

Engaging the Community in Ambulance Service Delivery

Brown T^{1*} & Cunnington D²

¹ Queensland Ambulance Service, Department of Emergency Services, Australia

² Queensland Local Ambulance Committee Advisory Council, Australia

Abstract

The Queensland Ambulance Service was borne out of local communities being committed to ensuring the safety of its members more than 100 years ago. Over the years these local advocates have evolved into Local Ambulance Committees. These committees have been instrumental in establishing a state-wide ambulance service (the Queensland Ambulance and Transport Brigade in the early 1900s) and later the transition of the service to the Queensland State Government (formation of the Queensland Ambulance Service in 1991).

Local Ambulance Committees are a unique community engagement mechanism. The committees are made up of members of the community who take an active interest in the provision of ambulance services in their area, actively participating in the promotion, enhancement and expansion of ambulance services.

There are currently 180 Local Ambulance Committees across the state, involving over 1500 volunteers. This is a well-established model with local committees linking with the regional management structure and supported by a state-wide advisory council.

In the past, the primary focus of Local Ambulance Committees was fundraising to support local service delivery. More recently, with the introduction of Community Ambulance Cover, Local Ambulance Committees now focus on their community engagement role — acting as advocates for their community and the ambulance service. Local Ambulance Committees have taken on new challenges and are expanding their focus on community safety outcomes and awareness activities.

This is a true example of community participation, engagement and empowerment. Local Ambulance Committees provide a fantastic link between a large government agency and local people.

Keywords

Government, community, partnerships, ambulance, service delivery

Introduction

For service delivery agencies of government to plan and deliver responsive services to the community, they must listen to and engage their communities. Community engagement is about developing

genuine partnerships with communities that allow people to participate in decision-making regarding the development and delivery of government policy and services.

Community engagement assists in identifying potential issues, options and solutions in relation to service delivery, and allows the community to be better informed, reduces the level of misconception or misinformation and ensures commitment and greater ownership of the final decision by the community.

The Queensland Ambulance Service is charged with the responsibility of providing the highest standard of patient transport and pre-hospital care. The Queensland Ambulance Service is also responsible for meeting, in a professional manner, expectations of the community when responding to requests for service, especially in regard to quality of service, and competency and efficiency in performance of the service.

The Queensland Ambulance Service places great emphasis on the value of community liaison and has a long history of involving the community in their decision-making processes. Queensland Ambulance Service is able to draw on a broad range of skills, knowledge and practical abilities of over 1500 volunteers throughout Queensland who are part of a network of Local Ambulance Committees, to ensure that the services it provides meet the needs of individual communities.

This paper provides an overview of Local Ambulance Committees and how they are engaged in the delivery of ambulance services in Queensland.

Background

Civil ambulance services commenced in Queensland in 1892 with the establishment of the City Ambulance Service in Brisbane. Communities throughout Queensland quickly realised the benefits of having a local ambulance service, and over the next 40 years services were established in many towns and cities. A local committee independently administered each service.

As demand for ambulance services grew and the operation of the service became more complex, individual committees began networking for mutual cooperation and support. This led to the establishment of a State Executive for Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade Committees in 1967.

The Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade State Executive was eventually rationalised, with committees forming geographic zones. Each zone was represented on a new state advisory committee called the State Council of the Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade.

In 1986 the State Council was further rationalised under new state government legislation and the Queensland Ambulance Services Board was established.

Following the Parliamentary Select Committee of Inquiry into Ambulance Services in June 1991, the board and all Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade Committees were abolished. Queensland Ambulance Service was established as a single state service under the management of a commissioner, and operated as a division of the Bureau of Emergency Services within the portfolio of Police and Emergency Services. Other divisions within the bureau were Queensland Fire Service, State Emergency Service and State Counter Disaster Service.

In 1993 the bureau was abolished and Queensland Emergency Services was established as a department in its own right. In 1996, with a change in government, the decision was made to rename the Queensland Emergency Services as the Department of Emergency Services.

Although all Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade Committees were abolished, the need to maintain close links with the community was acknowledged. To this end, the *Ambulance Service Act 1991* provided for the establishment of Local Ambulance Committees. There are many former Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade Committee members serving on Local Ambulance Committees today.

Local Ambulance Committees

Local Ambulance Committees are made up of members of the community who take an active interest in the provision of ambulance services in their area. There are currently 180 Local Ambulance Committees across the state, involving over 1500 volunteers.

Membership of committees is generally open to people residing in a particular area that are over the age of 18. Committees usually attract people who are well known and respected within their community, have an interest in ambulance service delivery or have been impacted upon by the ambulance service in some way, or people who simply want to contribute something to their community. Representation on committees currently includes lawyers, politicians, ex-ambulance officers, teachers, health professionals, local council representatives, business people, and representatives from other emergency service providers such as police, fire and state emergency service, rotary or lions club members, mothers, carers, etc.

With the extensive community knowledge and networks available on Local Ambulance Committees, they are in an ideal position to identify the needs and expectations of the community, offer other options to achieve a desired outcome and raise issues that may not have been considered. This is considered vital to ensure that we have an efficient and effective ambulance service that meets the needs of each individual community.

Local Ambulance Committees also play an important role in creating safer communities, particularly through their involvement in the delivery and promotion of community safety messages and initiatives, such as first aid training, injury prevention and awareness of our emergency number, triple zero (000).

The functions of a Local Ambulance Committee, as set out in the *Ambulance Service Act 1991*, are:

- to liaise between the community it represents and Queensland Ambulance Service
- to promote community participation in and awareness of ambulance services
- to provide advice to the Commissioner in respect of ambulance services in the community it represents
- to undertake fundraising activities for the benefit of ambulance services in the community it represents
- to manage money held on trust for the benefit of ambulance services in the community it represents
- such other functions as the minister agrees to.

Local Ambulance Committees retain an estimated \$5 million in funds, which are managed on behalf of the community. Contributions of up to \$2 million are made annually in addition to items of equipment purchased directly by Local Ambulance Committees and donated to the local station. Since the formation of Queensland Ambulance Service, Local Ambulance Committees have contributed over \$10 million to Queensland Ambulance Service.

Since the introduction of the Community Ambulance Cover, and therefore the establishment of a sustainable funding base, Local Ambulance Committees have been shifting their focus from fundraising to concentrate more on providing advice and feedback on the delivery of ambulance services and promoting greater awareness of ambulance service delivery and community safety.

Engagement methods

A number of mechanisms exist to enable Queensland Ambulance Service to engage with Local Ambulance Committees at various levels.

Local

The first level of engagement is at the local level. Local Ambulance Committees liaise directly with the officer-in-charge of the ambulance station. Each committee is required to meet at least six times a year. The officer-in-charge, or a designated staff member, is invited to attend meetings to provide an update on activity levels and performance of the service in the local area and an overview of state initiatives or policies that affect service delivery in the local area, and obtain feedback from the committee on the delivery of services in the local area.

If concerns or issues can not be resolved at the local level, the chain of command enables the issue to be raised at the area, regional or state level respectively. Local Ambulance Committees can also

discuss issues with their Queensland Local Ambulance Committee Advisory Council regional representatives (as outlined further on).

Regional

The second level of engagement is at the regional level. Regional Assistant Commissioners, in conjunction with Queensland Local Ambulance Committee Advisory Council regional representatives and other Local Ambulance Committee representatives, convene regional conferences each year to inform committees and obtain feedback and input into the future direction of ambulance services in their region.

Regions also conduct regular area meetings and/or regional reference group meetings, which are attended by the regional management team and Local Ambulance Committee members.

State

There are a number of mechanism that enable committees to provide feedback and input into the delivery of ambulance services at a state level.

Local Ambulance Committees complete an annual Quality of Service Survey to report on the level of satisfaction with ambulance services in their community and their interaction with the Queensland Ambulance Service as a community representative serving on the Local Ambulance Committee.

The Commissioner's Local Ambulance Committee Reference Group was established in 1995 to provide advice directly to the Commissioner on Queensland Ambulance Service policy, standards and strategies. The group consists of 14 members, two members from each of the seven regions. The members are elected by Local Ambulance Committees within each region. The group meets at least three times per year and additional meetings are held as required. The Commissioner and his senior executives attend all meetings.

The Commissioner's Local Ambulance Committee Reference Group was renamed the Queensland Local Ambulance Committee Advisory Council in 2002 and the role was expanded to enable the council to provide support and advice to Local Ambulance Committees.

The Commissioner, in conjunction with the Queensland Local Ambulance Committee Advisory Council and other Local Ambulance Committee representatives, convenes a State conference every second year to inform committees, and obtain feedback on the quality of ambulance services and input into the future direction of ambulance services.

Each Local Ambulance Committee is encouraged to send at least one committee member to conferences. The Minister for Emergency Services, Director-General for Emergency Services,

Commissioner, senior executives and a selection of managers from across the state also attend the two-day conference.

Support mechanisms

To enable Local Ambulance Committees to carry out this important role and to ensure that the Queensland Ambulance Service is getting the best possible advice and assistance from this group, a number of areas of support have been established within the service.

The Community Services Unit, incorporating the Local Ambulance Committee Coordination Area, provides support to Local Ambulance Committees at a State level. The role of this area is to:

- implement and evaluate policy on the relationship between Queensland Ambulance Service and Local Ambulance Committees
- provide the interface between Queensland Ambulance Service and Local Ambulance Committees
- facilitate the provision of information to Local Ambulance Committees on developments within Queensland Ambulance Service that are of a strategic nature or impact on the provision of ambulance services within the community
- liaise with Regional Assistant Commissioners and Local Ambulance Committees on financial management, constitutional obligations and regulatory provisions of relevant Acts and Regulations
- identify, develop and provide education for Queensland Ambulance Service staff in respect to the community interface.

Local Ambulance Committees are supported in each of the seven regions by Regional Community Services Units, Area Directors and the Officer in Charge of the ambulance station.

The Department of Emergency Services' Community Engagement Unit also provides advice and assistance to enhance the role and functioning of Local Ambulance Committees, and their partnership with Queensland Ambulance Service.

Conclusion

More responsive government services can be delivered by building effective partnerships between government service providers and communities, as has been demonstrated by the partnership between Queensland Ambulance Service and Local Ambulance Committees.

Local Ambulance Committees provide the community with a mechanism to enhance the delivery of ambulance services at the local, regional and state level.

A critical success factor for Local Ambulance Committees is the commitment of the Minister, Director-General and Commissioner to the committees, and acknowledgement of the committees as an effective community engagement mechanism for the Queensland Ambulance Service. As volunteers,

it is important that Local Ambulance Committee members receive high-level support and recognition, and have access to the organisation's decision-makers.