

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Melbourne – Thursday 12 October 2023

MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

WITNESS

Thu-Trang Tran, Chief Executive Officer, Volunteering Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, an all-party committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament which will include recommendations to the government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and paying my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery and remind those in the room to please be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

If you are giving evidence today, all evidence that is taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

At this point I will take the opportunity to introduce myself, and committee members will also introduce themselves to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee, and I am also a Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

David ETTERS HANK: Hi, I am David Ettershank, Deputy Chair. I am from the Western Metro Region.

Melina BATH: Welcome. Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

Samantha RATNAM: Hello. Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan Region.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi, I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Hello, I am Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Ryan Batchelor, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: With that, we will now hand over to you to make your opening remarks. I think you have about 10 minutes for those. Could I also please get you to state your name and the organisation you are representing, for the Hansard record. Over to you.

Thu-Trang TRAN: My name is Thu-Trang Tran. I am the CEO of Volunteering Victoria. I too wish to acknowledge the lands of the Kulin nation on which I am here with you, and I hope whatever the outcome of Saturday we are part of a bigger story of 60,000 years of history.

Visual presentation.

Thu-Trang TRAN: Firstly, I wanted to give you, as part of my evidence, a little bit of background about our membership, which I represent. We do not just represent the interests of members; we also represent volunteers and the volunteering movement. Secondly, I will walk you through the contextual story to nuance the submission that I submitted to the inquiry. I see this as supplementary to the written submission.

By way of background, we have around about 500 members, and as you can see from the first slide, they range across many sectors, not just the community sector but we also have some corporate members and individuals. Obviously in volunteering there is a large segment in community service and development. I also recognise that we have local government members as well, because they are big sectors that engage volunteers to deliver services and support community. Each of the organisations engage quite a large number of volunteers. You can see they range from 50 small volunteer programs to over 500, recognising some of them could spread not just across some regions but across the state and nationally. This is a map of the membership by postcode. It does not really completely represent the service reach, but it gives you a feel of how far into the regions and the rural area we reach, including the metropolitan area.

With the data that we learned from the 2020 State of volunteering report, I present to you key findings that are relevant to today's inquiry: volunteering is local, volunteering engagement is community building and builds resilience – you will see this in your slides noting the motivations for volunteering and why people volunteer – and because of that, it is absolutely imperative that there is place-based soft and hard infrastructure. At the moment that soft and hard place-based infrastructure is primarily Commonwealth funded or locally funded by government or by organisations themselves. With respect to the Commonwealth funding, it is digital-based support for organisations to engage priority cohorts for the Commonwealth government – examples include new migrants, women, people with disability, young people and First Nations. In Victoria we have the opportunity to map the service delivery partnerships across the emergency management regions. The reason I flag that is that this is an asset in terms of response for recovery, and I will dovetail back to that.

Next slide. What is happening on the ground? We know that there are perennial challenges. I would imagine that you would have heard today that people are time poor, volunteering rates are dropping and, importantly from our experience as the peak body that support organisations, volunteer managers and the coordination effort required to mobilise volunteers suffer from entrenched under-resourcing and lack of strategic visibility in organisations. We have to ask the question: are we asking too much of coordinators and managers of volunteers in mobilising volunteers also for disaster response when they are barely supported for the tasks, supervision, scheduling, data entry and all the different checks? All of the above often are often on the shoulders of them doing it as a volunteer themselves, and I think you would have heard that from neighbourhood houses.

So what is happening then is that – and you will see in your deck some of the news articles that support this – the trampoline, which is the hard and soft infrastructure, is broken, it is threadbare, and that is from decades of neglect at a local level, state level and Commonwealth level. When we are tasking for surge capacity in disasters, it cannot happen without the trampoline in place. What happens is you are asking people to bounce on that threadbare fabric. You cannot bounce on threadbare fabric. And that trampoline takes years to build; it cannot be built overnight.

Next slide. An example of the ad hoc funding and the result for management of spontaneous volunteers in emergency responses – I want to emphasise spontaneous volunteers, because that is what I am speaking to – is that we have just really in the last decade and a half had two ad hoc funding events. One is HelpOUT – I do not expect you to read the text in the moment, but I will just walk you through it. The details are there for you to refer to later. HelpOUT is actually a Commonwealth initiative, and it was started just in recognition that there was a gap in the management of spontaneous volunteers in times of disasters. That was decommissioned, and there was some transitional funding by DHHS to migrate it over. Since then, there has been reticence and reservations from local councils, local volunteer resource centres and local organisations to jump on the bandwagon again, because to shift their processes and their training and then know there is no funding means that that investment in changing their practices and procedures is not continuing, and that is tough on them.

The next lot of investment we had was really prompted by COVID. It started as a response trying to mobilise volunteers in times of COVID and make it easy for them to be mobilised with the concept of a volunteer passport. The technology, the processes and the wraparound were really quickly melded together, but again after a couple of years funding, funding was cut. So that leaves the sector again with a lot of reticence and reservations, and a tech build does not solve the problem. It is the wraparound supports that build that trampoline of interaction, coordination and relationships.

Next. So I guess our submission really speaks to a need for a whole-of-government led strategy to mobilise spontaneous volunteers and to build the capacity of managers of volunteers to respond in times of disaster. It is recognition that there are emergency volunteers on the one hand. They are institutionally trained and skilled

first responders. We also need to bridge the gap of how we mobilise the hundreds of communities and thousands of community members who come out and say, 'We want to help sandbag. We want to help to clear the rubble, but we also want to help build recovery,' but they are not used to being managed in the way, say, CFA and SES are. So there is a clear, clear gap, and that has been found again and again in reports and evaluations of every funding and attempt to mobilise volunteers in the past decade and a half.

Next. Just by way of context, I thought I would introduce a framing of the volunteer landscape. There is a lot of language around formal and informal volunteers who are not affiliated, and I just wanted to say currently we are applying a certain lens to volunteering that might not work in disaster when you are mobilising spontaneous volunteers. So you have institutionally trained emergency volunteers, and you would have heard a lot from CFA and SES. You have institutional volunteers and local councils, Scouts and neighbourhood houses. They are manageable; they are used to that. You also have non-institutional volunteers in organic groups like new migrant support groups or – and you would have seen this during COVID – the neighbourly response and the virtual communities. The spontaneous volunteers obviously come from all those three, but they are different. They are there in and out, or they might be in and they go, 'Hey, I like being a volunteer. I'll stick around.' But you cannot apply a sort of human resources role-based approach to mobilising these volunteers. A strategy needs to adopt a different framing of volunteer engagement of this cohort, and we have yet to I think invest long term enough and invest enough into the volunteer engagement practices to mobilise these spontaneous volunteers.

Next. So a couple of innovations in the past couple of years during COVID crisis response were done in Melbourne's west by Volunteer West. It looked at the volunteer engagement by SES, and it looked at the volunteer engagement by the Sikh community.

The CHAIR: I am sorry, but the clock has actually beaten you for your opening remarks.

Thu-Trang TRAN: I am just going to finish now. And that is fluid volunteering. That is it.

The CHAIR: Well, what I was going to say was that I am the first questioner, so I will give you some time to finish your presentation. There you go. How about that? So continue.

Thu-Trang TRAN: Thank you. I just want to say this is something that we can do, and I will flick to the next slide. That is the end of my slides, so that is it. I was about to say fluid volunteering is a concept that we might be able to apply to spontaneous volunteers.

The CHAIR: Okay, awesome. Thank you. Thanks for your presentation. It was very comprehensive, and you have got some very clear and tangible suggestions about going forward. On a practical level, how can we make it easier for people to volunteer on a range of different levels, and how can people become aware of how they can engage in different volunteering opportunities just at a very localised level? For example, if I wanted to volunteer somewhere, I would not know where to start looking. I might know if I want to volunteer for the SES, I know about that, but if I wanted to get involved in different community-type activities, where do I start looking and how can we improve that?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Sure. I think often in the past everyone wanted a one-stop shop, and I actually say now in my peak body hat that institutional approach to volunteering is actually not matching what the community needs. There are many doors to volunteering, and you have got to keep all those doors supported. Through your local temple, through your church, through your local volunteering resource centres like Volunteer West, through local council, each of them have volunteering programs or know partners or collaborators that they can refer community members to. From the research, most volunteers come and get recruited to volunteering through word of mouth, and that is why relationships are so important and that is why the idea that people can go to a tech platform and be mobilised, they might be interested, but also that conversion rate from registering to actually being placed or accepting volunteering is far and wide in between.

The CHAIR: And what, if there is such a thing, would be the average age of volunteerism? I am assuming that younger people with families and children do not volunteer that much. Is that true? What is the average profile of a volunteer looking like these days?

Thu-Trang TRAN: According to ABS data there is actually quite a range, a spread across the ages 18 and above. That was one of the slides I think I included in your pack. But predominantly the stories that we hear on

the ground and in my personal experience, it is people who have time, and that is what the ABS shows. Volunteering is declining because people do not have time, so if you think about who has time – retirees, women who are underemployed and unemployed women. Also, in sports the picture is little bit different – parents who are involved in the actual activity themselves. So that is the official formal overlay of volunteering, but you also are missing a lot of insight into the practices in diverse communities.

The CHAIR: And does it then follow, as you are saying, that it is people with time but it is often women that are underemployed – what is the gender profile? As a volunteering base, are you finding that it is – and there will be particular sectors that might have a different split, but what is the typical profile? Is it 60 per cent women, because women are underemployed? What are you seeing in terms of gender splits?

Thu-Trang TRAN: That is in this booklet. Yes, particularly women and those that are underemployed or have a bit more time. But there are different silos and different pictures. In emergency volunteers, the formal emergency volunteers are predominantly male. So there is a gender dynamic there that is quite different to the mainstream.

The CHAIR: Okay. No worries. And the clock has beaten me, so I will pass to Mr Ettershank. Thank you for that.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your presentation. As I understand it, volunteering is declining across the country with changing lifestyles and demands of work and leisure and suchlike. I am interested in your concept of the trampoline. I guess if we were thinking about – and you talked about that being both hard and soft infrastructure. If we were looking at, for example, places like the Maribyrnong community where there is a desperate need to try and mobilise, what would be in your mind some of the priorities if one was starting to try and build the trampoline for flood-affected communities like Maribyrnong?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Absolutely, so one of the things is you actually have to build long-term relationships with the communities on which you draw for volunteers at short notice. So the local community groups, both the diverse ones, informal non-institutional ones to the institutional ones around, including your local council, Scouts and neighbourhood houses. You need physical meeting places for volunteers. One of the things I hear, because at Volunteer West I was CEO at the time, was that for volunteers it is hard for them to continue to be retained in the volunteering program when they do not have places to meet. That is the hard infrastructure. Places, meeting places, were really important, particularly for the more organic groups.

David ETTERS HANK: Is that because of the social nature of volunteering and the desire for company and for companionship as well as to contribute?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Yes, absolutely. And also just meeting others and going, ‘Hey, I’m a sports volunteer’, ‘Oh, wow.’ As you meet, you might meet someone else in the SES, and you have a conversation: ‘Oh, you volunteer at SES. I might give it a go.’ So that is kind of playing to the word-of-mouth. That is how volunteers are recruited, and that is how volunteers get retained.

David ETTERS HANK: And the soft element of it? I mean, the physical is obviously the hard element. In terms of the soft, I am trying to apply that to the Maribyrnong context.

Thu-Trang TRAN: Sure. Soft is all about relationships, both institutional and noninstitutional, so relationships between local councils and the local volunteer resources and the neighbourhood houses. For example, once every six months we have a network of the large and small volunteers and coordinators and managers of volunteers just to know who is who in the zoo. They can call upon each other and go, ‘Hey, I need 50 volunteers to come out and help at this festival,’ and then the word spreads around. So it is just really how a town square would work, and particularly in regional local areas it would work.

David ETTERS HANK: So is there a bit of a chicken and the egg there in terms of having the people who are, if you like, at the core of organising those volunteers if they are not themselves volunteers? I mean, is that part of the rub?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Yes.

David ETTERSHANK: Some of the programs you referenced, were they designed to specifically employ people to be volunteer coordinators, or were they more disaggregated, if I can put it that way?

Thu-Trang TRAN: The programs that I spoke to on the slides there – the HelpOUT program was about mobilising existing coordinators and managers of volunteers in local councils and neighbourhood houses, then building a network between them and then providing the training about how you mobilise spontaneous volunteers in a crisis context, which is very different to the day-to-day Meals on Wheels sort of program. That is the kind of soft infrastructure – that ongoing relationship building so that it can be activated. And I can give you a very clear example. During COVID there was a rallying of the multicultural community as responders to raise awareness about COVID and the VMC, the Victorian Multicultural Commission. I was on the regional advisory council. There were WhatsApp groups and also –

The CHAIR: I am sorry, but the clock has beaten us on that one. My apologies there.

Thu-Trang TRAN: I will finish that up. It was core, because we all knew each other and trusted each other and we showed up.

The CHAIR: All right, thank you. Ms Lovell with a question, please.

Wendy LOVELL: Thanks very much. We all love our volunteers in our community. They do a tremendous job, and we understand that they do that under difficulties sometimes and at a cost to themselves. Do you find that there is still more volunteerism in the regional areas of the state than in the metropolitan areas, and is that just because we have more structure around the CFA, SES, CWA and those sorts of things?

Thu-Trang TRAN: I have to say the data for me – off the top of my head, I do not know enough, because I am actually participating in a regional volunteering study by Griffith University just to understand the lay of the land and the demographics. There is data coming, so I can take that on notice, Senator.

What we do know is that volunteering plays an absolutely critical role in the regions in terms of community building and resilience, and the proportionality and the weighting of that is different to the metro because in metro there is other infrastructure around to support community. That we know.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes. Okay, terrific. I am just wondering about barriers to volunteering, apart from things like just not knowing who to apply to. For groups around some of the more modern-day things that might be barriers to volunteering – like the legalities of being involved in a group and needing to get groups incorporated, the cost of insurance et cetera – is there a role for the state government or for local government to play in actually providing some of those types of services for volunteer groups?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Absolutely. That is a wonderful question. We wholeheartedly believe that the government can provide leadership in terms of providing insurance, and that was one of the issues during the COVID response.

Wendy LOVELL: The government had the VMIA –

Thu-Trang TRAN: Yes, exactly. I was about to say, for example, if people are joining as members of Volunteering Victoria or Neighbourhood Houses and they are volunteers, they should be covered under insurance by VMIA. So making those system designs and settings to support volunteers, that would be great, particularly if we can also extend that to small groups, and that is actually a priority in our budget submission.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Lovell. Mr Batchelor with a question.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I was going to ask a sort of riff on the regional versus metro thing that Ms Lovell was talking about, so I will not pursue that now. I probably do not have any further questions, other than just a gratuitous comment that we do have a couple of great CWAs in Southern Metro.

Wendy LOVELL: Yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: So they are not limited just to the country.

Wendy LOVELL: They are more prolific for us.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: No worries. Dr Ratnam with a question, please.

Samantha RATNAM: Thanks so much for being here. This is really interesting. One thing we have been hearing various evidence around and that has been touched on in the question before as well, particularly on emergency situations, is both the response and the recovery work that is done by community, often by volunteers. Have you had direct interactions with the SES and discussed volunteering strategies, and are you providing any support or interaction with SES about how they can bolster their volunteer numbers given the likelihood of an increased volunteer workforce needed in the future?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Absolutely. I have to say that I started in my role in January this year, but I know that institutionally Volunteering Victoria has had those conversations, particularly during HelpOUT, that project, and also weVolunteer. We note that we asked to be on the volunteering consultative forum that was part of EMV, and we are currently not members. That forum has been disbanded in any event, but I think it is absolutely crucial. There are other members in the volunteering resource centre space, like Volunteer West, who did that study with SES Brimbank. So it is organic. It happens at a local level, and it also happens at a peak level.

Samantha RATNAM: Great. And does the same go for the CFA as well in terms of their volunteer numbers and supporting volunteers?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Absolutely. I have been part of the women's panel for CFA. I actually called Kylee Bates to get her views to make sure that I am representing something that is coherent across the emergency volunteering space. She was on holidays.

Samantha RATNAM: Great. From that work, do you have a sense of the kinds of resources and interventions that we should be cognisant of that could better support volunteer engagement and retention for critical services like the SES and CFA? Because we are looking at flood inquiry responses and hearing just how important those services are for response and recovery, and the community relies on them – but also going against the tide of less time for people, often retention being difficult. Have you got any insights or things to share with us about what resources and supports those kinds of organisations need to ensure they expand and support their volunteer base?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Absolutely, and again this has been thoroughly examined in one of the research papers. Volunteer engagement practice is essentially what I understand your question to be, and definitely it is about relationship building long term with communities in the area and new communities – for example, the Sikh community. So they reach beyond their typical stereotypical volunteers, but also making their own organisation an inclusive organisation. Again there is a piece of work around inclusive volunteering practices that looks at, for example, do you have accessible women's toilets in sporting clubs, which I know is an issue. The dress codes – are they open to people of, say, Muslim background and the culturally diverse? And also some of the racism, visible or non-visible, that occurs in those spaces. There is a recent study in New South Wales that actually highlighted that there is an element of racism in volunteering, and I think that is something that we have to attend to.

Samantha RATNAM: I am very glad to hear there are services like yours being able to impart that wisdom on to a number of organisations that do want to extend their volunteering base and want to support them better by using that new research and experience to inform better ways of volunteer management, so thank you very much for that.

The CHAIR: Thirty seconds.

Samantha RATNAM: I might stop there, then. I have got other questions, but I will come back if there is time. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath with a question, please.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for your presentation – most informative. One of your recommendations – it is recommendation 4 – speaks to Volunteer Victoria, so yourself, engaging in the work and responsibilities associated with being a recovery support agency as part of the state emergency management plan. Now, volunteering across the board is so very worthwhile, and we have them in our country communities, embedded in there, but if we are looking specifically around the state emergency response and the flood inquiry, can you speak to that? What do you see your role would be and how could you inform and support certainly the state emergency management plan?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Absolutely. I understand that is a piece of legislation and we are listed in the schedule, and so our role is unfunded under that arrangement. So critical pieces of assistance that are gaps are mobilising messaging and community awareness about how you can help – ‘Please don’t turn up at the disaster site: wait,’ ‘Go to your neighbourhood house and ask them what is useful, rather than think what you think is useful.’ So that holding messaging to spontaneous volunteers is a role we can play in terms of the comms. Similarly to HelpOUT, supporting the training of volunteer engagement for existing managers and coordinators of volunteers and bridging the emergency context with the general volunteer engagement context are the two key roles that we can play. I think there is a bigger coordination role that is needed in the space. I do not think we are positioned to play that role, but we can definitely mobilise also our membership and the local volunteer resource centres and support them to work alongside local councils and SES to be the local coordination around spontaneous volunteers and messaging and training and induction of volunteers. That is definitely a role we can play.

Melina BATH: Perfect, and what is springing to my mind is you have got 500 different organisations, but sitting under those are potentially thousands of volunteers.

Thu-Trang TRAN: Yes.

Melina BATH: I see the sporting clubs, and I fully identify as a mum. You know, I used to be secretary of the soccer club et cetera, but when I am not doing that on a Sunday and there is a peak issue, an emergency, then you have got contact with those workforces, we will say, to redirect them in a positive way. Is that something that you see as part of your role?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Absolutely, and this goes to Mr Ettershank’s question, which is that it can be dispersed. It does not necessarily need to be centralised and can be, again, utilising the place-based infrastructure and the relationships and the connections between those local communities, but you just need a leader, a driver, to coordinate in that place, be it local council, be it a local volunteer resource centre or local neighbourhood house. But you also need a centralised space because people do come to volunteer.

Melina BATH: A trusted source too, a trusted source for dissemination of information.

Thu-Trang TRAN: Absolutely.

Melina BATH: And the other thing that you put up there, rightly, is that people can get volunteer fatigue. Volunteers keep volunteering and they keep volunteering, and you do not want to burn them out, and that is a real factor, but you also need a lead disseminator there to support those people.

Thu-Trang TRAN: Absolutely.

Melina BATH: And we saw it in the fires. I remember I called them the Lucknow angels. They took over a hall and they were just spreading, you know, all the right way of doing things. Can I ask, how do we change fluid volunteers and embed them into other volunteerism that continues on? Is that something that is important in the work that you would do there?

Thu-Trang TRAN: I would actually suggest that fluid volunteering has its own merit. So it is a time and place and it is appropriate for that context, and if you convert them to role-based volunteering then you have got the gap. So I actually believe that each have their own –

Melina BATH: They can be separate.

Thu-Trang TRAN: intrinsic value and they are very important in the system.

Melina BATH: Yes.

Thu-Trang TRAN: As I said, multiple doors to volunteering, multiple shapes and practices.

Melina BATH: And you might just want to –

The CHAIR: Sorry, the clock has beaten us.

Melina BATH: comment, or on notice, weVolunteer, how has that impacted you, the loss of that funding, the cancellation of weVolunteer?

The CHAIR: Can you take that on notice? Ms Broad with a question, please.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much. It is very insightful. I appreciate you have got in your submission just here about the Queensland model, building local capability to manage spontaneous disaster volunteers. Can you just give a little bit of an explanation of how that works?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Sure. Exactly what Ms Bath mentioned: they basically have a spoke and hub model. So Volunteering Queensland is a disseminator and a coordinator, and they have already built that trampoline through building the relationships and the capability of coordinators and managers to take on an influx of spontaneous volunteers, so they are primed and ready. What happens is when there is a disaster, they get activated, and then there is this surge capacity in Volunteering Queensland that already knows the model, and there are already the conversations, the networking, the relationship, the six-monthly meetings that then get automatically activated, rather than trying to build the plane, fly the plane and land the plane at the same time. So that is what we want to see, and you have to have sustained local capability already in place. I think what happens with a lot of the crisis responses is the ask is when the crisis happens, and that is not the time to start building the centralised communication hub. It is not the time to start building the relationships of trust and quick dissemination to occur, particularly when you are dealing with diverse communities who might take a while to go, 'Hey, I can really do this,' and feel comfortable doing it alongside SES volunteers or CFA volunteers or the ADF.

Gaelle BROAD: That is a very valid point, because I saw at Bendigo it was set up as an emergency relief centre at the showgrounds, and people that were with the Red Cross in that formal sort of volunteer thing were permitted there, and other volunteers were turned away because they were just inundated with people. So tapping into that – and neighbourhood houses, you mentioned those. I saw at Rochester volunteers just coming from everywhere and the locals on the ground taking registrations and giving directions. What are the risks involved? It seems to me with staff, there seemed to be some people that were limited by what they could do because they were paid employees. Volunteers can go into a house and help rescue somebody, whereas there are limits on what other people can do. I heard about SES being limited with the weight of sandbags and other people having to move them along. Have you got any insights into that situation in emergencies?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Absolutely. Essentially it is a matter of risk and insurance. Volunteers, because they are outside the system of organisations and institutions, do not have to comply with the risk management policies, so volunteers are people who sacrifice their own wellbeing for the safety and the wellbeing of the community. We have to ask ourselves at some point, is that asking too much of community volunteers to take the risk upon themselves just because they are free of an organisation? I think there is an ethical issue around that, and therefore going back to the insurance, we have to be able to provide that quick assurance of insurance for people who are well meaning and go into a disaster situation. Again I go back to the community response to COVID. There was an ask of community leaders to go doorknocking and support that, but the question is institutionally I could not recommend it because there was no insurance for sick leave for those that undergo and experience COVID symptoms, and this was in the early days. So it begs the question of what the protections for spontaneous volunteers are and what the system settings like insurance are that we need to make available rapidly and assure people.

Gaelle BROAD: Are there any examples of ones that are set up that you have seen? What is Victoria's situation at the minute, because it is sort of sign at your own risk, help out at your own risk. Are there any models that you could point us to that would be good to follow?

Thu-Trang TRAN: Well, I was an ex-public policy servant, and I think there are some precedents in the idea of TAC. I remember trying to explore that, the Transport Accident Commission. If someone is injured, if there is reasonable care or reasonable diligence on the part of the person experiencing the injury, perhaps then the state can step in and provide that insurance. I think there is a light-touch model in Queensland, but I will take that on notice.

The CHAIR: And the clock has beaten us, so perfect timing. Thank you very much for coming in and providing us with your evidence today. We really appreciate you coming in.

Witness withdrew.