

Fired Up About Community Safety

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Abstract

The Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) is a fully professional community safety organisation. Comprising 1500 firefighter staff and 49 fire stations in the Melbourne area, it operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The MFB has a targeted response time of 7.7 minutes and achieved the highest percentage of fire containment to the room of origin among the fire services in Australia. The number of preventable fire deaths is at an all time low: three for the past two consecutive years.

These results have not only been achieved by effective response, but also through the MFB's role in community education and advocacy: community engagement through fire safety education and campaigns for high risk groups; a regulatory role in the built environment; and continuous lobbying for enhanced fire safety regulations, standards and codes.

Recently the MFB has endorsed an all-of-organisation Community Engagement Strategy to further enhance our effectiveness in the area of reducing community risk. The objectives of the strategy include: further community consultation; providing information, skills and resources that empower people to take an appropriate level of action for their own safety and risk management; further strategic partnership building with communities and key stakeholders; and increased training and resources for firefighters in working with diverse communities.

Our key strength in community engagement is the work done by our firefighters within their local communities. An excellent case study of the local work being undertaken is our Heidelberg Fire Station, located in an area with a wide range of hazards and risk groups. The demographic includes a high concentration of newly-arrived migrants, various socio-economic groups, light industry, hospital and a university campus with a high proportion of overseas students. The Heidelberg firefighters have employed a range of strategies to engage with these many and varied communities including fire station open days, regular segments on ethnic radio, special programs for international students, liaising with owners of local factories and involvement with local hospitals in evacuation and decontamination drills.

The combination of an organisational framework and committed firefighters working with local communities to identify and address local issues of concern places community engagement as a key corporate direction of the MFB.

Keywords

Emergency services, firefighters, organisational capacity building, organisational strategy, local case study

1. Introduction

The Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) is a community safety organisation with a proud 112-year history, committed to providing world-class protection from fire and other emergencies in the Metropolitan Fire District of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. The MFB protects 1096 square kilometres across metropolitan Melbourne, property valued at close to \$200 billion, vital community infrastructure and, during daylight hours, over three million residents, workers and visitors. This is achieved by 1540 career firefighters who, working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, provide community protection, education services and emergency response from 47 strategically located fire stations, four Zone Offices and specialist departments and more than 200 corporate and technical staff who provide essential services to the organisation and the community.

MFB firefighters provide rapid and effective emergency response to the community including:

- suppression of all types of fires
- structural collapse and rescue
- high angle rescue
- road accident rescue
- emergency medical response
- industrial accidents
- hazardous material handling and storage incidents including chemical, biological and radiological emergencies.

The MFB is rightfully proud of its 112-year history and record as a community safety organisation. The MFB provides excellence in emergency prevention and preparedness and appropriate emergency response that is among the best in the world. As well as maintaining its targeted response time of 7.7 minutes, the MFB has also achieved the highest percentage of fire containment to the room of origin among the fire services in Australia. The number of preventable fire deaths in the past four years has ranged from three to seven. These results have not only been achieved by effective response, but also through the MFB's role in community education, fire safety campaigns, a regulatory role in the built environment and continuous lobbying for enhanced fire safety regulations, standards and codes. Firefighters are also trained in advanced first aid to support the Metropolitan Ambulance Service and attend life-threatening medical emergencies as part of the Emergency Medical First Responder Program. The MFB has strong partnerships with state and local government, service providers, community stakeholder groups, other emergency service organisations and private industry

throughout the Metropolitan Fire District, on prevention and preparedness initiatives that are critical to ensuring that the MFB is an effective community safety organisation.

Importantly, the MFB is also rated highly by the community in terms of trust, reliability and service delivery standards. People view the local fire station as an important part of their community and firefighters are one of the most highly respected professions in the community. All of these factors provide a solid foundation for our firefighters to work with their diverse communities in reducing risk and increasing safety.

2. Working with community and government: community engagement at the MFB

Building on its excellent reputation as an emergency response and community safety organisation, the MFB in 2004 endorsed a Community Engagement Strategy to: further enhance its effectiveness in reducing community risk; better integrate its activities, programs and partnerships; and more effectively work with the community it serves.

There were a number of drivers that lead to the organisation's desire to work more collaboratively and effectively with the community and to the development, endorsement and implementation of this strategy.

- Firefighters were already involved in an enormous amount of community engagement work through their emergency response roles and also through their work with schools, older people's groups, multicultural groups and others too diverse to mention
- Firefighters have a very positive reputation with the community, being the second most trusted profession, after Ambulance Officers
- The MFB has a very strong sense of community and culture itself due to the nature of its work and service
- With 47 fire stations strategically located around metropolitan Melbourne, staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the MFB is by its nature 'part of the community'
- With the increasingly diverse nature and complexity of our community, the importance of knowing the community and their needs has also increased. The value of local solutions to local problems is being acknowledged as far more effective than a 'one size fits all' approach.

The purpose of the Strategy, therefore, became to provide the framework to better coordinate a number of independent initiatives across the organisation, identify initiatives that could be replicated across the organisation, provide a better evidence base for our work with community and government, encourage cross-department initiatives and establish a mechanism for benchmarking and reporting that would allow us to better evaluate and improve our outcomes.

The strategy is underpinned by two broad-based approaches:

- The building of an infrastructure that supports and implements throughout the organisation the principles and practices of community engagement
- The development and implementation of station-based activities including Station Community Safety Plans, the purpose of which is to ensure that risks in a station's maintenance area are identified and addressed in a timely and structured manner. Stations will work with local communities at a variety of levels to identify and implement local solutions to local risks.

3. Principles of working with community and government

In developing and implementing the MFB's Community Engagement Strategy, the following principles were adopted:

3.1 What is a community?

In defining community, it is generally agreed that communities fall into two categories:

1. Geographic communities — people living in close proximity to one another
2. Communities of interest and identity — people who are grouped together by a shared characteristic or interest. This could be:
 - ethnicity or membership of a particular cultural group
 - religion, age, gender or sexual preference
 - disability
 - occupation or workplace
 - a particular interest or hobby
 - a shared experience
 - membership of an organisation
 - pursuit of a common social cause.

The MFB also needs to engage with agencies, statutory authorities, service providers and the like who also have responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of the communities listed above. For the purpose of the MFB's Community Engagement Strategy, these agencies are also considered 'communities'.

3.2 What is community engagement?

The MFB has adopted the following definition of community engagement:

“working with communities to identify their needs and to exchange information, skills and knowledge about fire, related safety and emergency management issues. Working together can help communities become more confident and self-reliant and help the MFB become more aware of how most effectively to ‘protect the community’.”

3.3 How do we achieve community engagement?

The MFB undertakes many forms of community engagement throughout the whole organisation. These include the following:

- *Public relations*
Building or creating a preferred image for the organisation — one that reflects the full range of our responsibilities and activities
- *Communication*
Providing information for various communities in a range of different and appropriate ways. (For a number of people, the provision of information is often the only form of community engagement they need or want to participate in.)
- *Community education*
Developing and delivering targeted programs and initiatives for high-risk groups or relevant to high-risk issues
- *Consultation*
Seeking advice and input from relevant communities when appropriate to determine needs and appropriate responses to those needs
- *Participation*
Involving communities actively in relevant issues to identify priorities, develop solutions and in so doing empower them to accept some responsibility for their own safety.

4. Strategy implementation

The five key objectives of the Community Engagement Strategy, adopted in August 2004, are:

- develop an all-of-organisation approach to enhance our engagement with the community and support our firefighters working with the diverse communities represented in their local area
- consult with a wide range of communities at station, zone and corporate levels
- assist communities with acquiring and using information, skills and resources that empower them to take an appropriate level of action for their own safety and risk management
- encourage further strategic partnership building and leverage off relevant existing programs/initiatives of government and other parties, statutory authorities and peak bodies involved in community engagement and community development
- provide staff with appropriate additional skills and resources to more effectively identify local community risks and work with relevant communities to reduce those risks.

The following early initiatives give an indication of the range and scope of the strategy which, over its three-year life, will help to build more strategic and sophisticated approaches to risk management and improved community safety in the metropolitan Melbourne fire district:

- The establishment of an inter-departmental committee to oversee the development and implementation of the strategy and promote the principles and practices of community engagement throughout the entire organisation

- The development and implementation of a framework for community consultation, including surveys, which is linked to the corporate planning process and the development of new programs
- A commitment to action research that actively feeds knowledge and insight gained from research projects into tangible community education initiatives — specifically this involves research with our state-wide Accident Research Centre, recommendations from a study undertaken on fire fatalities by the Coroners' Court and ongoing work with Victoria's major Adult Burns Unit
- The development of a number of key sustainable partnerships that help us to address the identified fire safety needs of some of our highest at risk groups. Three of the most noteworthy are:
 - a partnership with an inner city Indigenous Health Service to address their fire safety needs
 - a partnership with two local government areas who have identified personal safety for their older residents as a key platform for action
 - work with a Horn of Africa Women's leadership group which includes training and an exchange of information, which will assist these women to build bridges between the fire service and their community.
- The development of protocols and procedures around the use of interpreters and translators; the conduct of cross cultural awareness sessions at our fire stations; the attendance of firefighting staff at a number of community engagement conferences, workshops and courses; and commitment from our Training and Education Department to include community engagement components in all recruit and promotional courses
- A pilot of our Station Community Safety Plans at four selected fire stations. The firefighters will be prioritising the risks in their area and working with the local community to develop local solutions to these identified risks.

5. Case study

Most of the material presented in this paper to this point focuses on the organisational framework and capacity building that will improve the MFB's approach to community engagement. Underpinning this work is a strong acknowledgement of the enormous amount of community engagement work that our firefighters have been and are undertaking at a local level at each of our fire stations.

An excellent case study of the work of on-shift firefighters in the area of community engagement occurs at Heidelberg Fire Station. Heidelberg Fire Station is a single-truck station that is staffed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year by career fighters. Four shifts operate with a minimum of three firefighters per shift, which rotates over an eight-day period.

The town of Heidelberg is situated 12 kilometres northeast of the central business district of Melbourne and has a population of 53,496. The station's maintenance area covers approximately 28.91 square kilometres.

Within this area resides a diverse group of people. There is a broad cross-section of housing that ranges from government subsidised housing (including migrant housing) to million dollar estates. Approximately 15 per cent of this community has migrated here, predominantly from Italy and Greece and more recently from the Horn of Africa. Also within the station's maintenance area are all forms of industry, a number of hospitals including the recently completed Mercy Austin medical precinct — the largest in Victoria — several large shopping centres and all levels of schooling from pre-school to university.

The crew at this station is particularly proactive in the area of working with this community by identifying key at risk groups and key risks and working to minimise these in a variety of ways.

Part of the role of the firefighter is to develop a good understanding of the turnout area for which the station is responsible. To identify at-risk premises and document their relevant hazards and risks, for example, enables the fire service to better respond in the event of an emergency. This program is known as pre-fire/incident planning and includes visiting and documenting potentially at risk premises such as kindergartens, schools, factories shopping centres, hospitals or any alarmed building.

During such an inspection at a transport storage warehouse company, the owner who had previously had contact with a centrally administered department specialising in the safe storage and handling of dangerous goods, indicated that he would like to create a relationship with the local fire station. He perceived that he would be better serviced by the local firefighters as they were the personnel who would be attending any emergency call for assistance.

This raised the question for the crew as to how their individual work site linked with its local communities while at the same time dovetailed with the important and necessary work of the centrally located industry regulating departments. This question enabled the Heidelberg firefighters to develop and trial an initiative in a move towards engaging their local community. This was an example where the needs of the local community, in this case the owner of the business, became a priority and the local firefighters negotiated with the central agency to be the first contact. The local firefighters would be the conduit between the business and the 'expert' department rather than the other way around.

Another example of working with local community arose over several months as the firefighters identified a trend of the increased incidence of fires in a particular area where newly arrived migrants from the Horn of Africa were relocated. During the mid 1990s government housing

was allocated for the settlement of migrants from the Horn of Africa, Somalia, to Australia, specifically Heidelberg.

These migrants were in the early stages of assimilation into their new community and were still coming to terms with the change in lifestyle that comes with migrating to a new country. Firefighters discovered through attending increased numbers of fires that these people had been using open fires on the floors of their residences for heating and cooking.

The firefighters contacted the local council, which facilitated contact with the local police who had also become aware of the cultural differences and the need to establish some processes of safety education. With the assistance of the Somalian community elders, a number of fire safety meetings were held culminating with a 'Somalian Day' at the local secondary college in conjunction with the local police. Both at the meetings and on the day, firefighters spoke about relevant issues pertaining to fire safety, communication and creating an appreciation of the different cultures and the complexities of positive cultural integration. Because there are issues around fear of people in uniform, both the firefighters and police were involved in a number of friendly games of basketball with the Somalian attendees. This helped to break down the barriers and develop some personal interaction between the groups. These initiatives resulted in increased trust and exchange of social culture on both sides and pleasingly a statistical reduction in repeat fires of this group. Interestingly, some time later, the same crew also attended a car accident that involved a number of these same people. They remembered the firefighters from their previous work with them, which helped greatly in dealing with the accident.

As seen in the previous example of changing demographics, fire calls can be a good indicator of change within your local community. The housing component of the local university, La Trobe University, traditionally accommodated local students. This has changed with university expansion and accommodation units designed and built for full-fee paying overseas students, predominantly from Asia.

These overseas students were coming for a three to six-month Masters of Business Administration course. Because of the short-term nature of their stay, these students were focussed on study so assimilation was not necessarily an important factor for their stay.

As students settled into the accommodation, the firefighters noticed an alarming number of fire calls and false alarms to the premises. The fires mainly involved cooking appliances that the students brought from home and used to prepare meals and snacks within their rooms. Not only was this practice of cooking in sleeping quarters a fire hazard, but the appliances the students were using didn't comply with the Australian Standard. When firefighters arrived at

these calls there was a definite perception of fear on the part of the students. Initially firefighters were puzzled with this reaction but as time passed they began to understand it.

La Trobe Uni Accommodation, which managed the students' accommodation, had become frustrated with the number of fires and false alarms and had continually warned the students about the incurred MFB false alarm costs and the correct use of the facilities. This in turn created a feeling of uneasiness amongst the students, eventuating in students hiding evidence of a fire even though there were obvious signs a fire had occurred. It got to the point that whenever firefighters arrived on scene a number of the students would hide.

Firefighters discussed with accommodation management a possible solution to reduce the call rate and improve the students' safety. Rather than making the students fearful of the cost of the fire and the presence of firefighters, the solution would involve an education program as part of an induction day for students. The pilot program would become known as UNI-SAFE.

Within the first week of a student's arrival on campus the student would receive a one to two-hour program on fire safety education. The firefighters utilised an interpreter and several photographs of the students' accommodation to make the delivery more relevant. They delivered the program on campus to help assimilate the students to their surrounding environment.

The program included:

- basic fire and smoke behaviour
- evacuation procedures and points
- installed fire protection equipment, such as smoke alarms, extinguishers, exit signs and evacuation points
- the importance of designated areas for specific uses, such as cooking, washing, studying and sleeping
- practical scenarios involving students, staff and firefighters.

Most importantly the firefighters explained they were there to help students in the event of an emergency incident. They perceived this as being of utmost importance as the students previously related their uniforms to retribution for their actions.

The UNI-SAFE program resulted in a reduced number of fires and false alarms at the university as well as increased safety to the students. This also created improved relations between management, students and the local fire station. Greater understanding of the cultural differences and needs of staff, students and emergency service workers changed the working perceptions and relations for the future.

Another role of the local firefighter is to conduct location inspections of high-risk premises once a month. This gives firefighters an enhanced understanding of:

- the existence of safety requirements
- areas of risk and changes of risk relative to appropriate storage of dangerous materials
- complex alarm monitoring systems and emergency incident management systems
- site and building layouts of large high-risk premises particularly complexes such as hospitals, manufacturing plants and shopping centres.

By maintaining this knowledge in the event of an emergency, firefighters are able to deal with the emergency more effectively and efficiently.

During one such visit to the Heidelberg Medical Precinct — which is made up of the Austin Hospital, Mercy Maternity Hospital, Warringal Private, various out-patient clinics, clinical teaching buildings and university research centres — firefighters uncovered a faulty fire alarm panel. This meant that one complete building had no fire detection system. Firefighters raised concerns with the hospital management who reluctantly advised of another two buildings with 'out-of-order' fire detection systems. The reason for the failure was attributed to storm damage and the redevelopment of the hospital site.

Due to the high risk to life and property in the event of an incident in any one of these buildings, the firefighters saw a need to act to rectify this situation and contacted the organisation's Structural Fire Safety Department. Under normal circumstances this department would enforce changes through legislation with the local building surveyor or, in this case, the Minister for Planning. The officer in charge of the station, however, felt that there was an advantage in opening up communication with the engineers at the hospital to try to form an ongoing relationship to hopefully benefit all concerned. The firefighters initiated a number of meetings at the local fire station with hospital engineers, occupational health and safety representatives, security staff and MFB structural fire safety engineers to try and create a workable and ongoing solution that would be agreeable to all parties. All communication was now disseminated through a single contact, the station officer at the local fire station. He kept the other shifts and adjoining stations up to date with ongoing developments disseminating relative information to key stakeholders. Once again, a more local approach to an identified risk brought about a better solution for all those involved.

The solution came in two forms:

1. The hospital would establish a working time frame with fire protection contactors to reinstate the detection systems to the three buildings. The unprotected areas/buildings would be patrolled by security staff at regular intervals throughout the day and night. If an incident was found they would contact the MFB directly by calling 000. The hospital would keep in

contact with the local fire station notifying of progress shortfall and any ongoing developments.

2. The MFB would increase its response to the hospital in the event of an emergency call from two fire trucks to three. The local station maintained contact with the Structural Fire Safety department and utilised their expertise when required. The local station also increased the frequency of inspection to monitor developments first hand.

These processes remained until all alarm and fire protection systems were reinstated. Due to a subsequent risk assessment on the hospital precinct by the MFB the three-truck response was maintained for all emergency incidents.

The course of events has resulted in an ongoing line of communication between the local station and the hospital, which in turn created a solid working relationship of trust and respect between both parties. Other outcomes included:

- enhanced safety for staff and patients due to increased fire protection
- improved communication enabled administration of advice relative to emergency service requirements within the hospital grounds, e.g. vehicle access
- the Structural Fire Safety Department gained additional assistance from the local station
- an invitation by the building contractor upon completion of the redevelopment of the hospital precinct to the local crews to familiarise themselves with the facilities and the fire protection and monitoring systems.

Above all this innovative approach with open communication has developed a long-term relationship with local firefighters and hospital staff which will greatly enhance the safety of the patients and the staff at the hospital. This relationship has also opened the lines of communication for additional initiatives, which will be dealt with in a similar conciliatory manner.

The examples given are major examples of community engagement undertaken at the local station level. It is to be noted, however, that any group or individual that comes to the attention of the station will be given firefighters' time and attention. They also seek out many opportunities as it is their aim to engage with as many people within the Heidelberg station area as possible. Some smaller groups that they have recently worked with include:

- intellectually disabled nursing mothers
- intellectually disabled workshop
- Multiple Sclerosis support group
- isolated elderly
- home schooling students group.

These groups all have unique requirements with regards to fire safety and awareness and it is very satisfying to know a firefighter can make a difference to people's lives through working more closely with one's community.

5. Conclusion

Engaging the local community in prevention and risk management is only one of the many roles undertaken by the staff at the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. Emergency response is the key core business of any firefighter. This is in fact, their most essential community engagement. The community expects and deserves only the best trained firefighters to respond in a time of emergency.

In undertaking preventative work with the community, however, there are a number of challenges faced by an emergency service organisation like the MFB and, in fact, any organisation.

- The shift work nature of the job of firefighting often limits regular contact with communities. Rosters rotate from week to week, often making linking up with different community groups a challenge.
- Station staff themselves are often rotated to fulfil operational needs and this can often disrupt the continuity and commitment necessary when developing partnerships and delivering ongoing programs
- Operational staff are on call to attend emergencies and the operational logistics of an emergency service organisation often makes flexibility difficult. Often the best laid plans will be interrupted by the unpredictable nature of emergency operations and these ultimately take precedence over all else. Once an appointment is interrupted it may take several weeks to reorganise due to shift and other restraints.
- The MFB has specialist departments that work across the organisation as well as locally-based fire stations. It is important to strike and maintain the correct balance between a corporate, all-of-organisation, top-down approach and a more localised bottom-up approach.
- Engaging with the community often requires specialist skills and knowledge, so developing and maintaining ongoing and appropriate staff training is essential.

Working with government and community has been identified as one of the four key corporate directions for the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Melbourne in the coming years. The MFB takes very seriously the importance and complementarity of this work in relation to its emergency response role. The combination of an organisational framework and strategy, which aims at increasing the organisation's capacity to deliver on its corporate actions as well as the large number of committed firefighters working with local communities will ensure our success in this area to reduce risk and improve the safety of the people we serve.