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Emergency services, SES volunteers in WA quit in droves

Trevor Paddenburg The West Australian

Sunday, 2 September 2018 7:30AM



📷 File image



More than 10 emergency service volunteers quit every day in WA, new research has revealed.

And attrition in the State Emergency Service (SES) is the worst of all, with a quarter of the volunteer workforce quitting each year – putting massive pressure on recruitment and training of new members.

The research, to be presented at the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council conference in Perth this week, has raised fears about the response effort to bushfires, rescues and disasters in WA, where volunteers play a crucial role.

Dr Darja Kragt, a researcher with University of WA and the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Council, said the State had more than 26,000 emergency service volunteers but annual volunteer turnover was about 15 per cent, or more than 10 a day on average. That includes volunteer firefighters, paramedics and marine rescuers.

In the SES, Dr Kragt said the turnover rate was even higher, with 23 per cent of the volunteer workforce leaving each year, which she said could “jeopardise the ongoing delivery of SES services”.

Her research, based on in-depth interviews, showed many volunteers quit because they changed jobs or moved towns while others underestimated the amount of training needed.

“They’re quite amazing people because they see reward in helping other people, even in sometimes horrific circumstances. But what gets them to the point of saying, ‘I quit. I’m out of here’ is often the boredom factor,” Dr Kragt said.

“Some aren’t prepared for the amount of training they need to undertake. The reality is you might only get eight or 10 call-outs a year, but you have to show up for training every Wednesday night and constantly keep your skills up.”

Department of Fire and Emergency Services commissioner Darren Klemm said his organisation was focussed on “better supporting” volunteers, and reducing administration and bureaucracy.

Dr Kragt will present her findings at the conference at the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre this week, which brings together hundreds of international and local emergency management experts, researchers, frontline workers and volunteers, while showcasing the latest and greatest equipment to combat natural disasters.

Among the speakers is former NASA astronaut Mike Mullane, who will delve into lessons from the 1986 Challenger disaster and his US Air Force experience, including a crash in an F-111 fighter jet.

Craig Fugate, the former head of the US Federal Emergency Management Agency, will tell the conference how Hurricane Katrina's lessons can help prepare communities for disaster.

Closer to home, the Bureau of Meteorology's Mika Peace has analysed the Waroona bushfire to pinpoint the extreme fire conditions that razed the town of Yarloop in the South-West.

And Australian National University researcher Dr Marta Yebra will tell the conference how new age satellites are helping to monitor live fuel moisture in vegetation and assist with controlled burns.

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