Volunteering Participation Among People with Disabilities: Motivation, Challenges and Emerging Issues

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Problem Context: Emergency Services Volunteering

How can we encourage more diversity among volunteers?

How can we make it more meaningful, inclusive and sustained for volunteers?



What we know from the literature

- Structural/systemic barriers
- Stigma and ableism
- Deficit narrative/discourse
- Limited understanding from managers/supervisors
- Lack of inclusive practices and accommodations



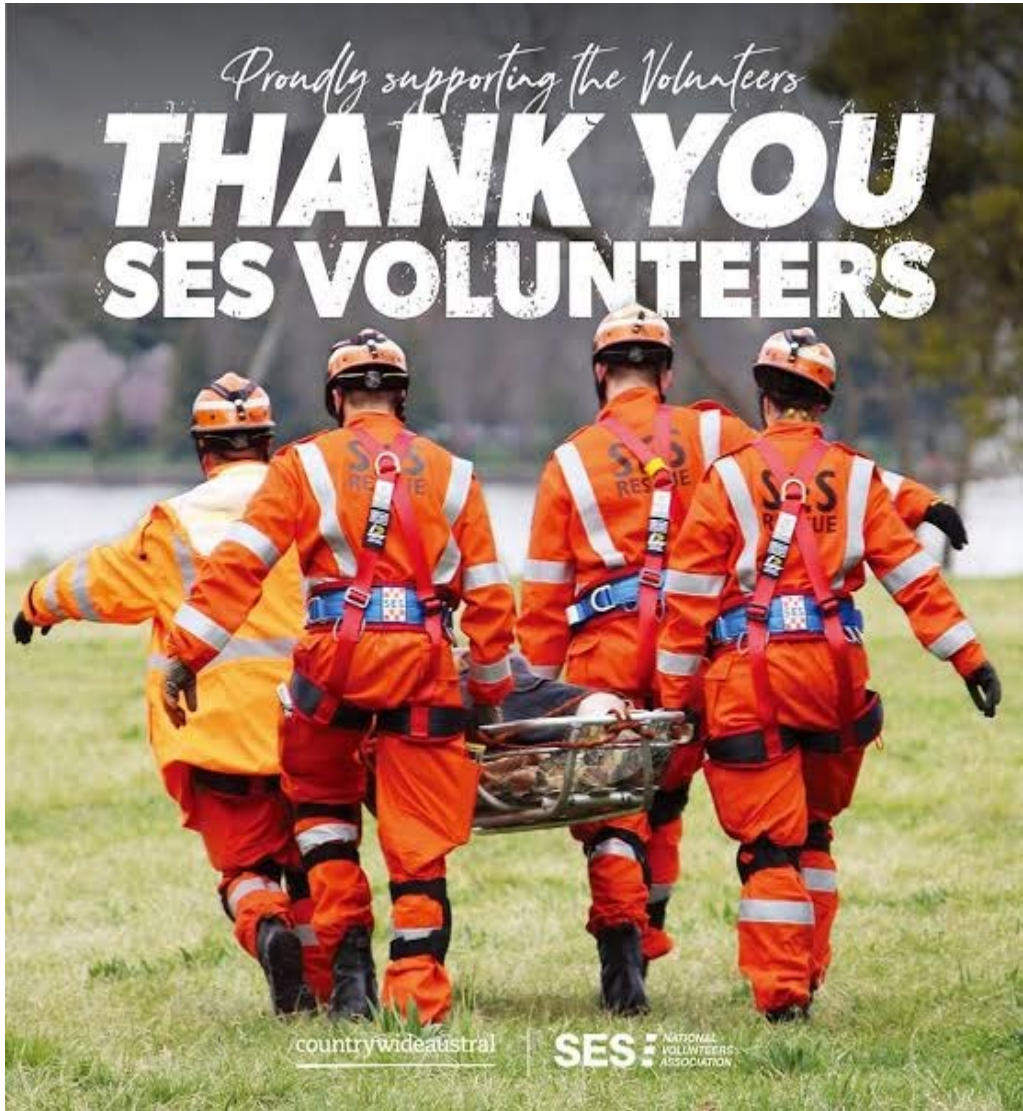
Research objectives: Understanding participation through volunteers' experiences

1. **Motivations**: what attracts people with disabilities to volunteering?

2. **Barriers/Challenges:** what undermines their ability to continue participating?

3. **Benefits and outcomes**: how does volunteering contribute to meaningful outcomes?

4. **Future/emerging issues** : what needs to be addressed or changed?



Methods and sample

- Semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis
  - 37 volunteers from 5 under-represented groups
  - 17 leaders
- 6 focus groups
- 5 site visits/stakeholder presentations (refine preliminary findings)

Under-represented groups:

- **Women**
- **Youth**
- **Disability**
- **CALD**
- **LGBTIQA+**

Focus: Lived experiences from volunteers and managers/leaders

Findings: Motivation and Enablers

Personal

- Meaningful pathways and opportunities are visible
- Build skills and leadership capabilities
- Contribute to communities

The leader/manager

- Mindsets that values contributions
- Strength-focused attitudes
- Open minded about various ways volunteers can contribute
- Collaboration to find the (non-obvious) fit

If they are not open-minded or can't picture it, they won't even advertise or accept volunteers with disabilities.

Manager knows what the person is able to do and is capable of AND what the unit is lacking…..and what the person is able to do aligns with the gaps

Findings: Challenges and Barriers

Personal

- Fear of being excluded if declare disability
- Physical disability render mandatory training impossible

The system/leaders/mamangers

- Lack of understanding of disability-specific needs and accommodations
- Ableist attitudes
- Gaps in awareness and flexibility
- Lack of discussions or collaborations to find fit

I always said that the fact that I can't walk around that well on the fire ground or whatever, but I can do ground controlling for the water bombers. I can do radio comms. I can organize the fire crew……

Fear of doing the wrong thing gets in the way of doing the right thing

Findings: Why stay?

Personal

- Sense of community and belonging
- Agency and autonomy
- Meaningful challenges
- Growth opportunities

The leader/manager

- Supports meaningful involvement
- Provides safe environment
- Willingness to invest time into finding fit
- Showing patience, care and concern

I find the sense of achievement with a lot of tasks, especially the community engagement ones, very satisfying and rewarding.

....learn the skills to be able to contribute to your community and to help people out in times of need, that gives you a lot of satisfaction as well. It gives you a sense of being useful.

Manager is always just open and full of suggestions and encouragement for her members who have health issues to take the time that they need……but have something that they can do when they come back

Findings: What do leaders/managers say?

Challenges

- Limited knowledge of how to support volunteers with disability
- Physically demanding roles can deter sign-ups
- Limited opportunities and accommodations to contribute and benefit
- Concerns about an inclusive group culture

What has worked

- Collaboratively match volunteers' abilities and interests with unit needs
- Encourage leaders to explore disability-inclusive volunteering opportunities

Future priorities

- Follow through with accommodations, assistive technology and a clear list of roles
- Provide advisors who proactively contact newcomers about support needs
- Showcase volunteers with disability and the possibilities for contributing

What does this mean?

- Work design and needs theories can be extended to ***volunteering design***
  - Autonomy, agency, mastery, purpose and meaning, relationships and belongingness

- ***BUT…..certain elements matter a lot more for sustained disability inclusion***
  - Visibility and authenticity (Signalling theory)…..*from virtue to authentic signalling*
    - Show *willingness* to understand and support (not just accommodations)
    - Understand *strengths* and aspirations
    - Move towards person-centred and *ability-focused*
    - *Collaborative* role design and fit (not always obvious)
    - Leader training and development (this is the hard bit!)

These need to be visible and experienced in practice (that is the currency)



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