



# Recruitment and Retention of Volunteers

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Evidence Brief #208 - 2022

## Fire and Emergency commissions research to support its main functions:

- Reducing the likelihood of unwanted fires.
- Reducing consequences from emergencies.
- Helping build resilient communities.

Evidence Briefs summarise this research, on specific topics. They are the initial port of call for decision makers, policy makers and operational staff looking to influence fire-related outcomes.

### Summary

This Evidence Brief summarises the findings of a number of studies commissioned by Fire and Emergency over the last 20 years on the recruitment and retention of volunteers. The studies include:

- Development of demographic and skills profiles, and understanding of the volunteer journey, from the perspective of different communities of volunteers (urban, rural, Māori, women, the families and whānau of volunteers). These studies span from 2001/02 to 2019/20. Research on Māori volunteers hasn't been undertaken since 2002.
- Social and economic impact analysis of volunteers in 2007.
- Review of existing volunteer support and recognition programmes implemented by Fire and Emergency, undertaken in 2021.

### The main reasons volunteers join Fire and Emergency:

- Serving the community, particularly for Māori
- Already knowing someone in Fire and Emergency
- Sense of belonging and being part of a social group
- Personal and professional development

### Key barriers to volunteers joining and staying were:

- Family-volunteering-work pressures and conflicts
- Fire and Emergency's organisational systems and processes
- Organisational culture, particularly for women
- Rural locations encounter more barriers.

The recommendations outline how Fire and Emergency could improve recruiting and retaining volunteers, and emphasis is placed on the importance of driving change through organisational leadership and culture.

**12,000** *volunteers*

**80%** *of all Fire and Emergency's staff*

**\$91 m** *annual value of volunteers*

**\$12 m** *annual value of volunteer labour*

**\$79 m** *annual value of volunteer emergency response*

# Recommendations from the research



## Recruitment recommendations

1. Volunteer recruitment campaigns should highlight the known motivating factors for joining - ability to contribute to the community, the social aspects and whānau atmosphere, and the opportunity for personal and professional development
2. The majority of volunteers enter Fire and Emergency through someone they know. The existing volunteer and career workforce could be viewed as roaming recruiters. Empower the existing career and volunteer workforce to act as recruitment agents



## Retention recommendations

1. Address the volunteer-family pressures through better information and guidance for families on the impacts on volunteering for them, family recognition, and improving the inclusivity of fire stations.
2. Recognise the work-volunteer balance through improved acknowledgement of employers.
3. Make adjustments to schedules (training and callouts), equipment, ways of working, and fire station facilities, to improve participation and retention of women, Māori, and other volunteers
4. The importance of recruiting and supporting volunteers could be led from the highest levels of leadership in Fire and Emergency. Improving the diversity, capacity and capability of volunteers, could be driven through Fire and Emergency's organisational culture



## Recommendations for future research

1. In-depth research on the volunteer journey for Māori, what works in recruiting and retaining Māori volunteers, and how a Te Ao Māori approach could be implemented.
2. Address the gap in recent qualitative studies which highlight the experiences of women volunteers (and workers) within Fire and Emergency.
3. Update and extend research on the value and contribution of the volunteer fire brigade.

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# The importance of Volunteers

## 80% of Fire and Emergency's people are volunteers

As at July 2021, 14,794 people worked at Fire and Emergency. Of these people, almost 12,0000 were volunteers (approximately 80% of the organisation's people), in volunteer firefighter, brigade support, and operational support roles. See Figure 1, for a demographic breakdown.

But the general public thinks that volunteers only make up 61% of the Fire and Emergency workforce.<sup>1</sup>

## The total annual economic value of volunteers has been conservatively estimated at \$91 million per annum, with the value of volunteer labour at \$12 million

In 2007 dollars, the total annual economic value of volunteers was estimated conservatively at \$91 million, comprising \$12 million of volunteer labour and \$79 million for the emergency response.<sup>2</sup> Volunteers also contribute six times more value than the average New Zealander.<sup>2</sup>

## The value of the emergency response has been estimated at \$79 million

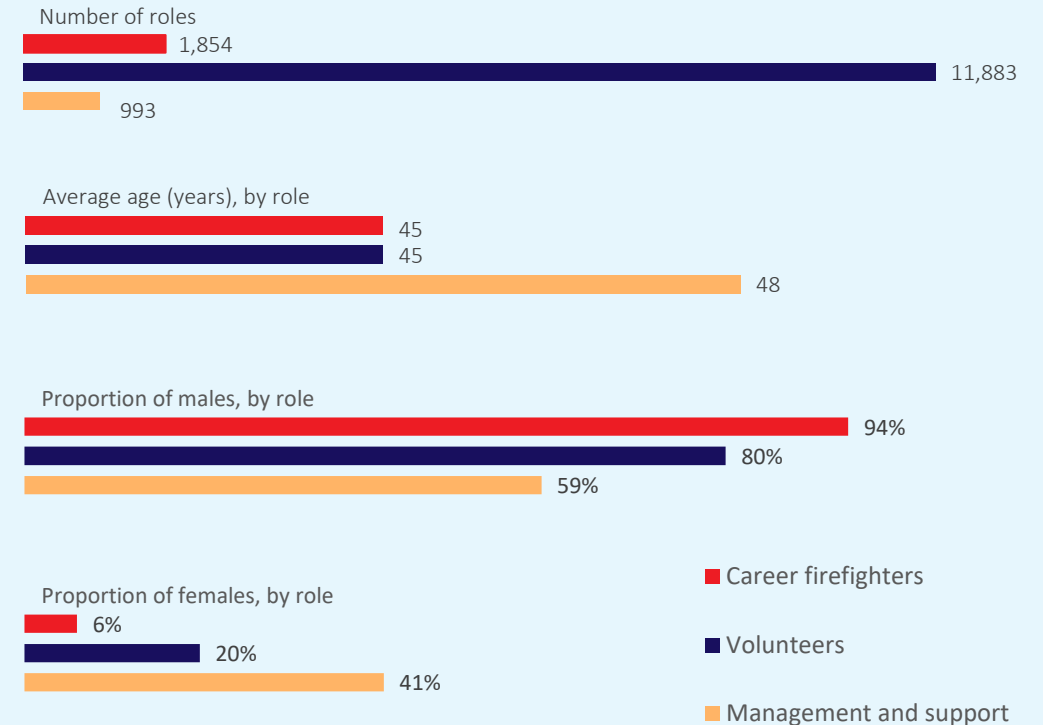
Due to their ability to respond to rural incidents quickly, the emergency response was estimated to provide \$79 million (in 2007 dollars) in economic value add a year. This was:

- \$23 million due to costs avoided due to a reduction in response times, and
- \$56 million, the value of lives saved.<sup>2</sup>

This doesn't include other benefits to the community such as safety and security, social cohesion, economic prosperity, fire prevention, and protection of property.

Turnover among volunteers since 2017 is around 10%. The Volunteerism Strategy 2019-2029 (Te whakatoitū i te Tūāotanga) describes how Fire and Emergency intends to recruit and maintain its volunteers through the use of Volunteerism Principles.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1.  
A profile of roles in Fire and Emergency, 2021



Source: Fire and Emergency New Zealand (2021)<sup>4</sup>

\* In 2007 dollars

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# Why volunteer?

## “Serving the community” was the main reason

Volunteers are part of their community, and provide crucial understanding of local fire safety strengths, risks, and needs.<sup>6</sup> In most studies, the number one reason given for volunteering was community service, supporting or contributing to the community, or to give back to the community.<sup>2,6,7</sup>

## Word of mouth – already knowing someone at Fire and Emergency – is often how volunteers join

A sizable proportion of volunteers do so due to someone they know volunteering.<sup>5,6,8</sup>

In 2019, new volunteers indicated that in the six months before they applied to be a volunteer, 72% had seen a Fire and Emergency volunteer in action and 52% had been approached by a Fire and Emergency volunteer about joining.<sup>6</sup>

## Sense of belonging and being part of a social group is a key reason volunteers join, and stay

Volunteer fire brigades are the heart and soul of communities, particularly rural communities.<sup>6</sup> For fire brigades in smaller communities, the station may be a community facility and/or it is regularly used to host functions.

Volunteers assist in sustaining the quality of life of themselves, as well as those around them. “This is the best social club in the world” – research participant<sup>2</sup>

Volunteering is a good way of settling into, and becoming part of, a new community.<sup>2</sup>

The social aspects that firefighters gain also flow onto their families and communities. Families gain pride knowing that their family members are volunteering. Families also strengthen their networks and achieve status in their community through their association with a brigade – 80% of volunteers thought their family had made new friends.<sup>10</sup>

*“I knew the chief.  
He just told me to  
come down Monday  
night, training  
night, and I did.  
We just had a chat.  
He told me to do it.”*

Urban volunteer<sup>16</sup>

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\* The survey sample consisted of 732 new volunteers. Interviews and focus groups were also undertaken with 93 established volunteers, and 25 exited volunteers

# Why volunteer?

## Personal and professional development is another motivator

For many volunteers, learning new skills and gaining new, or strengthening, knowledge is a motivating factor. Between 85-88% of volunteers have indicated that developing new skills, and ongoing training and learning, were important reasons for joining.<sup>6, 7</sup>

Research on the literacy, numeracy and communication skills of volunteers concluded that Fire and Emergency should use plain English for all volunteer training and communication materials, and that there may be benefit in offering training in soft skills as well as some technical skills.<sup>11</sup>

## Fire and Emergency could do more to support and recognise volunteers

There are lots of ways volunteers can be supported (Table 1). Over 2018/19, Fire and Emergency developed and implemented a range of volunteer reward and recognition initiatives. These included:

1. Volunteer recognition (medals and honours, gifts, vouchers)
2. Volunteer benefits (insurance, discount schemes, employment assistance programme)
3. Allowances and reimbursement
4. Remuneration (deployment payments for incidents of long duration).

A review of the volunteer recognition approach found that while there were good features, take up was mixed, there needed to be clearer distinctions between recognition and other types of volunteer support, and the initiatives could be better tailored.<sup>12</sup>

A review of the Frequent Values online volunteer discounts programme found low awareness and uptake, and it was not providing value for money for Fire and Emergency.<sup>13</sup> Volunteers also felt that it was more a support programme than a form of recognition.

**Table 1.**  
**Range of volunteer support activities**

PURPOSE	EXAMPLE INITIATIVES		CONSIDERATIONS
Providing the basics to do the job	Equipment and uniforms Thoughtful rostering	Comfortable stations Discounts / vouchers	Any potential conflict between volunteering role and the basics e.g. offering one-off event-based volunteer work that might fit better with work commitments
Duty of care	Advocacy services Dental and Health services	Gym memberships Basic training	What is expected to be 'match fit' What are the likely risks (protection, assurance)
Removing barriers	Reimbursement for expenses Family payment	Childcare support Employer recognition	Circumstance of your audience and how that interacts with the requirements of the job
Recognition Appreciation	Awards Discounts and vouchers	Benefits Corporate and family events	Form of the recognition and how that interacts with extrinsic vs intrinsic motivations Team vs individual recognition Who the recognition comes from
An environment to thrive	Team culture Team building and team events Training	Organisation-wide events Professional development	Culture Opportunities Skillsets

Source: Adapted from a Review of volunteer recognition approach<sup>12</sup>

# Challenges to volunteering

## Being a volunteer puts stress on families

The international and national literature finds that attending callouts can:<sup>10</sup>

- cause tension in partner relationships
- lead to trauma which affects family relationships
- lead to partners taking the burden of household labour and caregiving
- restrict partner and family mobility.

But on the flipside, the most recent survey of new volunteers found that over 90% felt being a Fire and Emergency volunteer made their family/whānau proud (Figure 2).

When volunteers join Fire and Emergency, families and whānau receive information about the support they can provide the volunteer as well as access to the wider network of volunteer families, friends and whānau, and a range of network events and support groups.<sup>14</sup>

## Fire and Emergency's organisational systems and processes were identified by volunteers as requiring improvement

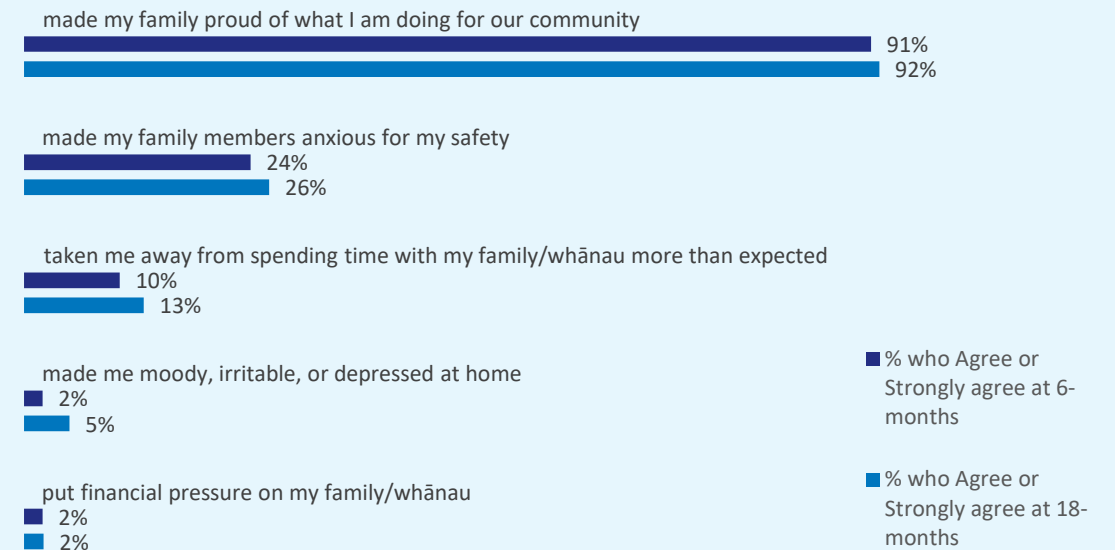
Surveys and brigade mapping exercises find that the part liked least about volunteering were a range of compliance, organisational, and administrative tasks and issues.<sup>7,8,15</sup> These included:

- Paperwork
- perceive excessive rules and regulations
- training that was not well organised
- lack of robust systems, processes and practices
- management perceived as overly bureaucratic
- poor leadership.

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

Urban volunteer<sup>12</sup>

Figure 2.  
Impact on family/whānau life, 2019, n = 732



Source: Adapted from Understanding the volunteer journey<sup>6</sup>



# Challenges to volunteering

## Some volunteers find it difficult to balance work and being a volunteer

Balancing work life with volunteering can be difficult for some volunteers. In a 2001 study, volunteers believed that this was the main reason driving turnover.<sup>7</sup> Encouragingly, most volunteers felt that their employers were supportive.<sup>6</sup> of their volunteer activities.<sup>11</sup> Less than 5% experienced negative impacts on work life due to their volunteer duties (Figure 3).

Fire and Emergency recognise and support employers, and those self-employed, through:<sup>16</sup>

- A “Proud Employer of Fire and Emergency Volunteers” mark
- Promoting employers of volunteers in the annual nationwide campaign
- Listing volunteers’ employers on trucks, on station signs, and in a web directory
- An annual ‘Thank You’ advert listing local employers in local newspapers
- Hosting employers at annual recognition events.



PROUD EMPLOYER OF  
FIRE AND EMERGENCY  
VOLUNTEERS  
HE RŌPŪ KŌTAHI TĀTOU

### Proud Employer Mark

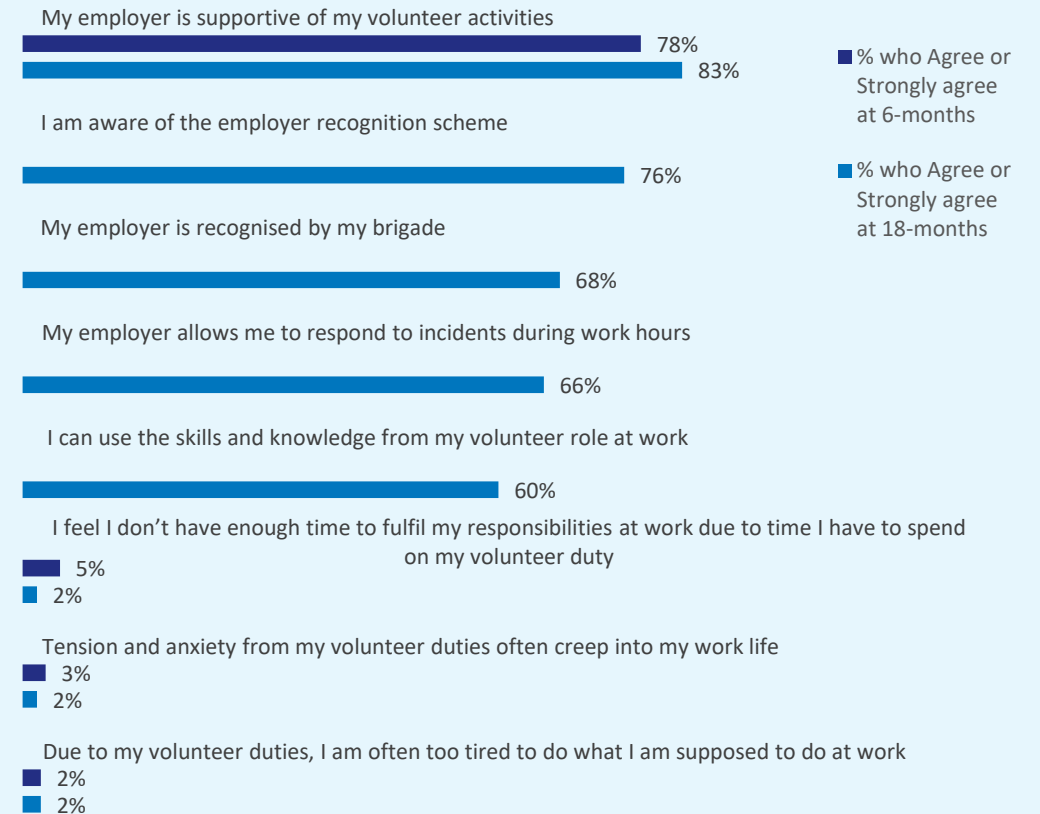
The Proud Employer Mark and annual campaign represents the collaboration between volunteers, their employers, and Fire and Emergency, and the vital contribution businesses make to allow for emergency response during work hours.

A recent evaluation, and ongoing tracking, of the Proud Employer Mark and the annual campaign found that:<sup>17,18</sup>

- 94% of New Zealanders thought Fire and Emergency should continue to promote it.
- 80% of New Zealand employers think it makes a difference to the recognition they get by displaying the Mark.

At this stage, there is still relatively low awareness of the Mark (between 15% and 27% of New Zealanders had seen it in the newspaper, on TV, online, or displayed by a business).

Figure 3.  
Impact on work life, 2019, n = 732



Source: Adapted from Understanding the volunteer journey<sup>6</sup>

## Organisational culture – women volunteers face specific challenges

The research consistently found that women volunteers face specific challenges:<sup>5,10,19,20</sup>

- Many interviewed potential volunteers felt they didn't have the physical strength and fitness to perform the role.<sup>16</sup>
- Equipment and gear did not suit their needs
- Lack of adequate facilities, such as showers and toilets
- Lack of flexibility in availability
- Perception of a male-dominated and sexist work environment, where getting accepted is difficult.

## Rural locations had difficulty recruiting, and “not getting enough action”, contributed to volunteers exiting

Mapping analysis across 220 volunteer brigades led to a profile of strong and struggling brigades (Figure 4).<sup>5</sup> A feature of a struggling brigade was low call out rates.

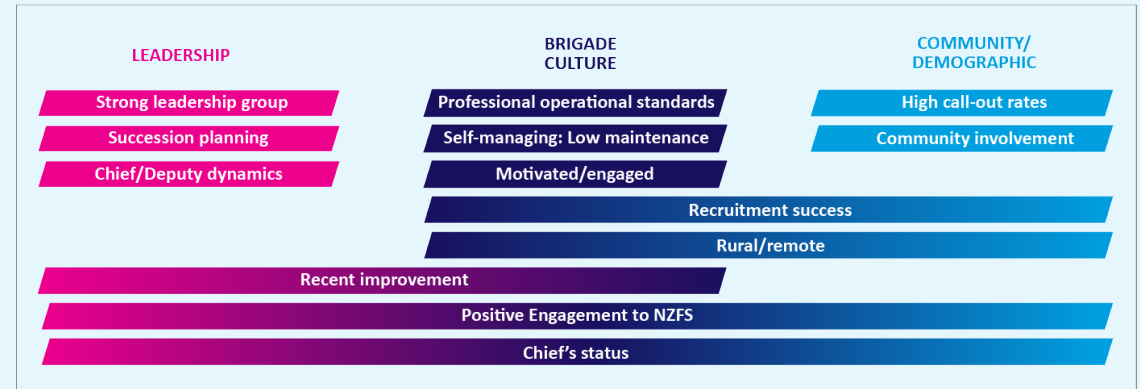
As a result, less busy, and rural<sup>7,20</sup> brigades often find it more difficult to recruit, especially for younger members. Potential rural volunteers often commute to larger urban centres to work, making it difficult for them to be able to respond to weekday call outs.

Being part of the action and attending call outs was important for volunteers.<sup>6,15</sup>

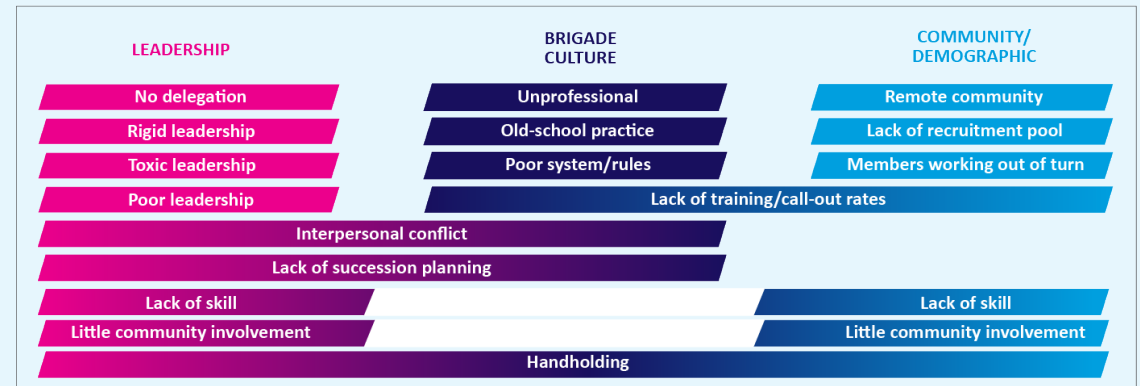
COVID-19 has exacerbated the issues regions face, especially with older volunteers having less time for volunteering or having stopped entirely.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 4.  
Features of strong brigades and struggling brigades

### Strong Brigades



### Struggling Brigades



Source: Differentiating Strong and Struggling Volunteer Brigades<sup>15</sup>

# What does this mean for hapori Māori?

Māori make up a high proportion of Fire and Emergency volunteers, particularly in rural areas.<sup>9</sup> The findings related to motivators for joining Fire and Emergency, as well as the challenges discussed earlier, apply equally for Māori.

The research on Māori volunteers is dated, undertaken in 2001 and 2002, and research undertaken subsequently does not take a specific Māori or Te Ao Māori lens. While recent research in Northland and Auckland sought to oversample Māori<sup>22</sup>, updated, in-depth research could be undertaken using Kaupapa Māori approaches.

## Motivations to volunteer

- Serving the community: Māori volunteers were more likely to say that serving the community was important for joining than volunteers overall.<sup>7</sup> Giving back to their community, the camaraderie they experienced, and the whānau atmosphere, were key sources of enjoyment and engagement.<sup>6</sup>
- Finding out from someone else they know: Māori also volunteer with Fire and Emergency through someone they know, and there was no significant difference between New Zealand European and Māori volunteers on how people became to be volunteers.<sup>6,9</sup>

- Social aspects: Māori volunteers make specific mention of the family/whānau and social nature of the atmosphere in the brigade.<sup>6,9</sup>
- Personal and professional development: The development of life skills is an important part of being a volunteer fire fighter for Māori, compared to urban volunteers.<sup>7</sup>

## Challenges to volunteering

- How volunteering is framed: Western concepts of “volunteering” do not accurately reflect how Māori and Pacific peoples view unpaid work. Volunteering is seen as part of everyday life and is usually described as “helping out”.<sup>22</sup> Māori, compared to European Pākehā, were also less likely to have heard of Fire and Emergency.<sup>22</sup>
- Stress on families: Volunteers commented that often it was the same whānau always volunteering (particularly in rural communities), which means there is little time available for contributing to other community services, and time for their own whānau.<sup>9,22</sup>
- Organisational culture: Just over half of Māori volunteers thought that Fire and Emergency understood the needs of Māori in volunteer fire brigades. Only 9% disagreed with this statement.<sup>7</sup> Māori volunteers indicated that they did not experience a lot of discrimination, but several described individual incidents.<sup>7</sup>

## Recommendations from the research

- 1 Updated in-depth research could be undertaken on the volunteer journey for Māori, what works in recruiting and retaining Māori volunteers, and how a Te Ao Māori approach could be implemented. (Using Kaupapa Māori research approaches.)
- 2 Volunteering campaigns with a focus on Māori should not use the word “volunteering”, instead mahi aroha and “helping out” would resonate

“

**... I think the reason a high majority of young Māori people join gangs is for the camaraderie. Perhaps they could use that as an angle to attract the young ones to join the fire service because there is camaraderie there. I've seen him in the street and within five minutes we're talking about all sorts. It does go deeper than just going to a fire call. In the back of your mind most of the guys know the kids or the wives. The wives know the wives.**

Māori urban volunteer <sup>15</sup>

”

# Recommendations for recruitment and retention

## Recruitment

**Volunteer recruitment campaigns should highlight the known motivating factors for joining - ability to contribute to the community, the social aspects and whānau atmosphere, and the opportunity for personal and professional development**

The research shows that there are four key factors which motivate potential volunteers:

1. Wanting to contribute to the community
2. Knowing someone already in Fire and Emergency
3. The social aspects and camaraderie
4. Personal and professional development.

In promoting volunteering and developing recruitment strategies, the research recommends:

- Promoting the “specialness” of volunteering at Fire and Emergency, using the terms “camaraderie” and “professionalism”.<sup>7</sup>
- Promoting the community service and self-development aspects.<sup>6</sup>
- Stratifying targeting strategies based on the motivations of diverse population groups.<sup>8,20</sup>
  - Contribution to the community, and opportunity to develop life skills, were particularly important for Māori.<sup>6,7</sup> Using the phrase “helping out” rather than “volunteering”.<sup>22</sup>

- Provide fact-based physical strength and fitness requirements for women, as they perceive them to be higher than they are.<sup>5</sup>
- Develop culturally appropriate mentoring programmes to recruit rangatahi Māori.<sup>9</sup>
- Continue to deliver cadetships, scholarships, and mentoring programmes to further support minority personnel.<sup>20</sup>

**The majority of volunteers enter Fire and Emergency through someone they know. The existing volunteer and career workforce should be viewed as roaming recruiters. Empower the existing volunteer and career workforce to act as recruitment agents**

Word of mouth, and being invited by existing volunteers, is how most volunteers enter Fire and Emergency. Potential volunteers can therefore be best reached through existing volunteer networks. This could mean:

- Profiling actual volunteers through community newsletters, newspapers, and other media.<sup>8</sup>
- Enhance support for groups like Afi Pasifika, Te Roopu, and Fire and Emergency Women, who represent people from diverse backgrounds where more retention and progression are desired.<sup>20</sup>



## Recruitment recommendations

**1** Volunteer recruitment campaigns should highlight the known motivating factors for joining - ability to contribute to the community, the social aspects and whānau atmosphere, and the opportunity for personal and professional development.

**2** The majority of volunteers enter Fire and Emergency through someone they know. The existing volunteer and career workforce could be viewed as roaming recruiters. Empower the existing volunteer and career workforce to act as recruitment agents.

# Recommendations for recruitment and retention

## Retention

**Address the volunteer-family pressures through better guidance for families on the impacts on volunteering for them, family recognition, and improving the inclusivity of fire stations**

- Give back to families who are supporting volunteers.<sup>10</sup> This can be through functional discounts.<sup>12, 13</sup>
- Base recognition on individual's preferences.<sup>12</sup>

**Recognise the work-volunteer balance through improved acknowledgement of employers**

- Recognise the contribution of employers with functional discounts.<sup>12, 13</sup>
- Provide material for volunteers to promote the importance of the work they do with local employers.<sup>8</sup>

**Make adjustments to schedules (training and callouts), equipment, ways of working, and fire station facilities, to improve participation and retention of women, Māori, and other volunteers**

- Reduce the requirements for attending training and callouts.<sup>10</sup>
- Design gear and equipment to fit women.<sup>5</sup>
- Enable Māori to “be Māori” in the fire service. This includes use and pronunciation of te reo Māori, bilingual signage, and making allowances for the significance of tangi.<sup>20</sup>

**The importance of recruiting and supporting volunteers could be led from the highest levels of leadership in Fire and Emergency. Improving the diversity, capacity and capability of volunteers, could be driven through Fire and Emergency's organisational culture**

Leadership:

- Training and support to those in leadership roles, focusing on cultural competency, inclusion and diversity, unconscious bias, and communication.<sup>8,10,20</sup>
- Policies and procedures for the selection of brigade leaders.<sup>6</sup>
- Leadership take a “hands on approach” and have more high-ranking officials engage with and visit volunteer fire stations.<sup>7</sup>
- Greater accountability for diversity practices from those in managerial and leadership positions.<sup>20</sup>

Organisational Culture

- Enable volunteers access to opportunities to develop communication skills, assertiveness skills, “soft skills”, social skills, and leadership and management training.<sup>11,13</sup>
- Promote volunteers into leadership and management positions.<sup>7</sup>
- Transparent and unbiased appointment processes across the volunteer workforces.<sup>20</sup>



## Retention recommendations

- 1** Address the volunteer-family pressures through better information and guidance for families on the impacts on volunteering for them, family recognition, and improving the inclusivity of fire stations.
- 2** Recognise the work-volunteer balance through improved acknowledgement of employers.
- 3** Make adjustments to schedules (training and callouts), equipment, ways of working, and fire station facilities, to improve participation and retention of women, Māori, and other volunteers.
- 4** The importance of recruiting and supporting volunteers could be led from the highest levels of leadership in Fire and Emergency and improving the diversity, capacity and capability of volunteers, could be driven through Fire and Emergency's organisational culture.

# Recommendations for future research

## Future research

### **While there is a large body of research on Fire and Emergency volunteers there are still gaps in knowledge in particular communities**

Updated in-depth research could be undertaken on the volunteer journey for Māori, what works in recruiting and retaining Māori volunteers, and how a Te Ao Māori approach could be implemented. (Using Kaupapa Māori research approaches.)

Researchers noted that there was a gap in qualitative studies highlighting the experiences of women working and volunteering within Fire and Emergency.<sup>19</sup>

- The last piece of research was undertaken in 2003<sup>5</sup>, and it will be important to understand to what extent barriers and challenges experienced then still remain.

There are also opportunities to conduct depth research in other communities.

### **The value of volunteerism study could be updated and extended**

The study which articulated the value of the contribution from the volunteer fire brigade used data from 2007. The study could be updated, and extended. Social benefits could be quantified, and a more dynamic picture of value could be presented (rather than point-in-time, static analysis).



## Recommendations for future

- 1** In-depth research on the volunteer journey for Māori, what works in recruiting and retaining Māori volunteers, and how a Te Ao Māori approach could be implemented.
- 2** Address the gap in recent qualitative studies which highlight the experiences of women volunteers (and workers) within Fire and Emergency.
- 3** Update and extend research on the value and contribution of the volunteer fire brigade.

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