiencing the same things means that when your return that there's sort of a gap between you an them when they don't really understand what you've been doing and you're not on the same page with them because you've been doing something different. Whereas I feel like that wouldn't exist if we were all in the same town together, same community. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 4 years]

Some participants explained the practice hazards they faced when joining campaigns interstate, and how they managed and coped with the different circumstances there.

> But this time I figured I'll go up, but I'm only going to drive, because I'm getting – I'm too old now to be dragging hoses around and running around the bush, so I don't mind driving a truck…. They've got nice seats in them and they've got air conditioners, and they've got everything in them to make you comfortable. Not like those old bone rattlers that we used to have. And you can, you know, you can drive a truck all day, which is a hell of a lot easier than actually working on the ground … but even then, you're going into areas that you don't know, and particularly, once you cross the border, their equipment is not compatible with ours, and you have to become self-reliant. And what we've done in the past when we've gone interstate is all the CFS trucks will go as a unit, and they will work together as a unit, because all our stuff is interchangeable between the trucks. We know, we've got our own training system, our own procedures, and we understand them…. If you stay in a system that you know and understand and you're familiar with, it's much safer and you get the job done a lot better … But the biggest problem is that when you knock off, you're going somewhere strange to sleep. You know, you're not going back to your own home, you're going to go and share a room with, oh, you know, any number of blokes that you know some of them, but you don't know all of them. And it's just like any group, you get 30, 40 or 50 blokes, and you - then you say, 'look, you're all going to sleep in that barn over there, grab a stretcher and a sleeping bag' – yeah … (Laughing) … And there was about, oh, 30 or 40 of us in this one little room with all these bunks that were made for school kids. And well, most of us went and slept outside on the dirt, it was easier and more comfortable than trying to … (Laughing) – oh, yeah – and the Salvo's sent over a trailer with – it was all loaded with barbecues, and you know, some jokers to cook it up, right. And of course … they spent all their time cooking for the officers, and we were out in the sticks getting bloody cold scrambled eggs, and bad air. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

Several participants emphasised the importance of receiving support from locals with knowledge of the local fire ground.

> We learnt that one quite a few years ago, that when we arrive, because we arrive with trucks and group officers and the whole fleet of about 8-10 trucks. We ask and really insist on a local knowledge person to be with us at all times because with what happened in the Canberra fires is when things went wrong … some really bad things happened. … It's not even on maps a lot of the stuff. And a lot of it here is, once you get west of here, probably about 30 kms west, there is no reception, no nothing. There's no phones, there is no internet, there is nothing. It's just on your own, you've got to rely on your maps and one wrong turn, especially in a whole fleet of trucks – you want to all turn … when things go wrong. [Trish, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 30 years]

Participants from one focus group described the levels of confusion that can arise when being away on campaign fires where large numbers of people are brought together from different parts of the country to work together and on multiple fire fronts. They also stressed the importance of good leadership, coordination, handover and communications.

> Adam: On the campaign fires where you get the phone call to say right you're off to New South Wales or you're heading off to Kangaroo Island, …it doesn't seem like there is any planning saying let's bring people from the grasslands up to the hills to fight a bushfire. They are not trained in that sort of firefighting, and that's where I think it all falls in a big heap. …blending these crews is great for training but training is not really good when you are in the line of fire …it does take a massive mental load on you when you don't know who you are going to have on the truck and what their capabilities are, and it's not until the shit hits the fan that you go right this fella can't actually cope or you know so that's a big worry.

Paul: On various campaigns where we have had not only people from the CFS, but we also had in New South Wales, we had a crew that consisted of CFS, MFS and Parks, but we actually worked very well, and in the majority had positive experience. They have all brought different skills, but in those instances, we weren't really in a sticky situation. You know it was fairly easy firefighting, so we had to learn how each other worked and I actually learnt a lot of really good skills off those people so just want to bring back to how we fight fires here. So, there's positives as well as some downsides.
Richard: The other incident too Sharon is that the CFS doesn't seem to understand you should do a handover, so if you are a divisional commander or sector commander or someone is going to control a group of 5-6 trucks it would be better if the divisional commander went across eight hours earlier, went out to the fire ground and did a handover with the fellow he is taking over from, and then when the crew arrived which maybe eight hours later he knows what's the situation on ground he briefs them, but they never ever do that, and the military has been doing this for hundreds of years and that's the way you've got to do it. You find out what's going on and you bring people in and straight away your leader knows what's going on, but we just blunder in; take over; take over the trucks and people walk out. That's it.
Paul: But also not just in military; I work in a utility and every shift that is done – there is a shift change-over – there is software to help with that – all the information which happened previously is all brought forward into the next shift.
Patrick: The same as nursing; it happens everywhere.
Colin: And CFS have the tools to do it. They have the process in place which we are taught, and I have never yet been in any incident where those tools have been used.
Interviewer: So, what stops them, why do they not-?
Colin: I don't know, I think it's about expediency and it's just get out there and do what we can do.
Richard: They are not well trained; our leaders are not trained.
Adam: The issue is there is no accountability to the sector commanders or the strike team leaders. They swan in, they do a very small amount of work and then they disappear, and they are never held accountable for decisions they make; the lack of information they pass down to volunteers which can be quite important on a fire ground for an operational thing, and it's just quite frustrating from a volunteer perspective. You know I could be stepping away from work for five days away from the kids, and you get there and half the time you are sitting around doing nothing, and I am like I could be at home or I could be at work, especially when you have got employees to look after too – it's not just a matter of myself. I've got to think about six other fellas.
Patrick: And as an aside the volunteer association categorically opposed reimbursing blokes like Adam if they are on the fire ground for more than nine days – categorically opposed it, and it came from the Prime Minister, he suggested it and our own volunteer association said, 'no way'. So how do you rationalise that, I have no idea.
Paul: Following onto what Colin was saying about shift change over and hand over, a lot of it I suspect is because when we go out and do these things once, twice, three times a year. You know people in the military and in the other services they do it probably every day. [SA Focus Group 2, CFS Volunteers]

2.6 Coping with anniversaries, other triggers and community impacts

Firefighter volunteer participants described a range of experiences that demonstrated the impacts of traumatic incidents and cumulative stresses on their mental health and wellbeing as a consequence of their volunteer roles.

It's interesting you don't think about anniversaries. We don't try to think about those things too much and sometimes they pop in your brain. It's interesting things like we had one horrific job and the guy who passed away had an aftershave on, and this was really interesting, and that was really strong, and I thought wow that was strong. Anyway … again three years later, and I had totally forgotten about that job and that job flashed in my head – we tried to cut him out, but we couldn't get him out but anyway, and it's interesting what triggers you. …And I've seen great firies [firefighters] have mental problems and it's been a real eye opener and I do believe the bucket overfills or can overfill and I have seen them with issues such as aggressive things with their wives, not sleeping, and so it can happen to the best of us … they have just literally been to too many things and busy stations. A nearby station has had three fatalities in the last two weeks – three bad ones. When it's kids and things it's always hard. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

[12 months on and remembering the fires] And I think it was only a couple of months ago, I said to my mate, I'm like, 'How do you forget?' But it just happened all the time. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

> [Talking about his current struggles with mental health] It was just the realisation of the fire, the pager going off over and over and over and over again … And of course, just the absolute visual reminder at every moment of every day, just your whole crew of firemen just covered in smoke; it was awful. It was so thick at times, so that has probably got me more to be honest … Just seeing a whole town on fire was quite something; we were surrounded by fire for 20 hours, everywhere you looked there's a light and you kind of got used to it, but it was a bit of a surreal kind of situation …it's that when everyone else is driving in the other direction, it's the people that are driving towards the danger. …And we were enjoying an afternoon out just yesterday with a friend …beautiful place, really slippery on the rocks and yeah, some poor bloke slipped and fell in and I was up and running towards him before anyone had even realised. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

Whilst the 2019/2020 fire season has passed, several participants remained somewhat vigilant.

> There's a lot of fuel around and I guess that it will depend a lot on the days and, of course, when that stinking hot days come up with the north wind, then we all become a little bit more apprehensive, and so in one sense, we become, especially those of us who have been around for a while, probably mentally prepare themselves. … we'll probably go to the fire station and we'll just sit there and we'll listen to the radios and we'll watch the TV – the modem and see what fires there are in the State and where they are and what's … the temperature's increasing, the wind's getting worse, or so in one sense there's a camaraderie that sort of – that we develop between ourselves that I – and I think that's very – that's very important alongside of, well, if you were all sitting at home or doing whatever you're doing and all of a sudden the pager goes off and off you tear off and jump on the truck and …, then that's not quite as prepared as you were if you were sitting at the station and you're saying, gee, it's a serious day and the weather forecast, oh, there's going to be a wind change and that's going to be worse, and you're a little bit more, shall we say, prepared. You're never fully prepared, of course. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age; 80s; experience: 60 years]

Several participants were concerned about a sense of complacency by some members of their community. This worried and frustrated them. For some, it seemed to heighten their vigilance and distress.

> It becomes just so embedded in your life … we live with fire – well, for those who are significantly involved in the service, we're living that every year and so the memories of the fires that we had this last year will be living in people's memories for quite some time; however, I guess there is a danger that people do get a bit complacent and … I think of some places where I think they might say, 'Well, look, I've lived in this beautiful area for the last 30 years and nothing's happened'. … some parts of the district are a disaster waiting to happen and we – quite a lot of us know that that's going to be inevitable. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience 60 years]

> I see some stupid things and … now with summer on our doorstep and a season like we have had, I find it quite frustrating … I've come across people lately that are just saying 'Oh well, it's like a lottery – we've had our turn, so it won't happen again this year.' [Tim, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 25 years]

> I was driving around the other day, I said to a mate, 'There's still so much more to burn.' But you know, I've started carrying my CFS bag to work with me, so wherever I am, I've got my gear. Just that heightened awareness and I think some people might be a bit blasé because it's burnt around them and it's not going to happen this year, but yeah. It can happen down the road. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 8 years]

Participants spoke about the everyday visual reminders of the fires in their community and how this impacted them and others in their community, and also how it also influenced how engaged and vigilant people were, or not, in recovery support and education sessions after the fires.

> We've had a few recovery sessions here where people have come to the fire station and invited community to come along. They haven't been as well supported here because – we pulled the fire up and it didn't result in any mass destruction in the village itself, only out in the ranges; but at other places where they lost 80 houses, three people deceased and the recovery operations over there were months, people came along to those because they'd been through a much worse event than here. But having said that, I mean driving in and out, just driving past the destruction of the fire every day for a year and some of it hasn't come back and probably won't ever come back and that's very waring as well. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

Participants were asked if they thought their view of themselves or others had changed since the 2019/2020 bushfire season. Brendon, whose crew were caught in a significant near-death incident during the fires which resulted in them being injured, reflected on how risky the role is and how close he came to dying:

> Probably a little; you're a lot more vulnerable within a fire environment that you may otherwise think is dangerous; you always know it's dangerous to that extent … So yeah, it has changed my view of myself and it does affect negatively at times, but I don't think my view of myself is negative. It does evoke – I've probably surprised – in actual fact I think I've got some tissues in my pocket, I haven't needed them because I thought I might to talk about it, I certainly have to the doctors and psychologists at times maybe because some people can sort of see through the frosted glass at work; I'd prefer not to. Maybe that's the bloke in me coming out, but yeah certainly I've shed a tear or two over it at times, but I don't beat myself up about that, I'm just trying to I guess find sense of it. We're obviously lucky that no one got more seriously hurt … a young RFS bloke was killed in the fire in New South Wales, it was only half an hour or so before this occurred to us and we knew that, we knew that he'd perished; it had come over the radio. So, we knew that this was, that our lives were at risk, it was pretty full on … there are many things about these sorts of events that are just not in anyone's control. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age; 40s; experience: 4 years]

Neville reflected on how he was surprised by some people and disappointed by others' reactions when under pressure and confronted by the fire season crisis, and also about his own reactions which he now found unsettling. Justin had similar thoughts:

> You get to know some people a bit better than you know you did before and you think, some people you'd think, geez I would have thought better of you than that during you know the crisis and then other people excelled and you know you thought gee that was fantastic and you're really doing a great job. … Some people surprised you, and other people disappointed you, you know … And tempers get, tempers get frayed and we say things we don't really mean; and you know, and I think we all suffered from that myself included. You know you get so cranky with things and you say you shouldn't be doing that and you rip into them and you know it's, you know I guess if a lot of people like me forget about it after you walk away I think I shouldn't have said that and you know everything's fine after that … There are some people and it's really affected me. They really have done the wrong thing. They should have known better, but they haven't, you know … when you've been working 15, 16 hours a day week in week out it does sort of, you know your brain snaps sometimes and yeah you let fly. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

> I think it's interesting seeing how irrational people really are. I think that we like to, you know when we're in our air-conditioned you know upper middle-class lives and go about our work and what have you, we like to sort of imagine that everyone, everyone is identical to us and that we're all wonderful, moral, rational people. Once that's taken away, it's interesting to see just how primal people are and how we're driven often more my emotion than by facts. That you know people are way more prone to hysteria than I previously thought and also that people have a lot, are capable of amazing things when shit hits the fan and that's you know so it's a double edge- it's a two-way street but yeah, I think it's whenever there's bad times, they bring out the best and the worst in people that you didn't know was there. People I had very limited respect for before the fires did things that changed my view of them, then people who I expected to perform better didn't. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 4 years]

Justin described feeling embarrassed by the attention that he received as a firefighter, experienced as 'imposter syndrome':

> I take a lot of personal pride in team in being part of the team during the last season, but I think in terms of myself there's sort of an imposter syndrome in that I, the disparity between what I felt I did, what other people think I did is so large that I sort of feel like a fraud sometimes. One example that stands out for me in a very cringe worthy way was it was Remembrance Day last year … by the time the order to travel to the fire arrived, everything's over more or less, and we finally arrived a day after everything hit the fan and there was not a single thing to do except sit in the truck and eat muesli bars and just wait for something to happen and the same day, the Sydney morning herald published this deeply embarrassing cartoon that depicted a rural fire-fighter and the soldier of the first world war … standing side by side on remembrance day, I just felt so embarrassed by that. While the sentiment is very generous, it just - I mean - yeah. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 4 years]

Wayne noted the greater community cohesion that he felt:

> It's brought us closer together and plenty of people have said that if anything positive comes out of the fire it's definitely how we've banded together as a community. And it's just crazy the amount of people just helping out. It's just endless. It doesn't surprise me though. I know how tight our local football community is, you know everybody from all different walks of life. But yeah, it's, that the fires definitely cemented that which is great. That's one thing that'll keep me there. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

Brendon described the post-traumatic growth that he experienced as a consequence of fighting the fires:

> Even though I have suffered as a result of that fire and so on, I'm still really glad that I was there. It was an experience like no other and it's not that I want to live on the edge kind of adrenalin type thing; it wasn't. It was scary and I did genuinely fear for my life. But when I look at it in totality that event is two minutes out of 28 hours and even though the period of time during it was confronting at times and difficult, there was a lot of good, there was a lot of experience that I'll forever remember. So yeah, I certainly don't wish that it never occurred, I feel quite fortunate if you will to have been involved in something like that and if there was another fire front bearing down and they said you're on the strike team, I'd go. … Some other things now are just less important. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

2.7 Community volunteers' experiences

Community volunteers' descriptions of their experiences during the 2019/2020 fire season were equally vivid. For many, this was a direct assault on their homes and communities; a global impact that reached the very foundations of their community.

> It was, it was like a violation on your community. … and you sort of turn it into you know anthropomorphise it [like a dragon herding the community] … but also then the displacement ... It wasn't just that I cared for the community and it's very sad, it was that I had imagined this beast for so long and then it was real. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

Community volunteers understood the impacts of the fires for their community; many had lengthy experience and knowledge. This sometime added to their trauma.

> I know Defence only gets called under certain things called The Defence Aid to the Civil Community. And I thought there was Armageddon, I thought that I was just walked out the office, nobody communicated to say that it's going to be the Defence Force turning up. I saw them, I went into the toilet and bawled my eyes out, and I thought this was the end of my life. [Justine, VIC Past CFA, Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 6 years]

Community volunteers described how they mobilised in spite of the chaos and destruction wrought by the fires, but also how they were frustrated in their efforts to serve their community, particular, like Julia, where they saw a need and could fill it with local skills and resources but were excluded from linking in with more formal relief efforts, largely from outside the community.

> I could do people's laundry. I could take people to appointments. Nobody ever contacted me so it did make me wonder whether all of the information that was given, whoever was collating it where it went and I actually went in and said 'Look, I'm not a trained counsellor but I can certainly go and listen to people and we had been told that when the Meals on Wheels were going out to deliver meals to people families just wanted to talk and myself and somebody who is a trained counsellor out of Carers and Disability Link said how about we follow you around when you're doing your meals and you can introduce us and we can actually sit with people and just let them talk if that's what they want to do' and it was, 'No you're not a trained counsellor, the government are going to be sending people in in the next 2 or 3 months' and both of us were sort of going … There are people that are in shock and trauma now. They need someone to just be able to talk so if we then realise there's something we can then, if they want to we can help them with going to a GP or if we see someone's in crisis. So it wasn't trying to step on somebody else's toes but it was this thing of going, 'No you can't do this' and it just seemed a little bit of a slap in the face of people offering who had so much experience and also knowing the local area and knowing that some of the farmers wouldn't want to talk to what they perceived as being a townie. [Julia, SA Community Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 20 years]

> I don't think a lot of people coming in from outside really understood the extent of that practical support that was needed. Some people did and I think there were other people who had the shock of their life. I mean I had a lady come in one day and I was trying to sort out food and all she kept asking for was pony food because that was her focus and she was wearing obviously stuff she'd been in for 3 days and I said 'Look, I can get you some other bits.' She said, 'No, I just need the pony food' and I said, 'Okay, but you might get a bit stuck for breakfast tomorrow so how about I put some other stuff together' and she, I could see she was, it was lights on, nobody home and I recognised that from seeing when my husband went into, just shutdown. So I put some things together for her and got her to show me her car and she found it really hard to take stuff from me and I said, 'We've got the pony food and if you tell me where the animals are we can make sure we get feed to them' … People came in and I said, 'Well have you got a dog lead, have you got a collar, have you got a bowl.' It was the really weird stuff that people wouldn't always think about that somebody might need and I gave her a pair of flip flops and some clean clothes and she said it'd be so nice to just get out of this stuff, I stink and I've been in this for 3 days now and I said here's a tooth brush and a clean pair of knickers and she nearly burst into tears and I said, 'That's all you really want when you're feeling grotty.' [Sandra, SA Community Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 20 years]

Community volunteer participants also described a range of experiences that demonstrated the impacts of traumatic incidents and cumulative stresses on their mental health and wellbeing, and that of others in their community, as a consequence of their volunteer roles. Jenny, who had seen the signs, based on her expertise in past bushfire roles, had been vigilant before the fires and remained so afterwards, and understood the painful process of recovery that was to come:

> It was quite a profound experience and probably quite unique. … I automatically knew that was a bad thing because I know that country and I know the distance and I knew the day … So, there wasn't just that personal responsibility to connect with people and try to warn them about risks to keep them safe in an incident, but I also knew there was a broader program and broader policy to get to as many people as possible. So, when that fire was getting very serious … I very quickly felt the responsibility of wondering if I had done enough. Had I persuaded enough people? … [reflecting on past fires whilst hearing the reports coming in] So you know that the people that you know and care for are not going to be the same people that they were, and they've got a really long and painful journey ahead. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

Other participants described how they and many in the community, in general, remain vigilant:

> I'd say there's a lot more anxiety in day to day. It's almost like summer becomes a time to be afraid. And we've always known about bushfire, but when it brushes past your front door, I think it heightens that awareness to the point of making you feel concerned enough that you don't wish to participate in social activities elsewhere if it's bad fire conditions. I want to stay home. I had a meeting on a week ago, and we had very rough weather…. I didn't want to go, because I felt I needed to be home, just in case I needed to put on all the sprinklers and close the fire doors. [Liz, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

> It's still very, very much in the conversation-that issue of sort of triggering, that you're having conversations with other people and there's something about you're not sort of wearing that on your own. It's something that's part of the community conversation … a group of families went down to the pageant and they actually made a point of saying we know that the fire trucks and stuff are going to be coming through. We don't want any sirens … my children hear a noise and she said they literally shoot off the sofa and so the parents I think are also very aware that their children are incredibly triggered … On some days when it's windy and it's warm you can, you can just, you can sense the everyone's feeling exactly the same way. [Julia, SA Community Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 20 years]

Community member volunteer participants were also asked if they had noticed whether their view of themselves or others had changed since the fires. Many commented on the negative impacts of the fires on the land and properties, but also about how the fire season had triggered other concerns in their past and personal life, created vicarious trauma, and how it had shaken their sense of community cohesion.

> I have taken on a lot of the pain of other people, and it has been burdensome … I am not enjoying at the moment seeing so many strong, proud people broken … and one was a lady who had helped to look after my son when he was little who had been a great supporter – as a new mother like she had

been a rock and so important to us and now to see her weak and so fragile. It's actually- that's quite rattling because in your sense of security these people in the community as much as I have said that the CFS camaraderie and strength has been a safety net … and it's like the landscape – you drive around and things are coming back but it's not what it was, so you go around a corner and something is not there anymore and suddenly you've got to change your memories, you've got to recalibrate and it's very unsettling … that woven fabric that you thought was strong and you realise it's changeable. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

I've been disappointed by the response of some people to other people's, you know, concerns and tragedy … I guess I found myself being a bit shorter with a couple of customers because, just because of they're you know, being a bit more self-centred, I felt. And yeah, it sought of, a couple of things brought it to the fore … this emotional CPR training actually made me talk about a few personal issues … And I haven't really spoken about those things … And so that I found myself you know, being a bit more emotional after it. [Terry, SA Community Volunteer, age; 50s; experience: 20 years]

Some participants spoke about their sense of positive impacts for their community and greater community cohesion as a consequence of their shared experience of the fires. This included a range of proactive community-based arts and social activities that brought people together to heal after the fires.

The other thing that surprised me is there are the formal structures in the community and in society, and what I saw happen after the fire it's almost like the leadership and then the real leadership is that, people have identified each other – like people have identified their own leaders, to cut through formality … it's almost like the lead has emerged. You know what I mean it's almost kind of something spiritual about it. It's like who among us here, who will rise to this occasion … I saw some incredibly special scenes that showed the true leadership of those people beyond position … what I think what the difference was is they themselves are incredibly vested and connected to the community … It wasn't just service; it was something else. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

People are in lots of ways now more connected emotionally with each other. There's this ongoing sort of checking in- … having something like a Men's Shed or a Women's Shed where people can get together and make and do stuff but over that there would be conversation and I think that's probably going to be the biggest healing towards moving forward is about open dialogue and conversation; but if you're making and creating something, you're feeling that you're of use as well. [Julia, SA Community Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 20 years]

2.8 The role of media coverage of the bushfires and its impact

Firefighter volunteer participants had predominantly negative views of the media; they felt uncomfortable interacting with the media, either because they were embarrassed by the attention or were coming a place of humility and stoicism as they attempted to cope emotionally with the distress of the critical events they were dealing with. Some expressed that they felt they were being used for political mileage or found approaches by the media inconvenient or annoying, especially when they just wanted to get on and do their job fighting fires and serving their community.

The one thing I did find is that when, especially in Sydney, when we knocked off and we were going back at nights, because there was all CFS vehicles, people – they used to close the roads so that we'd have quick access, and the roads would be lined with cars, and there'd be people standing outside their cars clapping and cheering as we went past, and that made me feel very uncomfortable. I felt – I don't know…it made me feel really, really uncomfortable. I didn't like it at all. And then – and then when you come home and you get off the plane, you've got all these politicians and big knobs all standing around saying how good you are and all that sort of thing, and I just wished they weren't there, I just want to get off the plane and go home ... And all that stuff's not necessary because we've – we're doing – we're doing what we went to do, you know, and that was it, but yeah – because – you know, when we get a call out here, you go out, you do the job, you come home, and put the trucks away, everything's cleaned up, everything is … then you go home. And no one in the town – well, it's very rarely that anyone in the town would come down to the fire shed and say, geez, you blokes have done a good job today. You know, we've had a couple of big incidents where, you know, one of the publicans might bring over a couple of cartons of beer, or the butcher might bring over some snags for a barbie or something like that, but you know, when it's – you feel very – I don't know what you'd say is very…you really want to cry, because you feel …

[struggling to describe it] Yeah, a bit overwhelmed with it. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

And a lot of it is rubbish too. You know, we had – oh, ScoMo [Prime Minister Scott Morrison] and all of these other no-hopers, I don't know, they actually came up and – and it's … - they don't appreciate the sense that – we put in – I don't know, look we were doing 120, 150 incidents a year, and big and small, big and small, and we were away from home, and several of the jokers had given up work and all of this sort of stuff, and then all of a sudden, after the fires, a few days after that, he says, 'Oh, look, we need 20 or 30 blokes down the fire shed at such and such a time on Tuesday afternoon, because Sir ScoMo's coming up for a photo.'…and it's an inconvenience to us, because now it's like having another call out, but we're not getting anything done, we're just there so that someone can get his photo taken. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

In the rural areas, it's not too bad, you know, we would be attending, say, a real bad road accident and we'd have the road closed, and we'd be working away and be trying to cut people out cars and things, and the reporter from our local newspaper would turn up, and because they were press, they had free access, they could just walk in. But when they came in, they were always respectful and they would always come in and they would go to the officer in charge and they would say, 'mate, I'm so and so from XXX, can you tell me what happened, can I take a few photos.' And you could say to them, 'Look mate, that's alright, just don't go anywhere over there'… and they would do that, no dramas at all…. And then, all of a sudden you get bloody Channel 9 and Channel 7 would turn up with their great big cameras and God knows what else, and you wouldn't be able to see what you were doing, because they'd be shining these bloody great big spotlights down the road so they could film what was going on. … you had to accept the fact that they were there, even though they were bloody pests. [Jake, SA CFS volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 28 years]

I get a bit cranky with media because it's all sensationalism and I normally won't even speak to them … [recounting an example] We were in a paddock waiting for the fire to come out and I was out on the road this day and the media pulled up and I just said to the crews, I said I'm going to tell these guys to bugger off. Anyway, they said no we can stay, I said well I really don't want you here. Anyway, they decided they were going to move but they came back but it wasn't exciting enough for them, so they moved on and the way I look at it is, they've always looking for something so they can be critical. … if something goes amiss, you're responsible for these extra couple of people and you know you've got enough on your plate without having to worry about them. … but their excuse is you know we've got a right to put this out to the general public you know, and we know what we're doing and all this sort of stuff and it really gets up my nose I'm afraid. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

Some of our guys won't talk to them because you're never really sure that what you say is going to be mirroring how it comes out. But RFS has got a good media section who pretty much – the guys who are working there are well known to the journo's … if it's going to interfere with what we're doing operationally then we say no. I try to make time to talk to them and just give them the cold hard truthful facts because they'll even polish it or they won't. I think the parts of the media I think that annoyed me was on SKY News where someone centred heavily on the fact of hazard reduction side of things and we should've done more and we should've burnt this, it was all the Greenies fault and all the rest of it. And then it was just one after another, they'd all get up and say pretty much the same things and you're just sitting here going well no, I saw this fire go through – just locally we had a wildfire in 2018 and it burnt the bush really heavily and this fire went straight through it…. It was just a fire storm, when you've got things spotting ten and twelve kilometres in front of itself; so that's a bit hard to take. … I know that some of the guys I work with in Parks have stopped wearing the uniforms into town because they were getting abused, we've attended jobs where people have had illegal fires and got abused, you know "where were you, why weren't you here on the day?" All that and that was all being beaten up by the media and so it doesn't help. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

Look, the media, of course, always wanted to get a story, of course, and I suppose … I don't know that I take quite so much notice of the media, to be quite frank. … Perhaps there are sometimes when you laugh a bit and you see how it's reported and you think, oh, well, that wasn't quite how the way I saw it, really. … I think they have been a bit more discreet in more latter times that I think that's – there's been a bit of training … and they sort of keep out of the way a bit … I guess, when there's a major fire on, people do want to know what's going on … I know very well that fire is a very frightening thing for many people and so, as a consequence, when they've got this fear atmosphere,

it – you do have to have a fairly responsible media to sort of give some guidance. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience: 60 years]

I think yeah there's positives and negatives. I think on the upside there's a greater appreciation of volunteers and first responders than there was before and people taking bushfire risk more seriously … people actually recognising and understanding a bit better about what you do … And as well as informing people of what's going on, I think though that the downside much of the time it boarded on hysteria. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 4 years]

Community volunteers had mixed views about the media and its role in reporting the 2019/2020 bushfire season coverage. Some participants saw it as a useful community service to keep people informed and in collaboration with community needs.

I actually think it allowed us to remain connected to what was happening and keep the thoughts of people directly impacted in our minds … it just allowed me to still feel connected to those people and be able to read stories and think, well can I help out there, can I do something to help there … The local community newspaper was absolutely dedicated running stories, free of charge, for people like us who were doing things to help. I did find the media to be incredibly supportive of all the volunteering efforts. [Liz, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

There were a lot of wonderful stories of the humanity after the fire, how people reached out. [Chris, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 30 years]

Other community volunteer participants felt that some of the media coverage was exploiting the situation and the people in the communities.

I thought it was actually quite insensitive … [regarding people who have lost their homes] so you are exploiting them at their weakest. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

I am actually quite angry with what I refer to as the media's obsession with disaster pawn. [Frank, SA Past CFS, Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 20 years]

3. Coping and sources of support in the volunteer role

3.1 Mental health and coping after the fires

Several participants spoke about their experiences of mental health concerns after the fires which indicated that many were still struggling to cope after the fires. Many, like Brendon, have continued to experience post-traumatic vivid memories of their experiences and have kept 'busy' as a way of coping. Others have experienced significant unresolved anger related to critical incidents that occurred, or problems with sleep and fatigue. Some, like Neville, just see it as a process of time to 'wear off'.

A couple of workplace issues have been fairly combative and confrontational and I think those combined have made me feel like I'm in a bit of a fight or flight situation quite a lot and I have found myself reflecting on the fires probably more than I would like and to the extent where the experts say if you're still thinking about it after this length of time you need to get some help; that's me, I am still occasionally thinking about it. …It's like I'm not here, I'm here but I'm not quite here somehow. My focus hasn't been great … Not only could we not train for the most part of this year because of the COVID restrictions, I have been hesitant to go to the station. When we had to do our burn over drill …I was particularly nervous and hesitant and so fairly uncomfortable around the truck and I haven't been anywhere near as involved in the station as I had been. We're busy though, I have two kids, sport five nights a week, I'm up at five o'clock to go for a run and I'm usually in bed at ten or eleven o'clock at night and if I sit down to do anything like relaxing in that period of time I'm lucky. So, you know, we are pretty busy anyway. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

Colin: I think the anger is one of the hardest things because it can just sit there for – it just doesn't go sometimes.
Adam: I find when I get fatigued, like if I am doing long hours at work that's when I do start to struggle to sleep or just the bad thoughts come back. So, I was medicated for a while and then the doctor was like you could be on these drugs for the rest of your life. So, I decided to take myself off of them and just try and went back to the psychologist to try to sort of deal with things a little bit

differently and I have noticed my health has taken a bit of a downturn. I have put on about 15 kilos since the fire. [SA Focus Group 2, CFS Volunteer]

After the fires, I must admit, it really got to me a few times and my colleague you know we're pretty good friends as well. I had a bit of a brain splat one day with him in the car and he just picked up the phone and said 'Talk with this lady' and we talked a few times and she's rung me back a few times just to make sure everything's alright … I mean things still affect me every so often particularly the incident with the guys that I nearly lost, come back and bite you. Probably, laying in bed at night … you know it's probably hardly a day goes by where you know even a year later, you don't think about what happened over the period, the things that happened, things you did … It's probably not so much a new feeling but not to the extent that it's gone on, so you know over the 12 months, I'm certainly a lot better now than I used to be. I used to get a bit teary talking to people … I guess it's starting to wear off. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

Nick spoke about the negative effect of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, which prevented volunteers from connecting with their peers on a regularly basis via training, to support their mental health.

When it all happened, a decision was made at a high level that they were going to stop all training for most volunteer places. CFS stopped training altogether so some of those people haven't attended a training night in months … But a lot of people feel like their time with an organization and the time that they spend on training is their time to catch up with mates…So to have that taken away from them is a bit of a big effect on some people. I know one person what's been in our unit and he'd lost his job, was having issues with family, and all he needed was to go to training. When he couldn't do that, it had a pretty big effect on him. [Nick, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 11 years]

James spoke about the ongoing shortage of basic resources to fight future fires, the promises made as part of political rhetoric during and in the immediate aftermath of the fires, and his feeling of the volunteers now being forgotten again.

People, some of the stronger personalities – stronger people that you thought were stronger were struggling with the fire, and I think the COVID definitely didn't help. I think all the money being raised and quite a few of us not seeing a dollar didn't help – not that I want any money but it's just … So, there are lots of issues and we were promised that 300,000 litre tank. Well, that's fallen by the wayside now. The brigade is one of the strongest brigades in the state and yet we are struggling to meet demands of our community … You know, it's not just leaving home, jumping in a truck, go and resolve an issue for someone out there and then come home and go back home again, and that's it, you have done your job. There's a lot more to it than that. There shouldn't be but there is. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

3.2 The primary role of families and peers as sources of support

All firefighter volunteer participants said that their first and most often used source of emotional support and debrief to help them to cope in their role was their family, particularly their spouse or partner. Families were clearly a part of the volunteer firefighter 'tribe' and this Strong family allegiance to the service appeared to be a protective factor, through shared experience creating understanding of the volunteers' needs by family. Equally important were their immediate peers - other members of their crew or brigade.

I am pretty lucky because my wife, her whole side of the family have volunteered or are still actively volunteering, so I have got a very good support network on that side of the family. I guess at a brigade level we debrief very well. Anything above brigade level, it very rarely actually happens effectively. [SA Focus Group 2, Adam, CFS Volunteer]

Yeah, I find I drop into peoples - I'm not the kind of person that'll come around to your house. I like to go to the pub, but I'll leave your house to you; to yourself. But lately you know, you drop around someone's house and have a quiet beer with them … So, you text and you know, how you going? … keep checking up on people … I love the fact that I pull in the pub after work, and you know everybody there. It's helped me bounce back anyway. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 8 years]

I go out, and I put out a fire and I come home and have a chat to my wife about it … The main frustration is stupid people making stupid decisions and I get to vent about that a bit with my wife and the rest of the crews when they are whining about stuff at the station on training days. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

We've been together a long time through things … and we can talk freely and openly to each other about anything, we've been together 40 something odd years, so I guess we've had plenty of training. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age; 70s; experience: 32 years]

There was so much informal support just across their whole daily life that no one else would see that necessarily or understand it, and then they were people they weren't seeking official roles or credit, they were just doing it. And I suspect that's what happens when you've got a good cohesive team of people looking out for each other, I guess? [Trevor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age; 50s; experience: 30 years]

I debrief probably more than I should with my spouse, with my partner. There's still a residual sense that I don't know, I still have this gut feeling that's probably just in my imagination that talking about things comes across as attention seeking … She's very stoic, very pragmatic, very determined. Not a romantic … which is what I love about her. She's terrific but yeah when it comes to these sorts of things, I sort of brought up a couple of things … you know I think I've talked about it quite extensively with her. Yeah, she's the steadiest person that I know. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 4 years]

We've had a few fatals [deaths] where after each of them the counsellors come out only for people that attended the scene of course, but I haven't sought counselling ongoing through the CFA ... And look, I can certainly talk to my wife about it and she's always there for support. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experiences: 4 years]

Yeah, because you're in your own house, you can talk to the boss [wife!] and say, 'Look, you know, yeah, that's a bit of a rough one'… and sometimes it's not even the detail of the talking, it's just sort of that they somehow know how to just sit with you. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

My family and my wife obviously will talk about anything with me … [Adult children] They're the first ones to ring … Just checking up on you dad, heard you had a bad night or bad day at work or a bad job at the CFS, and they know to talk to you … and yeah lots of mates and friends, so plenty of people I can lean on if I need to … I always remember that Crocodile Dundee film when he is in that big room with all those people and Linda Kowalski, and she said all these people have a shrink they talk to. And he looked at her and he said haven't they got any mates? And I know that sounds funny but that's so true isn't it? … I don't actually ask for help because I normally nut it out myself. I normally go and do something like walk the dog that gives me time to think. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age; 60s; experience: 25 years]

Yeah, well we have those nights when we go out for training, and we'll get there early … and you know, we'll have a barbecue and there'll be some chops and a bit of steak and a couple of, you know … and we'll just have a sort of a casual laid-back night where blokes can have a bit of a natter and a chat, and it's – yeah, that's good, and sort of a relaxing. [Michael, VIC CFA volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 48 years]

Steve: I think a couple of extra days on light duties still hanging out with the same people and, and then you can shake that shit off that you went through. And then it's alright, I think, but that's how we drag that one person out of instead of falling in a hole, you hold them up. So not leaving them on their own for too long. Going over there and just saying 'You're coming with me'.
Aaron: And people don't always say that they need help. So, you've got to sort of read it don't you? Because most people around here wouldn't say-
John: There was a pretty big emphasis on making sure that we're looking after our mates, because it was pretty traumatic, and I think it was pretty clear to everyone that you just look after each other as much as yourself. [SA Focus Group 1, CFS Volunteers]

Wayne, whose CFS crew were also involved together in the local football team, explained how the support within the crew came naturally and was often unspoken; like an innate sense of trust in each other to be there for each other. His later description of concern for a fellow volunteer at risk of suicide demonstrates the importance of peer awareness of mental health concerns.

We were there every day and we just, we ended up a well-oiled machine. …and we didn't have to talk to each other. You just get out and - someone grabs a hose and runs. The next person just is peeling it off the wheel. …it's like if you're in a footy team, you know that that person is going to be

there because you just know, ready to pass. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age; 40s; experience: 8 years]

Some of my friends that got caught, and we don't really talk about it that much like that situation unless they want to talk about it, but yeah. They were rattled. …And there was one driver, and you could just see that he was going to go home, but you know [suicide]. I said to our captain, 'Nuh, we'll take him out with us' … we headed out that day to just check over stuff. We weren't going to drive into anything stupid, but I saw this guy and I realised that he should come out with us just to keep going instead of- …it's probably something I haven't had to deal with before, but now it's yeah, you can see it. Yeah … blokes!! [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 8 years]

Similarly, Justin perceived that members of his crew intuitively knew each other's needs, through their shared experience. Nick described how this built a bond between volunteers but distanced them potentially from others in their friendship networks who were not volunteers. Trish, whose partner was also a volunteer firefighter, said that they support each other.

So I generally avoid discussing things with other people like within the brigade that is, because we've all generally, we've all seen and done the same things and so there's, there's almost no need for it to be said. Like not even that I'm worried about sharing it, it's that it doesn't, that it's intuitively known because we've all been and done the same things together … They don't actually have to say anything, but it's just that feeling of connection of understanding. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 4 years]

Most of my friends are volunteers. A big one is understanding; is that all the guys that you volunteer with, they know what you do, and they understand it. You can talk about all the incidents with them too, which I think helps. Whereas other people that you might be friends with, they don't understand what you do, or they might not be interested really into hearing it. [Nick, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 11 years]

My husband, so even though we don't discuss a lot of things; but if things are really bad, we bounce off each other … [recalling a critical incident] and I knew when he came home that night he was going to be a mess, and I just sat up with him I think it was about 5 o'clock the next morning when we finally got to bed, but he needed to vent. [Trish, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 30 years]

Some participants described the role of family as a two-way process of support; one that recognised the welfare of family unit around the firefighter volunteer as of equal importance in ensuring the firefighter's wellbeing in their role**. Volunteers and their families were all seen as 'part of the team'.** Although many participants said they shared their traumatic experiences with their family, Trish explained that volunteers also acted to protect their families from the more extreme aspects of the role.

It's connecting with the family as well. It's not just the person who is the volunteer. You've got to connect with the family because they're the ones that are worried sick about their husbands. So, give them that call and saying "are you going all right? You coping all right? Do you need anything done?" I did a lot of that after, you know or if they were on night duty and I wasn't on and they were … and you could speak to them. "Are you coping okay? Does he need extra time off or can I use him more?" I am in contact with all of them and they didn't know that, but they all know it now. They actually kind of all call me mum now … [Families] they are part of the team too because they are part of letting their husbands or fathers of their children go to these things … We have made a rule that what happens in the truck stays in the truck … the wives know that if anything ever happened, I would go to their house … they all know these fires were different, but they never – I think out of all of the members, I only know one of the males who because of his wife – 'No I watched TV and he's not going to go.' But they all seem to be – and we just seem to go all right. [Trish, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 30 years]

Some participants spoke about the importance of the culture of the brigade as part of that informal support, and how it could be a problem for some brigades, depending on the make-up of their members.

Definitely, you need to have very strong friendships within the brigade, you need a brigade with really good culture that's led well and has good values. I have to say some of the brigades that I've seen, I don't know what it is with men but when you get a whole bunch of men of the same demographic together and you put them in a uniform and you talk to them like they're heroes, they just become complete assholes and they treat each other terrible and everything- they turn even the

> most mundane, the most mundane boring task into a pissing contest somehow … So I'm very fortunate that my brigade is terrific and, although we have our characters … they put that to one side when they need to - yeah the culture of the brigade, you need good friends within that brigade, you can sort of reach out to one on one. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 4 years]

The underpinning fabric of support whilst on the job, noted by all firefighter volunteers, was the informal mentoring by older, more experienced volunteers to younger volunteers. It was a responsibility that they just assumed informally, as part of taking care of each other and their crew, and younger volunteers looked up to them.

> Your young fellas look up at the older guys…you know if they've been there for a long time that you watch what they're doing. And I'm in that middle bracket now in my 40s where I'm not anywhere near the oldest, but I've got young crew coming up behind me that I try and guide them. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 8 years]

> Our fellows have been to a very major bushfire. There were only two in our brigade that had seen Ash Wednesday, so most of them were a bit on the green side … so they get thrown in, they see houses burning down and people injured … afterwards, we sat them down, as we do sometimes after a very serious incident, just go and talk – and some, of course, don't say too much, but others probably make up for it … Especially two or three of them were a bit more wiser and probably seen a bit more of life, they can say things that probably help the others even though they don't say a lot, and so this sharing is – it was very significant. … I can remember one fellow saying how he had to take charge of the appliance. Well, he hadn't done that before … he had all this responsibility. Really, we're not talking about playing marbles here, we're talking about people's homes burning down and this … thing, which in actual fact, he was scratching gravel a bit. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience: 60 years]

> I have huge respect for a lot of the older members in our brigade who are just terrific people and who are really, you know there's a lot of frankly, there's a lot of young fuckwits who need to have some experience - experience needs to beat out some of their childish aspects but the older, yeah the older guys they know people really well. They know what they're doing really well. Yeah, they're just yeah brilliant. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 4 years]

> I have had a bit of feedback; I've run some debriefing sessions just in the station or at the group level and I'm honest with issues I've had and what I'm doing about it and I try and get people to speak out … it's basically peer debriefing … you've got to I guess be honest and don't make light of it, but talk about it in a light fashion, if you know what I mean; don't be doom and gloom about it, be positive, so it's not unusual to have these issues and the only unusual things happen when you don't deal with them. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

> Now my doctor, he's told me, he's been telling me for years that I've got PTSD, and he's wrong. I know that I haven't. But he tells me, 'you should talk to your mates, talk to your mates.' Yeah, and it works …. we look after our young ones, particularly, our younger members, and it's quite easy to sit and have a chat with them and say, 'Listen mate, how's things, how's it going, and if they want to talk, well you talk. Yeah, and it's not so much the talking it's the listening, I think if you get that … find the time to listen to them. And then at the end, you offer whatever advice you think may be, you know, may be helpful to them. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

Nick explained how this respect for older volunteers could prevent younger volunteers from speaking up about their mental health concerns. It suggests the potential value in older or more experienced volunteers being 'coached' to show their vulnerability to support help-seeking by younger volunteers.

> Probably for some of them, they believe that everything has to be okay or that they're meant to be okay, … they're not comfortable about speaking out if they have a problem because the perception is that everybody else, the older people are okay, and it wouldn't be looked on kindly. Where I was probably wasn't such a big issue, but I know that there is certainly in other rural areas where there's a lot of farmers. [Nick, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 11 years]

3.3 Critical incident debriefing processes and services available to volunteers

Firefighter volunteer participants' other main source of support was the critical incident debriefing services that were linked to each service type. These services relied on the individual initiating the contact with them,

or the captain or a senior crew member 'calling it in' as part of attending a critical event. During the 2019/2020 fire season, these counselling support teams were present on the fire grounds in a number of locations. Daniel, Wayne and Tony's comments captured the sense that this service was useful but potentially under-utilised by volunteers.

> We do after action reviews which is just in-house debriefs after jobs just to try and get all the stuff out among your mates so you can talk freely. And then there's a really good psychological support here for the RFS, they've got an in-house psychologist and you just get on to them and they'll organise professional help for things like PTSD and that sort of stuff … I think there's enough available, I'm not so sure that it gets utilised as much as it should. I think there's a lot of people that clearly need to take it on and they don't. I'm dealing with a few of those cases here and we've given them phone numbers to ring, we've had people to oversee them, but unless they voluntarily take the first step then you know, it can't happen. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age; 70s; experience: 32 years]

> Well, it's just your mates around you, I suppose … we do have the organisations, like I said we've got the phone numbers, the pamphlets for mental health, we've got SPAM Stress Prevention and Management crew. You can - we got a good hierarchy that we can talk to. Yeah, I think the best you know, I think the best, if you're in trouble, you talk to your mates … And just keeping an eye on each other …The support's all there. You just have to pick up the phone or you have to use it and there's some people that won't. And I don't know how to get around that, but that's when your mates hopefully pick you up … I think we're like rubber bands that have just been stretched. You know, the last 12 months I've just been so tired that yeah, you don't know if that rubber band's ever going to get back to normal, but yeah. You have good days and you have your bad days. I've had a few people on my couch. [Wayne, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 8 years]

> There's a phone number on every wall in the station that if you needed help and you want to talk to someone, other than these buggers that might not take you that seriously. Put another beer in your hand and shut up, you can talk to a professional- [Ross, Focus Group 1, SA CFS volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 52 years]

Several SA firefighter volunteer participants spoke positively about the SPAM crisis helpline and counselling services for emergency services volunteers and their families. They viewed it as an accessible and routinely accepted service to support their role. They particularly noted the benefits of the SPAM support following critical incidents, and the immediacy of the SPAM team response, often being ready to provide support at the fire shed when crews got back from an incident.

> I have always had the ability to go and get help when I needed help and sometimes you just need to go and sort those files out again in your mind to keep going. So, going to a place, like involving SPAM and then continuing with the psychologist has never been an issue for me. I don't have a problem and it's not a thing that I am broken, or I am going crazy. It's just I know that's the sort of stuff to do. [Richard, Focus Group 2, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 20 years]

> The CFS has a SPAM system, well what they call spam, and I don't know what it stands for, but it – sort of thing where if you have a particularly nasty incident you can actually ring up and they'll send counsellors up. Sometimes they can even be in the fire shed when you get back. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

> If we notice someone has missed the next training after a big incident, we'll generally call them and find out if they're okay. Or if we go to a serious incident, we'll actually call that SPAM number and get them to be at the unit when we get back so that everyone has to have an opportunity to speak, whether that be in a group or whether that be in private. [Nick, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 11 years]

Daniel described how he found this service useful when he was a newer volunteer involved in a critical incident after which he experienced post-traumatic stress reactions. Despite this positive experience of the service, Daniel went on to suggest that reaching out to more formal support beyond peers is still challenging and largely left to the individual volunteer to see the need, overcome potential stigma, and make the first move.

> I've used the critical incident support. Yeah well it's- the CISS, the rural fire service has a hotline, it's sort of pre PTSD hotline more or less where they partner you up over the phone with a mentor counsellor person and you have a chat and I think from, and so my first strike team where looking

> back it was actually a very very tame deployment but at the time being my first trip away there was- it was sort of a sense of 'Oh I'm going away. This is exciting. I get to use everything I've done in training. Will it be really dangerous? Will it be really safe?' … and then getting there and finding that actually things are more boring than I expected or - it's more complex than that and we had a, well we had- we had a critical incident on the highway one evening and I sort of thought, 'Oh wow that was exciting, that was really traumatic, I feel very proud to have survived that or come out of that, that's really exciting. And then sort of within a few hours I was sort of thinking 'Oh that was much closer than I would have liked and then you know-' … everything was adrenaline and fuelled and fun and purposeful and you had people around you and then as soon as I came home I was a complete mess because the contrast between you know going from somewhere when there's something to do and having purpose to coming back home where at that point in my life I didn't have any and combined with the adrenaline dissipated and realizing that I very nearly was killed and it was almost like it took 48 hours to realize that had occurred 2 days earlier, like it was a very delayed reaction and so because it was my first time … well okay this is really out of control and I don't understand where this is coming from so I called the counselling hotline and talked about it with you know someone else who's been there and that was really constructive and that was a really really beneficial thing to do and I was fine very quickly after that. It was just a matter of having the right conversation the right time early on, rather than letting it build, yeah so I mean so that's probably the only time where I've had to reach out and get help. … when it's incident related, I'm okay finding someone in the brigade to talk about it but when it's personal there's a sense of it coming across as weakness and so I still am not very good at- and having said that, no one's reached out to me either. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age; 20s; experience: 4 years]

James, who is both a CFS volunteer in his community and a paid member of the MFS in his usual employment, explained how the two services differ in how they manage and support debriefing processes after a critical incident. From his description, it is apparent that the CFS process is much more informal and reliant on the interpersonal skills and awareness of more senior members of the crew. This informal 'hot debrief' was clearly a positive process that acted as early intervention in relation to mental health symptoms.

> We try and have a hot debrief. So, we debrief things quickly after a job. I have learnt these sorts of things in my own job, so I gather the CFS people around from each truck and I give the opportunity to talk and we will stand close together away from cameras and things and we just talk about the job and you thank them for their efforts and I say things like – 'we didn't cause this – we are just here to assist and clean up the mess that happened here. We haven't caused it. We haven't contributed to it in any way. Our role is to come and sort these issues out and that's what we have done. So, if you struggle and talk to your family and talk to your mates and don't forget there is always help there. My door is always open, you can always ring me and I am there for you if you need me.' … and you talk like that so you have a lot of debriefing and you normally, some of these jobs have a big debrief at a bigger level in a week's time but it seems like within the different services. CFS not so much, it sort of falls back on me a bit … but then today or a couple of days to make sure they're okay … I think it's probably a democratic process when you are voted in, and if you have been in a while people have seen you in your different roles and I think they probably vote you in, and I think part of the voting is they feel comfortable with me talking to them, and they can always talk to me, but it is a role you assume and you take on … In the MFS, I get back to work and on the computer I can send them out a form that goes through to what we call our cognition peer support people and I can request a phone call to the following people. I can request a follow up. I can request a meeting and the boys – well the crews get a phone call while they are off shift the next day or their few days off so that's good. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

James went further to explain some of his experiences in providing this informal support to others:

> In the chain of command, some of them aren't used to like a command process, you know, they're self-employed – they don't answer to anyone, they can be a little bit awkward to handle but normally a quiet chat and a coffee somewhere and you can chat to them; but yeah, it's just something you do as part of your role and I suppose you take it serious, and because of your caring nature you don't want anybody to be crying and upset and worried, and I've had a suicidal type things and had to resolve them not nice – I mean, didn't commit suicide but one of them was damn close with a gun and everything, and that was unbelievable. He's a wonderful lad now, he's a fantastic lad and got on with life and married with children and moved on, but bad at one stage. You know you come across all sorts of things in your life – you do. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Some participants remained cynical about the usefulness of services available for supporting their mental health; they either saw them as misplaced because they were delivered by phone and not personalised enough, by outsiders without peer lived experience of EFSR service or shared experience of the fires or they didn't see them as relevant to their needs. Their comments suggest that it would be better to upskill those who have 'walked the walk'.

> One of the things I found, particularly since the fires that our mental health support has been fantastic but the trouble is, a lot of it's done just over the phone where, in a lot of cases, I think it should be more of a personal basis … Unless you knew the person and had some time with the person, you would think yeah he's fine. But because I know him and I know what he's like and I know what's happening and I know what he's been doing and done, I know he's not fine. Now you can't do that over the phone. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

> [Talking about crisis help-line numbers] I just laugh at that because there has been times in a previous life when that fast moving train across that train crossing is actually probably a good option, and they say all you have to do is ring this phone number, and I reckon if I'm at that stage that's the solution, I am not interested in ringing a phone number because I've got the solution, but that's me. [Colin, Focus Group 2, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 13 years]

> [Receiving talks on wellbeing from outside agencies] Yeah look we've had a lot of that around here just recently and we even had some sessions with some people who came out here and you know were supposedly showing us how to cope with, you know, issues that have happened … and most of the people just felt that it was a total waste of time. [Michael, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 48 years]

3.4 Seeking more formal help for mental health

Some participants shared their experiences of seeking more formal help for mental health distress. Some felt it was *their* responsibility to themselves but also to their peers and crew to look after their own mental health and seek help if needed, especially if they were in more leadership roles.

> A few years back, I went through some horror stretches and I went and found myself a clinical psychologist … I was diagnosed with PTSD. And then something years ago now there was a really bad accident here, there was five people – it was a head on, five people were incinerated and it was pretty bad – I went back and saw her again and then it was on TV and the RFS psychologist saw it on TV and got onto me and he organised and financed to see another lady and I've been going to see her for I don't know, a couple of years now, every month or six weeks. But I'm quite happy to – when I have the debriefs, I'm quite happy to say look, 'I know I've got PTSD, I know I have to see somebody, I know when things are going to be' … Because I've got a bit of extra responsibility, you have to get up and you do something about it a bit more than what you might've … [recounting an incident in the late 1990s] I figured out then and there that I really needed to talk, get it out and the old thing about I'm alright … doesn't work, it just doesn't work; it just boils away inside of you. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

However, this process could still be a difficult one to navigate, especially where the person was in a leadership role and heavily invested in the volunteer role over a long period of time.

> There are people that I know locally here that do need support, but we can't make them go and get support. One particular person who just refuses to have any consideration applied, you know, 'I don't need that, you know I'm fine', but he's not fine. And sort of those things play on your mind as well you know because a guy's also been you know, around for nearly 20 years and you know you think you know you really should go and talk to someone you know … Well, in this particular instance, as well as being a group officer and speaking with his captain and a couple of other people, we had a session with him and we're about to have another one next month as well just to see how things are going. It really gets back to the point where if things haven't improved …. You know we're going to have to say, 'Well listen, you're not really fit to be in the service anymore', and that's something that you don't want to do. You know it'd wreck his life as well but you know so you've got to think of the people that, he's an officer as well and you know he's in charge of people and you've got to think of the other people's safety and their wellbeing as well as the guy himself, his own wellbeing. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

Some participants described help-seeking as a process of realising something was not right, often over a lengthy period and only when others pointed it out to them or suggested that they should consider it. They delayed seeking formal help for a range of reasons; finally accepting that they weren't invisible often prompted them to take that step.

> [Reflecting on the trauma of a near-death situation he experienced during the 2019/2020 fire season] Yeah and look, that aspect of it, Sharon, stayed with me a bit; I've sought some advice, professional advice because it's kind of been difficult … I still came to work most days, my wife still worked from home, kids did pretty well at home school …Some of the more astute around the office, XXX, she kept asking for a long while if everything was okay and I'd go yep and eventually I said, 'Why do you keep asking?' And she said 'You haven't been right since the fires'. [Brendon, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 4 years]

> I had one member – they stayed with their property and because they thought 'Oh we're firefighters we will be fine.' Well, he actually had a breakdown – one of them had a breakdown and he just said, 'I'm an idiot … here I was with a garden hose thinking I could save the world … I don't even know how I am alive', and actually, when I've seen his property, I don't know how he lived either, but it took him a long time – I think probably about 10-11 months, finally he got counselling but after all that time ringing home, going and seeing him – 'Please get some help – you need it. You are having nightmares,' but he was angry with himself that he stayed because he said, 'I was stupid … I really thought because I had been in the brigade and I knew what I was doing … I didn't realise there was this great big wall, and what was a silly looking little garden hose going to do?' [Trish, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 30 years]

Adam sought formal support outside of the organisation, on his own initiative, and at his own expense, when he saw how his mental health was directly impacting his family.

> Yeah, I found a private psychologist … [When asked if the organisation supported this] Well I don't think they have a choice to be honest. It's my mental health, I will do what I please and see fit to – I will speak to whoever I want … So I have paid for everything which I don't mind because I've found somebody – so I was actually diagnosed six months after the fires with PTSD … Just carelessness I think sort of crept in, and no one cared about us so why should I care about anyone else or anything else for a period of time which is scary when you've only got a very young baby … I knew then that I had to get some professional help. [Adam, Focus Group 2, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 30s; experience: 5 years]

Justine was also currently receiving formal psychological support, on her own initiative, due to concerns about confidentiality if she was to use services organised from within her organisation.

> I have proactively sought counselling to talk through the issues and talk through the rest of this stuff. …the Department has a program. I refused to go to it because when I was with the Country Fire Authority and I had some issues with my manager, because he was bullying me, I went to that program to have a chat. They broke confidentiality and provided that information to my manager … It stops people from seeking help. [Justine, VIC Past CFA, Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 6 years]

3.5 Community volunteers' ways of coping

Similar to firefighter volunteers, community volunteer participants described the family and peers as their main sources of emotional support to cope with the aftermath of the fires and their volunteering role. They also described a range of self-care practices that they did either on their own or with a small number of 'trusted' friends, many who had shared the experience of volunteering; and they emphasised a process of reciprocity, of looking after each other.

> When I get time I just go for a walk with people and reflect on what happened and so on you know … we often talk about things. [Chris, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 30 years]

> Friends are wonderful you know, and just quiet time you know, having a bit of a break. And you know, having a talk to the people that understand … that I respect a lot and think highly of them because they are compassionate people … Good friends realise you know, you just need to have a chat and that's like here … Yep, I'm staying for a cuppa. Oh, are you, why? Because you need one, yeah … we look after each other. And they ask me how I'm going just as much as I ask them how

> they're going, and I relieve things off my chest about - you know. … I take my dog for a walk and to at the end of the day I try and have a routine that allows me to wind down as well. If there's you know, stresses, I play bowls up here with the community and just you know, try and escape from some of the pressures of here … we've got a very good community. [Terry, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 20 years]
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> Definitely having the friends around me that have gone through a shared experience … I think we all rib [humour] each other and we do it out of a place of caring for each other. When I was moving, they were 'all hands-on deck' helping me move stuff and just such a beautiful bunch of people and yeah, we're quietly there for each other. I think that's the thing. We feel that mateship … and we sit and we chat with each other and we can normally pick up if somebody's not travelling as well. [Lucy, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 10 years]
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> It is different living on your own. It's just that physicality of knowing someone's around but even if you don't want to talk to them there's somebody there so you feel safer knowing there's someone there. I come home and I've got my dogs and I often think gosh I can't imagine coming home and there being nothing here. I think just having an animal around it makes a difference. Yeah, and I think you could be having the crappiest day going and they'll still sit there going, 'Yeah, when you've finished crying can you now feed me?' [Julia, SA Community Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 20 years]

Community volunteers also spoke about the challenges involved in seeking help and in using more formal counselling services that were available to them, but which relied on the volunteers making the first move to reach out for support.

> There's isn't a lot of automatic outreach but there is still an expectation that people will do the reaching out when they have a problem, but people don't often know they have got a problem … One of the most powerful things that the politicians did on the ground was to just pick up the phone and call people and they played that role because they knew that it would make a difference and they were absolutely doing that to CFS and first responders. … There isn't enough of that but there probably isn't enough of the right kind people who would be welcome to do that. So, I think that very personal approach but it's not something you can dial up. … people have to respect you and want you to be there. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

In the context of their own mental health and wellbeing, community volunteers talked about their concerns for the wellbeing of their communities, more broadly.

> My wife and I have spoken a lot about things and I am sure there are things that we could have talked about which we don't but we have debriefed, but there are a lot of people out there who are still I suppose fighting the fires in their heads and they haven't got over it yet …I suspect that there are some people who are bloody minded like I am …but there are lots of people who aren't as bloody minded as I am who will not basically tackle the bureaucracy because they might take off what little we've got. And it's these people I suppose are the ones who are the most vulnerable … I suppose what keeps me going Sharon is that if I don't keep all this stuff up then what's the point of living; it's the importance of just keeping on keeping on because if you don't you may as well not be here. [Frank, SA Past CFS, Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 20 years]

Justine and Tim spoke about unintended consequences of the fires for their small communities, which left some members of communities feeling more exposed, and which impacted on community trust and identity.

> It's really interesting because the communities that were fire effected from my area, they flew in extra counselling services and things like that. But a lot of people didn't like the particular – she's really lovely, but …there was all this stuff that had been hidden, that was coming out like domestic abuse, drugs, incest, like a whole lot of stuff. [Justine, VIC Past CFA, Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 6 years]
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> Some people come to live here because they want to escape, to get away from their problems or other people. So, when the fires came, and some of these people had the fires on their doorstep, they had to come out of their houses … the firefighters and the volunteers providing the volunteer relief efforts afterwards were now stepping into their private space, which they didn't necessarily want to have happen. We saw things that people had wanted to keep hidden and we weren't really prepared for that … it sort of rattles a small community at a deeper level. [Tim, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 25 years]

3.6 Finding meaning and purpose - making sense of their experiences after the fires

When asked how they make sense of their experiences, almost all firefighter volunteer participants reflected on their experiences of attending fatal incidents, saving lives or experiencing near-death experiences themselves in the context of their volunteer role. These extreme situations and the qualities that they saw in themselves and others at these times gave them a sense of value in their contribution, and a stronger belief in others.

> Look I had a family – we went to a house fire, and this was during the day, and we didn't have much of a crew, and we – when we got there, there was a couple of neighbours trying to fight the fire with a garden hose, and the fella said – he said, 'He's in there, he's stuck in the house, he's stuck in the house.' I went in and got him, which we weren't supposed to do, it went against protocol, and every – every bloody thing that, you know – and so, but I went in there, and I got this joker out, and he was dead. But we revived him on the front lawn. And ambos took him downtown, and he was alright, you know. And his family come over and saw me about a couple of days later, two or three days later, and they come over, and they thanked me for getting him out … But that was special, like I really, really – really, really appreciated that. That was something special, yeah, you know, it's got real meaning. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

> Don't think of the ones that were lost, think of the ones that were saved. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

> We go back and we finish our dinner or we make a cup of tea or coffee or you go back and jump back in bed again, and you have just been to a fatality and then you get back in bed and then you've got to go to sleep, and it's interesting you do cope with it to a certain extent I think – you have to because once again you try and emphasise it's not your fault and you have done your best and you tried hard to save their lives but they're possibly already dead when you got there and all sorts of things … And it brings you the tears sometimes, sometimes you are teary when you're alone I suppose, but I suppose that's part of coping. I think that's good to release it like that, I think. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Making sense of the fires was about understanding and acceptance that many aspects of the fires were simply beyond anyone's control because they were caused by nature. They struggled to come to terms with their experiences of the fires when the fires had been deliberately lit; this was described as a moral injury by some volunteers.

> Well, knowing how it started – knowing how these fires start – you know it might be a different ball game if it was deliberately started, but knowing it's powerlines or a tree on power lines … some of the things we did was shooting some of the animals. So not nice to have to do but some of the koalas we had to put down in the bush and stuff like that, and then you reflect on it and find out it's been deliberately lit, and that's hard to grasp and you think - who the hell would do this terrible destruction of our environment? [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Several participants spoke about the use of humour to cope with their experiences of firefighting, more broadly, as an everyday part of the culture and atmosphere that they and others create in their shared role.

> Happy disposition; always whistling and happy; try and look for the good things in life. I don't dwell on the bad things; busy, active – and try to communicate well – I am not always successful with that, but I try … that rubs off on other people and they are happy and I am happy because they're happy … Yeah the boys, my crew always joke – we will just get a cuddle off of everyone and everybody shakes my hand and that but then you end up communicating with them and being a good listener I suppose and trying to cheer them up after what they done or whatever … Well have little jokes in the truck on the way back sometimes and some of them are not appropriate for people to hear I suppose. It is a coping mechanism, and you crack a few jokes, and it does, it helps you. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

> Sometimes it's hard for people coming from the outside because they don't know when it's banter and when it's serious and Australians are great ones, so you know pulling the piss for want of a better word, and sometimes it can get pretty hectic, but of course it's a way of blowing the steam. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

It's our way of keeping it all in perspective; otherwise, it would just get to you and you'd full in a big heap. [Judy, VIC CFA Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Bob exemplified the thoughts of several participants when he talked about the mateship and commitment to his peers as the main way that he made sense of his experience. He drew on his military experience which he perceived as having a similar underlying philosophy.

I think I've been fairly fortunate, I think, having a military background – 21 years in the Army. I think it's the training, it's the camaraderie between the blokes in our brigades that – yeah, it's a little bit of everything, isn't it? … I was a mechanic in the Army, and we were in the position where we would have to recover a heap of stuff that had been broken down or been damaged or whatever, and we would have to fix it, repair it, make it work again, and you wouldn't stop until it was all done. …sometimes you'd go for four or five days at a stretch without any sleep, and you'd just keep working. And you draw on the same thing there, you see, because all your mates are there with you working and you're all backing each other up, and that keeps you going, and you don't want to let your mates down, right, so you keep going. And then it's the same in the CFS, you know, you get onto a truck and you've got a crew, and as an officer, you're responsible for these people. You take them out to a fire, you've got to bring them home again, and you bring them home in one piece. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

A South Australian CFS crew also exemplified the mateship and commitment to each other and their community as central to what kept them going after the fires:

Steve: I'd say we were mates when we went there, and we're potentially closer mates having been there. I look around at these guys and many that went and put themselves on the line, it gives you, I don't know respect to the people that are doing it. Everyone was touched by it. So, everyone's bound together almost more sort of thing. It almost made you feel more part of the community, like one big family. There's only one time we don't get along and that's football … But after the game we're all mates.
Ross: It helps you to know that if you had to go out again that you'd know that you had people who have got your back. I feel so proud of those that have lost everything, but they'll still smile at you in the street. I still get very emotional on how close I come to losing all my stuff and the town, but it's still standing here. Most people out there are so fricking strong and beautiful, they're an inspiration to everyone.
Ross: It just happens.
Brian: Everyone that was on the trucks fighting fires, saving houses and livelihoods out of people they know. So now they're back rebuilding what they saw being lost, so the cycle just keeps going around and around.
Ross: You haven't got different people coming in to do different jobs; we're all here, we all owned it, we all lost it, and now we're all rebuilding it.
Interviewer: So, so what do you think you still need?
Steve: Footballers.
Ross: Six-foot-six ruckman [group laughing] [Focus Group 1, SA CFS Volunteers]

However, in stark contrast to the above comments, some participants described ongoing problems in their communities after the fires. Their comments demonstrate that, for communities under stress, community cohesion is a fragile thing and, when conflict or clear division exists, the consequences for the wellbeing of volunteer firefighters can be significant.

Yeah, well, in general I can just put it out of my mind. So many people tell me one day it's going to come back and bite you, but it hasn't yet. The only difference is like this last season has been, well I guess could be called so long and so horrific, it's sort of- it's always, it's always on the back of your mind and there's been a lot of issues within the community as well and unfortunately, you know there's Facebook and all this sort of stuff, there should be a law against it, they shouldn't allow it, the stupid things that some people put on there … it incites some of the other people and you know we've actually had, I've been threatened with Coronavirus, we've been threatened with violence, we've had people stand in front of the trucks and wouldn't let us work and things like this and it's mostly because of things that have been put on Facebook … Every call in my district recently, I've gone to because the abuse and things that have happened towards firefighters. I'd rather it happen to me rather than my crew. You know, I get paid to take the flack, they don't. Well, I don't get paid at all, but you know what I mean. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

In the communities where they're very cohesive, their health and wellbeing is certainly much better

> … Homes were lost across the difference regions; but where I live, it's become an 'us and them' situation. In the smaller communities too, you certainly don't need the polarisation. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

Community volunteer participants described finding meaning and purpose after the fires in a range of ways. All reflected on how their experience has strengthened their positive sense of people and their community, more broadly, and how it made them more grateful.

> I saw other people are more kind, generous, especially when there is a natural disaster … very often we think people are selfish … you also see the generosity of people and many of them and also some people you know after the fire decided to come and do much more work … I see a different side of some people … there's a lady in my church but particularly the one lady, I thought she was very cold very often. But when this couple came after the fire and she just kept up during this Christmas dinner and she was there sitting with this couple all the time and every time she sees them she was the first person who would go in and raise them and spend time. And so, I see a different side of them. … People surprise you sometimes and it's sometimes the people that you least expect. … Some people come from nowhere and they decide to help other people. I've seen many other disasters … but it still surprises and amazes me … So, in fact, people are less isolated and more connected because of this experience. [Chris, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 30 years]

> I think I'm thankful for what I've got. Yeah. And I suppose it makes you grateful for the life that you've had where you haven't had those sorts of things happen to you. And it's really luck, really. [Jess, SA Community Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 1 year]

> I guess I have done some soul searching in a way as to why I responded the way I did because it was probably quite extreme. It was just like nothing else mattered but serving that cause. … my view of politicians has improved … and in a senior person in the CFS …and I saw it in a few people … There was no ego, it was being available and serving and caring for the community … So, I have been pleasantly surprised about the strength, dedication and commitment in that regard. I have also actually realised that some people don't have that streak … that their care and their community contribution is only usually to get something back … and I was grateful because I had reconnected with friends, people came forward and I shared time and space in a way that – …something quite remarkable happened during that time because our souls were kind of laid bare, and there- … my capacity to care and to love others is actually far greater than I have ever realised. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

> It's not until there is a crisis that people – that the weaknesses in the community are exposed. And the converse happens as well where people surprise you and the people that you expect to behave a certain way may well behave a different way …I suppose that's a benefit of volunteering actually because you see the good side of people. [Frank, SA Past CFS, Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 20 years]

Geoff described how his sense of purpose has continued following his experience of volunteering following the 2019/2020 fires, through his ongoing connection with members of those communities and continuing to put his skills to good use in the longer-term environmental recovery.

> There are a few places that we went to which were burnt down … just to see the devastation of the vegetation, and that's why I have come home, and I have grown 1,500 plants in my backyard to take over. I've got a bit of a horticulture background. I've got a clear skill set there which just absolutely ramped up as a result of seeing the need. [Geoff, SA Community Volunteer] … [On providing plants] Well it maintains contacts with the landholders, the farmers too. I spoke with one this morning over there and he remembered me because I put a bend in his fence. I didn't do it right … And a lot of these events – they all rush in and they all do stuff and then they leave again … it's a connection that's been built. [Geoff, SA Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 10 years]

Frank talked about how the experience had prompted him to reflect more deeply on the meaning of community:

> If for example out of all of this exercise here in 2-3 years' time all of this would have been forgotten – nothing will have changed, then I think that's a condemnation. We need to work out how we can actually sustain the positive lessons that we have learnt. How did we do that? … it's not just about recovery from the bushfire. It's saying what sort of society would we like to live in, and people are

beginning to ask those questions and beginning to think through those questions, and that's really heartening that these things are happening. [Frank, SA Past CFS, Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 20 years]

4. The role of the volunteer organisations

4.1 Not feeling valued for their contribution

Participants made many comments that reflected an overall sense of not feeling valued or respected by their organisations or by politicians. This came in many forms and included feeling that their needs were ignored, not feeling listened to or supported or fully acknowledged for their experience and contributions, being looked down upon by some paid staff, and being expected to take on roles and responsibilities that should otherwise be undertaken by paid staff.

The lack of support from the higher layers of their organisations was perceived as particularly problematic during and immediately after critical incidents like those experienced during the 2019/2020 bushfire season. Participants of SA CFS focus group expressed significant anger and anxiety and feeling that they had been abandoned by those higher up in their organisation who they perceived as uncaring towards them as volunteers.

> Richard: Also creeping into the vernacular recently is that the Chief said that some of these people who are in charge should continue to do dynamic assessments, and don't necessarily remain and put their crews in danger. I am thinking hello. Well, they are trying to put the blame back on these blokes. I mean they are tasked to do a job as part of a sector, and they're suggesting that if the individuals make up their mind they should leave, but it doesn't work like that.
> Colin: Well, we actually weren't given the information to have made an assessment. If they had said to us you are going down there and you will all be burnt over, we all would have said 'up yours, we are not going.' … but we were told we would go down there and told it would be hairy [risky], but it would be manageable.
> Adam: … but we now know that through the report that the weather forecast predicted exactly what was going to happen. Six o'clock in the morning the fire had already started crowning, so it was out of control then. In their plan to send us down, they didn't have any plan to get us out at any stage.
> Patrick: Look at this, this is indicating what they should have learnt from the previous fire … Repeat, repeat, repeat – repeating the same bloody mistake over and over again.
> Jake: But they learnt nothing from the previous reports in relation to the fires.
> Colin: …The people who were down at XXXX which got absolutely smashed were told to get out of there because the weather was going to be unpredictable. We didn't get that information. The report also talks about a bushfire sort of plan that … should have had in place for the protection of this building that we were tasked to protect, and it wasn't in place. You know the building hadn't been prepared; the building was not defendable even in a small fire let alone what came through, but we weren't told that.
> Interviewer: So, this report sounds like at least it's got some facts, right?
> Patrick: Yes, because someone other than the CFS did it. …
> Colin: So, there's that frustration about an organisation that should be good at it were absolutely incompetent, and you can top off you know the CFS support for us has been they can go to SPAM. Have not had a call higher than my captain. I would have thought probably a call from the group office might have been good, maybe someone in region might have been good, but no it's the feeling of worthlessness but not even a call to say you've had a shit time, how you doing? [Focus Group 2, SA CFS Volunteers]

Participants also expressed frustration and anger at being on the receiving end of what they perceived as poor decision-making by the management hierarchy, particularly when participants with lengthy experience in the field felt that their expertise was dismissed or not sought. The earlier example cited by the SA CFA focus group who perceived they were 'sent in to die' is noted, Taylor, in particular, provided further examples that suggested more preparation was required and clearer jurisdiction guidelines and management:

> Management making sound decisions seems to be the number #1 complaint that firefighters will air when you get them in a group with the management not around. So, XXXX being the last thing I went to was like a pretty big one. They sent us over because there was a monstrous wind front that was coming through and they had four days' notice before it arrived and so it took them three and a half days to decide that they needed to do something about it. So, everyone involved was frustrated

that no one being able to make the decision about do something before shit goes wrong, and then they put us in the way of the fire storm at the last moment to try and do some back burning to stop it – we weren't allowed to call it backburning actually. I gave it some other funny name and weren't allowed to say it over the radio and all the rest of the crap. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

[Recounting a region where a number of services crossed over in their jurisdictional responsibilities] So you have four different sets of people managing the event. So, you can just imagine – I mean we weren't allowed in the operations, but you can just imagine the absolute dysfunction of that. For some reason someone gets their idea that we shouldn't be doing backburning in a national park or whatever strange idea is they have, and the common sense is it takes an hour to go from one side of the island to the other and there is no water. So, you can't fight a fire with water when there isn't any and so it took them three and a half days to sort that shit out before they got something done, and that's more and more frequent … the ability for us to do our job by putting in back burning is just getting very very restricted. Wait until we are in danger and put water on it rather than, you know, put a back burning so it's safe when it hits – when it runs into it. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

Yes, basically the red people hate the yellow people. It's not all of them but there's enough of them that it can come to a head on the fire ground. So, to give you an actual example I was having to defend a whole bunch of houses by driving down a narrow bush track with my appliance … which is built for going in the bush. It's a real fire truck designed for the track and I was directed to do that by the urban groups who were there – the manager of the urban groups, and halfway down the track there was an urban firefighter who was standing in the middle of the track and I drove up behind him and he turned around and just wouldn't get out of my way. I had to actually get out of the truck in the middle of all this fire and tell him that his boss had told me to go down and defend the houses at the end of this road, and only then would he get out of my way to let me pass. So, that just gives you some idea of what is bizarrely going on his head – that's just one example – I have had a lot of problems with that kind of thing. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

Participants emphasised the lack of acknowledgement for their efforts on the part of the hierarchy within their organisations and from some politicians. This included failure to communicate acknowledgement for their contributions, dismissing their expertise and ideas, and perceived failure to adequately resource volunteer brigades.

It's an appreciation of what they do and from you know people in authority coming down and thanking them for their efforts and perhaps the odd BBQ or something. They don't want that much … I think the biggest acknowledgement for us would be for somebody from hierarchy to come down and look – you know "We appreciate what you have done … We promise you we are going to look at a new station for you or an upgrade to your station and we are going to look at that and have it completed within the next two years." So, a timeframe as well and then that we would take that out to the community, and they would have to live by their promise. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

Some of the biggest mental stresses we have besides doing some horrific type things is this lack of respect for us, not from the community and people in general but from our politicians; and let's face it, we don't want to have to go down and build it [the fire station] ourselves. We don't have time. We do things for ourselves, but I shouldn't have to go down and pour a slab and build a new station myself and do it as cheap as we can, and then we see other stations being rebuilt and I know some of them have poor facilities, but you look at their call rate – they are a quarter of our call rate and they spend three quarters of a million building them a new station and we noticed these things. I am not trying to be awkward but that's some of the issues we have is we are not listened to … We are the busiest – one of the busiest single appliance stations in the state and during the fire I was really upset that our Prime Minister didn't visit us. So, I raised that through a couple of contacts here and we ended up with almost every politician … We had everyone at our station and every one of those people were gob smacked at the pathetic facilities that we have – the lack of facilities, but you just seem to bash your head against a brick wall. [James, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 25 years]

There's one specific incident that sticks in my mind as being particularly bad. So, after a fairly large set of fires, would have maybe five years ago or so, all of the crews gathered together at the end of it in a big … all the people that had been fighting the fire and one of the senior people who run the area – probably the area commander I think was out the front giving us a debrief address and they

> asked anyone if they had suggestions for how the event could be better managed and, like an idiot, I put my hand up because I am always thinking of things we could have done better, and I mentioned something and he shut me down in front of everybody quite rudely and dismissed my suggestion which pretty much everyone thought was sensible, and I thought that kind of behaviour was inexcusable because it's not just that he immediately dismissed what I said, but the way he did it actively discouraged everybody else from ever putting any suggestions in as well … Like he didn't want anybody offering any sort of criticism over his handling of the fire to the point that he's going to immediately dismiss anything anyone says. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]
>
> This is getting a bit personal, but my FCO [fire control officer] never actually acknowledged any of us with anything that we really did. They just did an overall general … to everyone … you know you think you would have come down and spoken to our members for us or give that person a phone call to say, 'Okay are you coping all right with what you are doing with your brigade?'…. But it's not only in with fires – like … car accidents and, even then, they say, 'Oh no you should ring us when you want some help.' Well no, how about if you give us a little bit more feeling – we are the volunteers, you are paid. Why don't you give us a little bit more feeling of you do a good job.' [Trish, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 30 years]

These perceived problems with leadership and decision-making extended to learning from past bushfire seasons and putting recommendations into practice in future.

> No decision ever happens. So, just to give you an example, so the last bushfire season they did a monstrous report, 214 pages of report they did on all those fires. During the course of that they had 5,000 suggestions from volunteers. So, like 1,000 written ones and 4,000 emails I think, and they summarised all 5,000 of those suggestions in a mere five pages of their operation synergy report and guess how many actions that they came out. Like how many things that they planned to do to rectify those 5,000 things - none. They didn't have a single action plan, not a single anything at all that they are going to change to solve that problem. So that gives you an idea of the scale of the issue that we are dealing with. They have got budget to produce 214 beautiful coloured pages of we're awesome and no incentive whatsoever to change anything whatsoever about the way it's already working, no matter how crushing the number of inquiries and the volume of the request is that they get. We have no support in answer to that. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

4.2 Unrealistic expectations and problem with bureaucracy

Several firefighter volunteer participants spoke about how their workload and roles had become increasingly caught up in bureaucratic processes; Taylor, in particular, expressed concern for the impact this had on volunteer attrition rates. These concerns included the levels of paperwork to become volunteers, and the significant amount of paperwork that they were expected to complete as part of their role, despite being unpaid and volunteers.

> The workload which is expected of volunteers within the CFS I think is completely unreasonable. If I wasn't retired and my wife wasn't retired and some of the members that help run the place, it simply wouldn't work …and the nearest paid members, paid staff members to this staff brigade are 80 brigades away. So, we never see all this support from paid staff, end of story. [Colin, Focus Group 2, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 13 years]
>
> They have made us all get blue cards. I understand why but that was a pretty difficult time for us when we're trying to recruit volunteers; and everyone has got to do police background checks for those bizarre reasons. Actually, probably the majority of brigades when I was there when I joined 12 years ago there is only one person other than me left still and the majority of the resignations have resigned because of the administrative paperwork stuff and generally speaking lack of support and understanding and compassion from the managing team and the people above them. There's so much wrong with the way that the management and generally people of higher rank treat the actual frontline workers. I won't begin to start with all of that problem. Causing huge attrition basically. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]
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> We now are involved with a whole lot of issues in relation to documentation administering a brigade and with all the complexities that come with that, that's another challenge in itself, whereas once

upon a time, it was all simple, but life isn't simple anymore. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience: 60 years]

The one problem that we are having is that we get all these directives from the region headquarters, and there is so much administrative work that is dumped onto the volunteers that it's not funny…. And if you come home from a fire and you've been out … It's hours, and hours, and hours, and you come home and you're absolutely buggered, the last thing you want to do is sit down at a computer – and I'm 70, I don't know much about computers at all – but the last thing I want to do is sit down at a computer and fill out a report in triplicate, and then fax it off, and do this and that and some other damned thing. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

Just becoming a volunteer today is a lot harder than it was, you know when I joined up. The application form is like 20 pages long and like when I joined up it was like "oh yeah, sign your name here and take these couple of books over and read them and we'll do an assessment on you and that was it." … You know the training is also quite intense these days. … there are so many courses that you can do with the service … You know you can't pick up a chainsaw unless you've got a ticket to pick up a chainsaw and that sort of stuff which is not a bad thing because you know you- some people have got no idea what they're dealing with and they end up killing themselves … The administration side of things, we're out here, always say if you send paperwork up to the fire controls centre, make sure you've got a copy of it because they'll lose it ... We're changing in New South Wales and we're what's called an RTO which is a recognised training organisation and it's made it so hard for training these days because you've got to have what they call an EST, an ESTA. … You know there's just so much rubbish involved in yeah stuff that we've been doing for 26 years. I can't train people in it because I don't have that EST after my name … I'm not too sure how many of the qualified trainers and assessors we've got, but you know the workload on those is quite a big chunk of their life and we're all, we're all volunteers you know we've got a life outside of the service … paid trainers don't necessarily have any knowledge of the RFS … You know the bureaucracy's we've got to deal with today compared with back then are enormous. [Neville, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 27 years]

Several participants noted the lack of support and contact they received from paid staff, and the overall poor relationship between the two service types.

Our paid staff here are working for themselves. The relationship in general, between the volunteer firefighter and the paid staff is pretty poor. You don't get together; you don't have time to have a discussion with them. …they're too busy looking after their own jobs and their own positions to bother about helping the volunteers out like they should … A lot of the paid staff are not as confident as they should be. I have had a couple of incidences where we've required assistance from them, and they haven't been able to come to the party and give us the help that we need. Their first priority is looking after their own job. They – some of them – look, some of them are quite good, but some of them have been – I forget what they call it, is it the Peter Principle where they say that everybody gets promoted to one level above that at which they're actually copping it. And I think that quite a few of these people are – they've been promoted one time too bloody many. … It impacts on our wellbeing, because we don't have the confidence and faith in them that we should have…. I would like to see the whole thing rejigged somehow, and a new proper system put in place. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

I know the counselling has always been offered to us … There's a difference … that personal phone call – I don't mean Homebush in Sydney – I mean our control centre – a little bit more feeling from them I think, but I mean I have been doing it for a long time – they are paid, and we all feel they look down on us because we are volunteers, and they are paid. I do feel like there is a separation. [Trish, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 30 years]

I guess there's always been a bit of us and them, sometimes it's light-hearted, sometimes it's a bit more than that. But … it's not like the CFA where you've got volunteers and then paid or … people in the one station, we don't have that; we've just got the local fire control centre, but it's got the Fire Patrol Officer and a Deputy, … Officer and all the other people that do various things. And sometimes they're supposed to be there to basically serve the volunteers, sometimes they'll lose sight of that and I'll be honest, some of the worst are ones that have been volunteers and have graduated into professional ranks which is really unusual. … We're one division that went for like 60 kilometres; I can't control 60 kilometres of fire, but there wasn't anybody else. So, we had those sorts of management issues because we basically ran out of people and trucks and aeroplanes and helicopters and all the rest of it, we were just running on an oily rag in the end. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

Problems with bureaucracy also created practical problems. Some participants described problems with access to equipment and resourcing, and problems with firefighting equipment, which impeded and complicated their role, especially their attempts to prepare for and respond to fire events, Liz and Frank stressed just how important practical considerations were that also included the community:

> There's an issue with PPE, the clothes; we've just gone through a change, we've just been issued all new gear but the people I spoke of before, they were in a place that was well cleared and under scrubbed. He'd taken a heap of hoses out, he had a dam and a swimming pool, and he had the hoses laid out like a spiderweb so he could go in any direction, just pick a hose up and drag them around; so really well prepared. But when the fire came through, they had some animals in a pen, they recuperate wildlife and they went out to spray some water over the animals and when he looked across – heard the fire come and he looked across – didn't see any flames, he just saw white. And what happened, a burst of super-heated air came up the hill and it knocked them over and it scorched the fire protective gear off them, just scorched it off, just disappeared. So, if we've just developed this new gear and it's fallen down not through flame impact, but through the impact of hot air, then we've got an issue with that for sure. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

> You're going into areas that you don't know, and particularly, once you cross the border, their equipment is not compatible with ours …Yes, it's been problematic, like you wouldn't believe, yeah … There is a committee that meets, and all the fire chiefs from all over Australia all get together and they have all these meetings, and for 20 years they have been trying to standardise all of the equipment within Australia. But each one of them wants to be the boss. And they will not back down, and they will not change anything, so we are stuck with what we've got and it's never, ever going to change until we get rid of those idiots that are running the show. I'm ex-Army, so I've got a natural bent against officers there, so- [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

> I think it's harder for volunteers. Most paid services, if you're a firie or an ambo or something, you have a tablet in your vehicle so while you're driving to the job, you can get live updates and information from people that are there. The volunteers are certainly lacking that in their vehicles. They don't have those tablets; they don't have that information, so you sort of don't really know what you're going in for until you get there … for instance we went to that accident, we didn't know it was someone that we knew until you looked at the car and you knew that was their car. [Nick, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 11 years]

> And I have to say, reading as I did, notes in the paper of everyone getting upset over some of the big places like Red Cross and St Vincent DePaul's, not releasing funds that people had given, and saying, well you know, we keep them for a future emergency, I was really glad that we had chosen to help the local organisations who were going to use that money straight away and use it all, because that's what it was for, that's what people expected. When they gave that money, they expected it to help someone right now, in their situation. … We avoided actually giving to the CFS, because that's all government and it just goes – if you give money to the CFS, it tends to just go into government revenue, and they're constrained with how they can use it. … And they don't always get the things that they ask for, the CFS, so it's very difficult … When the fire was coming towards the town, the power was shut off and the CFS couldn't get their trucks out of the fire station, because they're electric doors didn't work. How ridiculous is that? And they couldn't get a generator out of the government. So, they went to the Recovery Centre and said, 'Listen, can you buy us a generator?' And I think that's where quite a bit of, a chunk of the money raised went. [Liz, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

> Most people had already started their holidays, hadn't they? People who needed to be in place. These events tend to happen during our holiday season. When I raised this with the bushfire recovery person he said 'Oh yeah we allow for that'; but he was thinking in terms of emergency personnel being required to be on duty, but one of the things you learn from these exercises is not just the emergency personnel, just about all areas of government need to be there. School, all social security services and all that sort of stuff. The example of the council was such a blatantly obviously one where they couldn't even get into the hall [Command and Control Centre] because, 'Oh, they have all gone off on holiday – who's got the keys? It was just silliness. Again, people need to recognise that a bushfire or any disaster impacts on all levels of society, not just emergency personnel, everybody is involved … they don't 'war game' it enough in terms of incorporating using people who are not the first responders. When they do a simulation of a disaster. Who are involved?

> SES, CFS, ambulance, SAPOL but they are the only ones that are involved in the exercise. [Frank, SA Past CFS, Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 20 years]

Not all participants held such negative views about their organisation though, as exemplified by Justin's comments:

> I think it's vastly improved, I mean it's a very controversial area within the organisation because there's plenty of people particularly from regional brigades who feel that the RFS has become too city centric and who feel neglected which is partly the older people having a gripe but there's probably also an element of truth to that in a way, so there's a lot of different views about that. I personally think it does an amazing job and from what I've been able to tell from the organisation's history, it seems to be a vast improvement on where it was in the 90's … all of that stuff is covered and dealt with including mental health where there's, you know- everyone knows that there is a critical incident hotline, everyone's made aware of it. It's part of the training, it's posters on the wall, there's, you know, all that sort of stuff. [Justin, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 20s; experience: 4 years]

Rob captured the importance of the volunteer role, the need to do more to support them to perform their role, and the importance of taking steps to ensure future supply, especially in rural communities.

> How we look after volunteers into the future is going to be very, very important because, in some places, the ability to pick up people to volunteer is not quite so easy, especially in some country areas … having daylight crewing for volunteers is becoming an increasing concern for many, many brigades as those in the peri-urban areas and many work different sorts of hours, but particularly, they need the community to go to work. … they're not only just volunteering for the actual incident; they have to involve themselves in a whole heap of training, so that requires – this is not Meals on Wheels now … emergencies don't happen at a certain time and as a consequence, how do you pick up volunteers at a moment's notice at some time during the day or perhaps even at midnight. … It is a diverse role. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience: 60 years]

4.3 What is needed to better prepare new volunteers for their role

Some firefighter volunteer participants talked about the further training needed to better prepare volunteers for their role. This related to administrative requirements of the role and potential need for other volunteers help coordinate administrative tasks, but also the value of shared training with other brigades and also with paid firefighters; notably, with the ever-increasing likelihood of campaign fires in future.

> Patrick: We do some combined training activity with other brigades who are close; but bear in mind we only train once a week for two hours … it doesn't leave you a lot of time to think about doing something with other brigades; we do but not often, only once a quarter.
> Colin: On the fire ground or any incident, we are still operating you know almost in isolation because the officer on the truck will manage their crew and the other crews will manage and there will be an incident commander, but they may not be a lot of interaction happening in between that and if you are doing a job, you are not having a chat as well. So really, we do operate predominantly in isolation. [Focus Group 2, SA CFS Volunteers]

> People don't realise how much documentation actually happens during the fires. Everything's got to be followed in documentation…Especially when there's a coronial inquiry of people dying … a lot of it's hard as a volunteer…Yeah, you're not trained for it. [David, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 26 years]

> We've still got this brigade mentally where we only fight as a brigade, not as a bigger unit. And we aren't really doing larger exercises which is what we need to do. So, we need to start getting used to the tempo of doing campaign fires, because they are coming. [David, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 26 years]

More personalised mental health training was also noted; as was the value of drawing on the experience of older volunteers with more years of service, though there was acknowledgement that this needed to be tempered with care and (as noted in the first theme) that it was difficult to realistically prepare volunteers for some situations.

> [mental health training] It's basic with every course you go on…'Here's the number for SPAM, talk to them, they'll solve your problems' is pretty much what you get told … Maybe if the person giving the

> talk says those sorts of things, that this happened to me and I thought I would be fine, and I thought I should be fine because that's what I signed up for. But in fact, I wasn't, and I left it a long time before I told anybody. That kind of thing, rather than just speaking at people, trying to bring them along on a personal journey…I heard a very moving talk by a policeman who goes and does that. He travels around Australia and he suffers from PTSD. He goes around Australia talking to police recruits about his personal experiences and his personal journey and it's actually pretty powerful. [Nick, SA CFS Volunteer, age; 20s; experience: 11 years]
>
> Having older blokes around you and their experience. [Simon, Focus Group 1, SA CFS volunteer,30s,1]
>
> Paul: You could say enough, and people would never come back again, and you would have no service.
> Colin: I would normally say they wouldn't put you in dangerous situations, but I think I would have real problems in actually saying that now. To our new people, I probably wouldn't go anywhere near that because that might not be the sort of thing they need to hear, and I certainly wouldn't go near the statement of when things go really bad, they will look after you because I don't think they do …
> Adam: With a bit of a military background, I sort of expected there were would be some exciting times and some boring times and things like that, and I grew up on a farm as well so I guess I have always had that bit more life experience on what you would if you were somebody from the city. … but I don't think anything can sort of really prepare you for sort of what we went through. [Focus Group 2, SA CFS Volunteers]
>
> These days when people join there's a plethora of paperwork to fill out … then they do a volunteer induction, so they know how the system works and then they turn up and they do a course that turns them into a basic firefighter skills. Now beyond that, most brigades have got a group of older people that mentor the younger ones or the less experienced, they mentor them through and so we try and balance up because, as you know, a lot of the stuff that's written in manuals and things there's nothing like pure on the ground experience. [Daniel, NSW RFS Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 32 years]

Community volunteer participants spoke about different processes and skills needed to prepare new community volunteers. These included encouraging volunteers to be self-aware and attuned to the emotional impacts of the role for themselves and those they are supporting.

> Just to have a very confident sense of what is needed and what you can do for others without bringing any of your anxieties to the table, so that you can be of service to those people in need. [Liz, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

4.4 What is needed to better support volunteers during and after the fires

In addition to the many issues raised by earlier themes, several participants offered further ideas for what would help volunteers to cope better during and after the fires. Their ideas were diverse and are therefore provided here in no particular order of priority.

Bob spoke about the importance of collaboration and cooperation with paid staff to support volunteers' learning, build trust and relationships, and also the practical benefits this provided on the fire ground.

> When I was in Victoria, the CFA had paid staff … we could ring them up and say, 'Listen, in two weeks' time, can you run a training exercise for us' on such and such, and they would come out and they would do all the preparation, they would run the training, they would clean up afterwards, and it was all done. And you could drop into the fire shed and you could catch these jokers and say, 'listen, how does this work, how does so and so?' And they would sit down, and they would tell you. When the volunteers got called out to an incident, these fellas would be there. The truck would be going. They'd have the map, they'd have everything there, and they'd say 'This is where you're going, this is what you're doing, use this radio frequency, go down there, if you have any problems, call us back and we'll get' – and then when they came back afterwards, they'd say 'Righteo, fellas, park the truck over there. We'll clean it up, we'll restow it and make sure everything's right. Thanks for going out.' And they'd – these paid staff were actually working with and for the firefighters. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

Bob suggested that there needed to be more focus on family support, not just support for the volunteer:

> I mean, it's bloody hard for the wives. Years ago, we used to have a system where we had – oh, there was about six or perhaps eight of us in the town that had a fire phone … hooked up to one line, like a party line. And what would happen is that if there was an incident they would actually be rung through on that phone. [Bob, SA CFS volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 56 years]

Richard talked about the importance of leaders who were more present in their roles with the fire crews.

> We don't have enough leaders in the brigades. The group officer should be a paid person. I mean, at region level, they call him the regional commander. He commands nothing; he is the manager. The group officer should be the group commander and he should be around commanding, not doing that ... We need leaders not bloody managers. [Richard, Focus Group 2, SA CFS Volunteer, age; 70s; experience: 20 years]

Rob also talking about leadership qualities, emphasising how importance trust was to fire crews, and that leaders should be trained in recognising this, rather than assuming that they do:

> It's this implicit trust that you must have. I think that does develop to a large degree in a number of brigades over a period of time and that's required – I don't know that we train our leaders as much in that as we ought to, but there are usually some people that in the brigade itself could have picked that up anyway.… It's all very well to tell someone what to do, it's the way you tell them what to do sometimes that's pretty important, and not just, do this, and sometimes it's not a bad idea to say, well, I'd like you to do this because I've got a problem here and I need someone to do that for me. [Rob, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 80s; experience: 60 years]

As a community member, Jenny also talked about the need to support leadership within the fire brigades, particularly to support the mental health of their peers:

> …and the power of a brigade captain or a group officer to make decisions is very limited, but the responsibility is all theirs at that level, and so I think what should happen is there should be more agency given at those lower levels to try and even help the mental wellbeing of those people who have to lead and send people into precarious situations. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

Taylor emphasised that much more needs to be done to educate the community about bushfires, especially those who live in fire zones and about better preparing their properties, to alleviate the pressure then put on firefighter volunteers dealing with ill-prepared properties:

> When I was off duty from fighting stuff and came home, I had to go to the neighbours who had all evacuated and tidy up their property because everyone said evacuate so they just ran away, and that meant that they hadn't done anything to their houses at all to stop them from burning. So, had my neighbour's house caught fire which it easily would of because there was like kids' inflatable playground equipment and burning stuff all over their yard then their house would have taken out my house and then the next one down and so on. So maybe asking people to think before you evacuate and stop shit that's going to burn from being anywhere that's going to catch fire would be a good plan … The media should have said 'Make sure whatever you need to do is done and then evacuate' and I don't think they made that clear. And one of the problems is probably most people don't know what they should do. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

Jenny spoke similarly about the need to better prepare people for the fire season. She suggested more formal statutory mechanisms to prompt people to prepare their properties better:

> With people living in bushfire risk areas there is going to have to be … as much as I was a little bit disparaging of the power and control of the state information in that ability for sort of community level to help itself, there is also a significant need I think for government to actually enforce it and to compensate for those people who will not ever take bushfire risk seriously, and you know some properties will never be defendable but in people's minds they just – there are a lot of legacy properties in bushfire risk areas but I am seeing now even in the recovery journey those practical people who are often just practical or intergenerational or they have been from rural areas for a while … They are used to being self-reliant … They will rely on the state for assistance, and I think there maybe now a need for pre-emptive statutory mechanisms, you know, to save people from themselves. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

Jenny also spoke about the need to support firefighters to understand their limits and the need for proper rest, particularly during the fires:

> Even if you have got that training and you have had that preparedness, you absolutely need support to understand that sometimes you just shouldn't be sent … People will be like – it's like a kelpie that you've got a chain up to make it stop. The people in those positions as well as getting quite hyped up and wound up, they often are so geared to serve – you have to physically force them and remove them. You have to make it mandatory, and you have to make it so it's not a weakness … I know I need breaks to process and debrief or I can't sleep because my mind is so busy and I need that decompression time … and you might want to remove yourself but you have got pressure to stay … their minds are always strong but their bodies always give way first, but their minds are also having damage done … even for factory workers and truck drivers; there are just almost legislative measures that mean you have to stop. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

Justine talked about the need for more and easier access to counselling support:

> More counselling, not making people feel terrible to get counselling … What's frustrating is we have a fire season every year, we have disasters, we have all the rest of it and say 'We're going to learn from this, we're going to learn from that one. Or we're going to put more funding into do this, more funding for that; we're going to help with people.' It hasn't changed …It is absolutely woeful. I shouldn't have had to spend 6 months to find a mental health first aid course … with what I've been through. [Justine, VIC Past CFA, Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 6 years]

Frank emphasised the need to minimise bureaucracy so that community motivation wasn't stifled, and so communities could get on with their recovery efforts after the fires:

> One of the things that needs to happen is the bureaucracy needs to get out the bloody way … On the one hand, you realise that structures and systems are in place to protect people and all that sort of stuff. You can understand that but, by the same token, there needs to be far more flexible thinking, and far too often people just see their role as ticking boxes and as long as the boxes are ticked then the project can go ahead and if the box is not ticked the project cannot go ahead. Well, many of these projects would not have gone ahead if we had relied on ticking boxes. [Frank, SA Past CFS, Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 20 years]

Liz spoke about the need for government to formally recognise and support the mobilisation of expertise and experience of informal community groups and networks that already exist in fire affected communities:

> If it doesn't come from a sense of community that is already there – and some of the smaller places do have that where there are community groups and meetings and people … well, we were all very well known to each other because of other events there; we all came together to help out, at different things, different times. So, in a lot of smaller communities there's already a very strong sense of community. It would be nice, I think, if it came from both government and maybe even private sector to sponsor an opportunity for volunteers to be formally recognised as an emergency response group … There's the formal CFS volunteering, but you miss all of those other forms of volunteering, and they were all of that, they weren't anything to do with fighting fire; they were to do with cleaning up, psychologically supporting, finding things that people needed. And I think that people get a feeling of belonging and strength when they - if you deputise somebody … It's easy enough to recognise them just by saying 'Well, yeah, all of the local regions can belong to an emergency response community group' and to keep that word community in there so that it's not a state thing, it's not an official thing that can put some people off, but a state response community group, and it just makes people feel like, 'Oh well, I was part of that' … It's not just for that moment, it's actually after when people are getting on with life in their community. [Liz, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

Talking to others in the community and being involved in recovery efforts, Jenny also emphasised the overwhelming sense of providing practical solutions and learning the lessons from past fires:

> I would like 90% action and help to actually physically fix things and then sort of 10% outreach phone calls saying, 'Hey, how you are going?' … I know what I need, and I am not getting that, and that practical thing is something that I feel is important – that's often a gender thing as well, very outcome focused on what you need to do – I have seen a community group now which is doing a lot and that's how they're dealing with their mental health … There are people, especially people who have been through a couple of fires, they are desperate to capture what they know and what they

> have learnt about what works and what doesn't and put it into place where it can be effected into policy, and they don't have that forum, and they're trying to impress it upon you know community leaders and say this is what – and there are some incredibly practical view points out there … a lot of those ground level people … they don't mind the pain, if someone's situation can improve from what they have learnt. [Jenny, SA Community Volunteer, age: 40s; experience: 25 years]

Liz provided further practical suggestions about how governments and business philanthropists could support people to rebuild after losing their homes during the fires:

> A friend of mine said to me, 'You know, it's nearly a year since the fire and I still don't have a home." And all of the support starts to disappear. And she said, 'You know, at the start, people were offering furniture' and I was certainly one of them, although I didn't expect anyone to come and take it at that point; I just wanted to let people know I had it, and she said, 'By the time our houses are built, we'll go around and say, oh, what about some of this second hand furniture people have been offering … and people will say what furniture?" … it probably is more burdensome then, because you've got the offer, but you've got nowhere to put things … Can governments supply warehousing storage space that people can donate really lovely pieces and they are there until people have homes again to put them in. Is there something that the private corporate enterprises that are obviously doing these big housing development things, a philanthropic thing could be just to set up a warehouse with all these kitchen bits and anything. [Liz, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

Terry emphasised the importance of all volunteers receiving mental health training, particularly given the likelihood of finding themselves in accidental counselling roles during the crisis response stage of the fires:

> Yeah, I think there was a couple of people, one that was in a command centre here and he wasn't prepared for that public interaction. His role was to, you know, support the CFS and everything but he had all the public that were wondering what the hell is going on and what's happening with my house or what's happening with my family. And so, and he wasn't prepared for that … unfortunately that's what's going to happen in an emergency. … It takes a long time for those formalised programs to get on deck like you know, government support and so on … to get those agencies actually on ground; so, the people that are there during the event and shortly after are the people that are in your community … Having that confidence within yourself or giving the community the confidence to be able to say 'Look, are you okay' and then just giving them the skills to listen. And in a general sense would mean that almost everybody in the community was able to be a therapist or you know be able to support their neighbours … it's this accidental counselling … I think that's what those people wanted, and they were put into roles where they didn't realise they were going to have to do these things … And that would've been very traumatic for them because their focus is to make sure that the CFS resources were in place, not to try and manage the people that were yelling and screaming and panicking and those sorts of things. [Terry, SA Community Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 20 years]

David and Jess stressed the need to acknowledge the important role and expertise of volunteers in farm units:

> As a volunteer, you know it obviously relies – there's a real combination of local knowledge, and because you live in the area, and – a lot of them are from the ex-CFS. And then set up their own farm firefighting units. And the lads become disillusioned with the CFS hierarchy. And so, they've gone and formed their own. And they're actually quite hard working. We rely on their – on their intelligence to get back to it, because they know the land a lot better than we do. [David, SA CFS Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 26 years]

> I've got a better appreciation of the farm units that help with the CFS, but I'd never really knew much about. And so they do a lot of work as well helping their neighbours and that's where I was a little bit cross – this is a bit political – with Scott Morrison when we went to Kangaroo Island and said, "Well nobody died on – at least nobody died." And then he said – well they said, "We did have 2 people die." They weren't firefighters. And then – but they were fighting – they were on a farm unit. Because I've helped out with BlazeAid and I realise how so many people are involved and doing the right thing and the farm units do just as much - just as much as the CFS. [Jess, SA Community Volunteer, age: 60s; experience: 1 year]

Taylor stressed the value to the volunteer services of ex-ADF personnel who came with many skills relevant to the role:

> Our new first officer is an infantry solider with extremely good management skills and is a blokey bloke. So, he's absolutely the person that could run a brigade you could possibly imagine, and that is working extremely well for us … getting people like that in roles that are going to be impactful is important. [Taylor, QLD RFS Volunteer, age: 50s; experience: 12 years]

Geoff emphasised the value in how BlazeAid approached the contact between volunteers and communities impacted by the fires, through having a local coordinator as the clear point of contact initially to establish trust and manage communication and logistics:

> Look I think Blaze Aid has developed a really good approach. You go out in teams and the team leader is the person who negotiates and talks with the landholder in the first instance, so there is that one person, that one contact and I found that after day 2, day 3, day 4 we could all talk with the landholder. So initially just have the one because they recognise the person might be overwhelmed. And it means that the landholder only has to deal with the one person and doesn't have to deal with all of the emotions of all of the other questions and so on, but as the barriers drop over the days, and it's days, it's not weeks, it's only days and all of a sudden you know the landholder is working alongside you instead of looking at you as being some sort of alien coming in … and the fact that you have got a local coordinator. They were landholders themselves; they also had fire damaged property. [Geoff, SA Community Volunteer, age: 70s; experience: 10 years]

Recommendations

Several recommendations are derived directly from the experiences and expertise of volunteer participants involved in this research. Some suggestions relate directly to ways of improving mental health or addressing poor mental health. However, many of the recommendations are about improving the broader context of services and community support around volunteers, with improved mental health and wellbeing as an outcome of volunteers feeling more supported, connected and acknowledged.

This approach recognises that, in the same way that it takes a village to raise a child, a range of interconnected processes are needed to support an individual within the wider context in which they live their lives – their local community. This respects that, for those volunteers whose mental health has been adversely impacted by the bushfires, both clinical (focused on treatments and symptom reduction) and personal recovery (focus on regaining connectedness, hope identify, meaning and purpose and empowerment) are important and distinct outcomes (Bejerholm & Roe, 2018; Leamy et al., 2011). The recommendations are therefore underpinned by three core requirements:

1. Acknowledging, enhancing and making use of the strengths of existing support networks and also the importance of fostering cohesive community environments.
2. Scaling up training and support resources for volunteer agencies to ensure the sustainability of volunteering.
3. Improving collaboration and coordination between different groups (firefighter volunteers, paid staff, community volunteers) before, during and after the fire season.

Full list of recommendations arising from this research

1. **Improve acknowledgment and refinement (via upskilling where required) of existing informal mental health supports/networks currently utilised by volunteers (i.e., the hot-debrief, formal and informal mentoring roles, and peer-to-peer and family support). (R-1)**
   Debriefing as part of psychological support following attendance at events whilst in their volunteer role was widely discussed by firefighter participants. They described their engagement with a continuum of processes from informal debrief with peers, to informal and more formal group debriefing delivered following critical incidents with dedicated organisational debrief services (e.g., SPAM in SA), to individual formal counselling (service sanctioned or independent of the service to ensure privacy). The vast majority of debrief support was informal (primarily with family, peer to peer, or captain to crew or individual volunteer) and occurred predominantly at the level of crew or brigade, with limited help-seeking beyond this support level.
   - Services more explicitly recognise the value of informal peer debrief that occurs within volunteer crews by encouraging and supporting local volunteer leaders to activate this peer support as an explicit part of their job description. (R-1.1)
   - Include trauma-informed care training for peer workers as an explicit part of their job description. (R-1.2)
   - Ensure that follow-up support services are delivered face-to-face, where possible, as the preferred option and minimise phone follow-up; and that it is delivered by those who are known and trusted by the volunteer, and by individuals with ‘local’ knowledge, skills and understanding of the ESFR organisational culture and structures. (R-1.3)
   - Follow-up with volunteers beyond the initial critical incident period after significant fire or other events as a matter of course, to protect against cumulative trauma. (R-1.4)
   - Visit volunteers on leave with mental health problems ‘in place’ or at home, and consult with/include their families, where possible to ensure their needs are assessed holistically, seeing the person in the whole context of family and community. (R-1.5)
   - Enable volunteers to seek formal counselling support outside of organisationally provided services (and financially compensate) to ensure privacy and confidentiality, and foster help-seeking early for mental health concerns. (R-1.6)
   - Many volunteer firefighters are primarily supported by their families (especially their partners and children, often over many years). Friends and volunteer peers are also crucial supports, especially for those who do not have family support. These may be regarded as informal volunteers – they too should have access to mental health support, formally supported by the organisations. (R-1.7)
   - Consider a ‘Community of Practice’ or similar forum, especially for those volunteers in leadership roles (e.g., brigade Captains and more experienced firefighter volunteers), where those providing

informal peer support and debrief can support each other's mental health, wellbeing and role development. (R-1.8)

2. **Reduce administrative load on operational volunteers through a review of administrative structures and the recruitment of agency specific administrative volunteers. (R-2)**
   Participants emphasised the pressures and fatigue they experienced from tasks and responsibilities within their roles that they perceived as inequitable, given their volunteer status. They spoke about the burden of administrative paperwork and the need for more administrative support to the volunteer services.
   - Review brigade structures to reduce the administrative load on operational volunteers. (R-2.1)
   - Given some volunteers do not want to perform operational roles (due to preference, capacity, step down due to cumulative stresses) but still want to make a contribution, recruitment of volunteers specifically for these non-operational roles could be considered. (R-2.2)

3. **Support greater recognition of the skills across the sector to allow volunteer and paid personnel to work together side by side in relation to training, disaster preparation and campaign coordination and communication. (R-3)**
   The need for greater respect and acknowledgement by the organisations' chain of command and government for their skills, experience and contributions was felt by all firefighter participants during the 2019/2020 bushfire season. This need was particularly apparent in relation to how volunteers supported each other's mental health and wellbeing. This impacted their mental health after the fires directly and indirectly and was manifested through expressions of anger, loss of identity, sense of moral injury, and threats to meaning and purpose. It also impacted them directly on the fire ground when they felt exposed to high risk situations due to ineffective communication as well as lack of collaboration and support from paid staff and those coordinating the bushfire response. Together, these issues also exacerbated their sense of cumulative trauma. Campaigns were noted as particular times when greater stress and anxiety could be experienced by volunteers due to being in unfamiliar terrain, using equipment that they are unfamiliar with, often separated from their natural peer supports within their brigade, away from natural informal supports at home, and these larger events having the potential to have greater confusion in the command and control structures.
   - More opportunities for paid and volunteer staff to connect and share training and support when preparing for fire seasons and campaigns in order to improve trust as well as build relationships and respect. (R-3.1)
   - Improved use of handovers to key people on the ground, especially during campaigns to avoid confusion and chaos, and improve communication about the fire situation and status between shifts on the fireground. (R-3.2)
   - Keep established crews together, wholly or at least partially, where possible, when on campaigns. (R-3.3)
   - Greater consistency in firefighting equipment across borders. (R-3.4)
   - Ensure volunteers have adequate accommodation and other supports whilst on campaigns (where possible and practicable), especially given many volunteers are retirement age and may require added supports for sleep and rest to recover physically and mentally at the end of each shift. (R-3.5)
   - Ensure organisational management and politicians keep their promises to ESFR volunteers and their local brigades. (R-3.6)
   - AFAC, through its role in implementing uniform accreditation standards across the sector, consider how volunteers can be supported to maintain their training and accreditation at the same or similar level to paid firefighters. (R-3.7)

4. **Improve financial compensation from the government for loss of income/earnings incurred as a consequence of volunteering, particularly during a major bushfire campaign. (R-4)**
   Volunteers possess a strong desire to serve their community, and this is often an imperative in rural communities where there is heightened bushfire risk and threat to their homes, businesses, farms etc. They may therefore be emotionally torn between the competing priorities of their volunteer role and duty to their community, and their paid employment or other responsibilities. Volunteer firefighting can have actual financial costs to the individual and their families (e.g., loss of employment earnings) which can create or exacerbate stress and anxiety in the short and longer term for volunteers. It can also put pressure on rural communities that may be already experiencing pressures with ageing populations, economic downturn, impacts of drought or flood and fires, greater unemployment and other social

problems compared with urban areas which together create greater mental health demands on these communities.

- There is a compensation scheme, but how it is applied and participants' knowledge of it appears to be inconsistent. Hence, the process of how to apply needs to be clearer. Volunteer organisations need to support volunteers to make claims rather than leaving this to individual volunteers. (R-4.1)
- Government review how firefighter volunteers can be financially compensated for loss of earnings. The following should be explored:
  - Remuneration should only apply when state governments require that volunteers be available to deal with an emergency.
  - Any registered emergency services volunteer to be given leave on full pay whenever their services are required. (Employers to recover their costs from the government.)
  - Self-employed volunteers to be compensated at a rate commensurate with the industry standard. (R-4.2)
- The nature of some rural communities is changing, and many people commute to the large urban centres for work or study, especially younger volunteers. This means that in an emergency there is a shortage of people to act as first responders. Consequently, many available first responders are older. To ensure that fire stations are well staffed during catastrophic days, all volunteers to report to their station on those days (or at very least be available). This requires a review of compensation. (R-4.3)

5. **Investigate ways to improve training for severe events, via the development and implementation of virtual reality technology training to better prepare volunteers for their role and for large-scale campaigns; particularly, to prepare them for the realities of extreme fire behaviour and potentially traumatic events, and to practice working together in high stress and time critical situations. (R-5)**

   Many volunteers commented on the difficulties associated with simulating the conditions that were experienced during the 2019/20 bushfire season. They also stressed that there are many aspects of the role that are difficult to train for, given the nature of the role. This meant newer volunteers, in particular, may be unprepared for more significant events and tasks within their role until they are actually performing their role on the fireground. This means they can be inadvertently exposed too early to traumatic events and to tasks beyond their skill and experience levels.

   - Government and ESFR organisations to invest in fire training that uses virtual reality technology to give volunteers a more accurate scenario of what they may expect in their role given varying conditions and landscapes. The prime aim would be to give first responders a sense of the challenges that they will face, to better prepare them emotionally, in addition to better practical preparation for the role. (R-5.1)

6. **Introduce additional mental health training for ESFR volunteers and communities impacted by disasters. (R-6)**

   Volunteers undertake a range of training courses in order to perform the practical aspects of their role. Formal mental health focused training, however, is limited; most volunteers gain their understanding of how to cope with the psychological rigors of their role largely through cultural exchanges with peers and through informal mentorship from older and more experienced volunteers, particularly through their brigade captains, and through informal trusted community mentors and 'accidental counsellors' in the communities. From this research, it is apparent that there are many types of volunteers, including family and community members who act informally but who would benefit from mental health training because they are often the trusted and primary individuals to interact with others who may need support.

   - Enhanced and expanded training and psychoeducation for disaster prone communities in relation to community orientated disaster preparedness and fire safety planning, what to do during the fires from an individual and community orientated perspective, as well as the roles and responsibilities of all community members throughout the recovery period. (R-6.1)
   - Mental health first aid training needs to be made widely available to communities that are likely to be impacted by bushfires and other natural disasters; prioritised for volunteer ESFR first. In those communities, people working in service stations, post offices, hairdressers, schools, supermarkets, cafes, etc – tend to become impromptu counsellors. Some people do this instinctively well, but many people do not know what the signs are of mental stress. If communities are well versed in mental health first aid, then they are better placed to develop strategies to pick up the needs. (R-6.2)
   - Acknowledge the value of experience and length of volunteer service and maximise that expertise in all training and mentoring of newer volunteers. (R-6.3)

- Training should be undertaken by lived experience peer facilitators from the local community who have 'local' knowledge, skills and an understanding of the ESFR organisational culture and structures (experience of recovery and management of mental illness, self-harm and/or suicidality is also an advantage). Ensure this is part of a structured activity and appropriate supports for the speaker and audience are in place. (R-6.4)
- Regular face-to-face mental health and wellbeing training which covers all aspects of the role and is staged according to the age and experience of the volunteer. This training, in the aftermath of a campaign and the everyday volunteer role, also serves as an opportunity for formalising the strengths of informal peer debriefing and early intervention in relation to mental health symptoms. (R-6.5)
- Include members of volunteer farm units in any training and support, and community debriefing, alongside firefighters from the paid and volunteer organisations. (R-6.6)

A significant role of volunteer firefighters is attending motor vehicle accidents (MVAs); often they are the first on the scene, especially in rural locations with limited ESFR services. Rural MVAs are more likely to be high speed, high impact events, with greater risk of death or serious injury to vehicle occupants, and there is a high probability that volunteers will know those involved. This has clear implications for volunteers' mental health.

- Ensure a full scope of training that also acknowledges volunteers' role in attending to MVAs. (R-6.7)

7. **Implement local community logistic support capabilities, drawing on a register of identified local community members' expertise and knowledge (e.g., drawn up by local service clubs and agencies in collaboration with local government), to support volunteer and paid ESFRs at commencement and during a major campaign, and alleviate high stress and time critical situations. (R-7)**
   A range of practical gaps were evident that, if filled, could support mental health and wellbeing and serve to prevent or minimise distress among volunteers and their communities, especially during fire incidents, but also afterwards. In particular, in the early stages of major fire events and in the immediate aftermath of the fires, it takes some time for the various designated agencies to get organised to deliver the support that firefighters and other ESFRs and communities need. Establishing a community-based capabilities that could provide earlier and more immediate support would be valuable.
   - Engage with the community in planning and preparation for fire events so that the benefits of local knowledge are maximised. For example, local councils to map resident expertise of individuals in rural communities in relation to skills, knowledge of local terrain, facilities and resources as a preparatory activity that can be called upon readily at the critical early stages of an event rather than leaving it to be 'discovered' by chance during or after a natural disaster event. Relying predominantly on 'external experts' can undermine local mental health and resilience efforts during a fire event and be a missed opportunity to support sustainable mental health and wellbeing in the months after the fire event by promoting naturally occurring local leadership and expertise.

     These community members would then coordinate with paid and volunteer ESFR workforces to provide the following services:
     - Provide early access and support to the establishment of staging areas
     - Ensure interstate crews are supported
     - Set up R & R facilities
     - Provide a central point of support for the various services deployed: police, paramedics, etc.
     - Provide a buffer for crews from journalists (controlling media is important)
     - Provide community support (there will always be some people who will need a place of refuge)
     - Follow up on additional services required; for example, vets to put down injured life stock. (R-7.1)

8. **Recognise volunteers support local communities and the importance of fostering local community cohesive environments. (R-8)**
   Volunteer firefighters are members of communities; they usually live in the communities where they serve and have many ties and relationships beyond their volunteer role; they are part of the cultural milieu of their community. Therefore, in the event of fires, they are directly impacted by the impacts for their community and are often held accountable by community members for fire outcomes. They can experience significant challenges in safeguarding and preparing their areas for fire seasons, particularly

problematic when some community members have low literacy for fire safety planning. This can heighten their psychological stress, particularly as they attempt to get on with their lives alongside others in the community who may hold animosity towards them or expectations of their role that cannot be met.

- Ensure efforts to build or maintain community cohesion are explicit goals in the recovery effort. (R-8.1)
- Consider whole of community simulation to prepare for the fire season in rural areas, not just drills for emergency services. (R-8.2)
- Ensure clearer communication and access plans to public buildings/facilities are developed ahead of each fire season in the event that fires start on public holidays. (R-8.3)
- Through clearer communications, ask people to think, learn and prepare their properties better before they evacuate. (R-8.4)
- One of the interviewees stated that, 'It's not just about rebuilding fences; it's about rebuilding lives'. Fences do not take long to rebuild, lives a lot longer. There needs to be a long-term ongoing commitment to empowering communities to look after themselves. Just as we do not disband our volunteer fighters after the disaster so we should not assume that we can fix things 'quickly'. (R-8.5)
- Ensure volunteers' needs are assessed holistically, seeing the person in the whole context of family and community. (R-8.6)
- Introduce more family support services using local expertise and peer led, including more access to mental health support for families. (R-8.7)

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Appendix 1: After the Fires: Focus Group / Interview Guide

Demographic Questions

- Gender – male, female, other
- Age
- Role
- Location type – metro, non-metro
- State
- Living situation – with family, with others, alone
- Length of first responder working or volunteering career
- Extent of ESFR activity as part of your employment or volunteering (usual call-out frequency)
- Family also ESFR or volunteering roles?

Overarching Areas of Focus / Core Questions:

1. On Being a firefighter / volunteer
2. Short and long-term impacts on wellbeing and resilience
3. Factors your think are important for effective coping in your first responder role
4. Perceived need for support, help-seeking, and use of support during and after the fires
5. Strategies for building resilience and protecting mental health (individual, team, organisation)

Core Questions with Further Exploratory Questions

1. On Being a firefighter / volunteer
   - What motivated you to become a firefighter / volunteer?
   - When you are not volunteering, what occupation, role or activities do you usually perform?
     - Any issues with navigation between the roles, support for volunteering role by employer, family, getting the balance in roles, etc

4. Short and long-term impacts on wellbeing and resilience
   - Can you tell me about your experience of volunteering during the 2019/2020 bushfire season?
   - Are there any things that you have found challenging or that have hindered you from moving on with life after the fires?
     - Coping with anniversaries, other triggers?
   - Views on the media coverage of the bushfires and how it impacted you?
   - Since, the 2019/202 bushfires, has your view of yourself, others and things around you changed? Explain.

5. Factors your think are important for effective coping in your first responder /volunteer role
   - What does it mean to you to be a firefighter / volunteer, especially during and since the bushfires?
   - What motivates you to continue volunteering in the future?

6. Perceived need for support, help-seeking, and use of support during and after the fires
   - Who do you draw support from to debrief and share your experience of volunteering during the bushfires?
     - Role of family, friends, other volunteers, others?
   - What helps you stay strong / to keep getting on with life?
   - At what point would or do you ask for help from other? Explain
   - How do you go about asking for help?
   - Perceived reasons for the Who, What, When, Where and How of help-seeking?

7. Strategies for building resilience and protecting mental health (individual, team, organisation)
   - What has helped you to makes sense of your experiences during the 2019/2020 bushfire season?
   - What does being resilient mean and look like to you?
     - *What do you think builds resilience?*

- *What does your organisation do to help build and maintain it?*
- What does mental health and wellbeing mean and look like to you?
  - What does your organisation do to support mental health?
  - Mental health conversations and who, what, when, how of help-seeking in your organisation?
- What is needed to better prepare firefighters / volunteers for their role?
  - Services, community, organisational factors
- What is needed to better support volunteers specifically during and after the fires?

Appendix 2: Wayne's Story

(Written by Wayne 12 months after the fires)

December 20 2019 was a day I was supposed to attend a Christmas work do with a building crew I had worked hard with all year. The weather forecast had come in, and it was coming in catastrophic conditions for a fire that afternoon. High winds, dry lightning, no rain. I had been involved in a fire the week before and the CFS crews
were on tenterhooks that day. I texted my workmates to let them know I'd be spending the day on a fire truck, waiting.

Dec 20 was spent driving around in our truck, surveying an already burnt fire ground, on my mate's farm, not far from his house. Conditions became that bad that we couldn't tell the difference between the earth dust, ash blowing around and smoke that may be coming from the existing fire ground. We spent an afternoon preserving our energy, relying on our pagers to alert us to anybody who needed help that day…3pm, all of my crew were sitting around my friend's kitchen table. All our pagers sounded at once. Multiple lightning strikes hit all at once. We rush to our truck, to wait for orders. Trucks were sent in all directions, but we need to keep in mind of further strikes, we cannot spread ourselves too thin. I'm not sure how many fires started that day, but it was the beginning of bedlam. I can't remember a lot of what happened, just rough details, and my phone overheated in my pocket so any pics that I could use as a reference disappeared. It would be three weeks before I contacted my family to tell them I was alright.

From December 20, for the next two weeks, I would drive out to our friend's home, where our fire truck was being kept. The fire was in the vicinity of his place; therefore, it was pretty damn personal. We worked day and night, sometimes I slept at his place, but mostly I'd drive back to the station for a wind down with the other crews, but also to get a briefing on the fire. You can learn a lot, simply by hanging around the station.

On average, I think we were getting maybe three hours sleep per night. I'd jump out of bed, make a strong coffee and try to be at our friend's place for the crack of dawn. The fire was getting bigger by the day, and we knew some bad weather was approaching. We worked harder, everybody was growing more tired by the day, but we persisted. The friend and I had taken this fire on, other places on our truck were being rotated, but it was our truck. It was our fire, and his home was up the road. Our friend's farms and houses were being surrounded by flames.

Christmas day had arrived. I woke up first thing, went to the station to check the maps, weather conditions, and meet the crew to fill the other trucks. The locals were being rested for Xmas day, but not our friend and myself. We were going back out, but under the radar. We went rouge. The other crews were awesome to meet, we had breakfast together, there was a good feeling in the air. Like when you didn't think you could help a community anymore, but you found a bit extra! Everybody looked as if they were the Xmas orphans, like we had no family at home, including myself. I wore my Hawaiian shirt and Santa hat that day. 'Merry Xmas' was written in the dust on the back of our truck, along with 'thank you' and 'S.O.S'.

I can't remember the exact date, but we found out January 3rd was going to be catastrophic weather conditions again. With so much work done, but so much more to do, we all took a hard swallow, deep sigh, let out a couple of expletives, and went to work. The nights were perfect, so were the mornings, with no wind at all, but every
morning the 'beast' as we called it would wake up. It became windy, the work got harder. Our truck was on the job at 6am. We waited for everybody else to have a cooked breakfast, most trucks were arriving around 10am. I was thinking of how precious time was being wasted.

Crews started putting in control lines ready for the bad weather we were about to cop. With perfect evenings to light up, we walked kilometres with our drip torches, lighting up the bush to get ahead of the fires. One night we were told to knock off at 8pm. We couldn't, it was perfect to keep going. Remember, our friend's house was up the road. It was our 14th hour on the job. We kept going.10pm, midnight, 1am rolled around, everything was going to plan. We had stopped using our radio hours ago. Adelaide Fire listens to our main radios, and thought we were home in bed. The locals knew we were there, working side by side. We called it a day at 4am, after 22 hours.

Finally falling asleep, crashing hard! The friend and I had agreed to set our alarms for 8am, but alas, both woke up after 2 hours sleep. Bolt upright I sat. 'Fuck, how long have I been out? Where is the fire?' I thought. You jump up, and check, of course. Then you are awake! At our friend's, you can walk out to his front yard and see how far the fire has moved. 6am, back on the truck, 20 hours later, fall asleep again. Repeated, over and over again.

It was one lunch time, I was in our friend's toilet, sitting in a daze. Smoke started coming out of the door, then out of the walls. I was in trouble, I was hallucinating! I walked out to the dining room table to announce, I needed a day off. At the pub that night, talking to a friend, I looked over his shoulder, smoke was coming out from the carpet on the floor. I took myself home to sleep.

January 2nd. By this date, our town was evacuated by everybody. The army, who were using our local sports oval, gone. CFS, gone. Ambulance station, deserted. We were alone in our town. Except the local farm units and our local CFS. We couldn't rely on anybody else. A few army guys, before they left, called us crazy. That meant
something! By 8pm on the 2nd we hadn't had tea bought out to us on the truck. Beauty, we figured, means we are headed home soon, to get some sleep before Armageddon hits the next day. Then there it was, another load of cold schnitzel packs for tea! 'Eat up, then you are all coming for a drive'. We conducted another large burn, getting back to the station at 2am. We slept on the floor, scared we would sleep in.

As expected, Jan 3rd was an awful day. You know how the story ends. It started off with a bunch of mates waking up on a hard floor of a CFS station.