

**VOLUNTEERING AND UNPAID WORK PLACEMENTS
AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW**

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Submission to the inquiry into volunteering and unpaid work placements among children and young people in NSW

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Background

The NSW State Emergency Service (NSW SES) was first formed in 1955. It is the combat agency for storm, flood and tsunami's and also assists many other emergency service organisation's. The (NSW SES) has about 10,000 volunteer members, 228 units and 17 region offices in NSW.

The NSW SES had no formalized statewide focus on engaging, attracting, developing, supporting and retaining young people until the NSW SES was provided with funding from the volunteer support package to develop a Secondary Schools Cadet Program in 2009. The subsequent success of the cadet program has led to increased interest from young people wanting to join the NSW SES and has highlighted the need to remove barriers preventing young people from being accepted into SES Units, mainly relating to supporting structure, policy, workplace culture and fear of change.

Groups of young NSW SES volunteers have combined with other emergency service volunteers to attended 2 youth forums (2010 and 2012) where recommendations were presented in reports that have been submitted to the respective organisation's CEO's. I believe that the actions that have been implemented from these recommendations have contributed significantly to an increase in the number of young people now engaging with the NSW SES.

Existing policies relating to volunteering and unpaid work placements among children and young people in NSW:

The minimum age for a NSW SES unit member is now 16, however, previously members in the 16 to 17 year age range had been restricted from attending training and operational incidents that require an overnight stay or are outside of the of the region boundary. Young people in this age group often had unit membership applications rejected because of the belief that they could not be effectively utilised until they turned 18. After consultation with the Commission for Children and Young People and SES stakeholders, NSW SES policy has now been changed to allow members aged 16 and 17 years to attend training and operational incidents that involve an overnight stay. The only restriction in place is that members in this age range must not be involved in going to real life road crash rescue incidents or similar situations that were likely to cause psychological harm.

Members in this age group still require parental or legal guardian permission to join the NSW SES as a unit member but are now considered co-workers in an adult organization where all members are governed by a code of conduct. Consequently adult members in units with 16 and 17 year old members are not required to complete a Working with Children Check. As a standard practice Criminal History Checks are still carried out on all members at the point of joining the service.

Since the above stated changes came into effect there has been a significant increase in the number of young people becoming members in the 16 and 17 year age range. A membership data snapshot was taken in 2009 that showed the NSW SES only had **43** members in the 16 to 17 year old age range. A data snapshot that was taken in June of 2013 showed there were **473** members in that age range.

Measures to encourage volunteering and foster opportunities for volunteering among children and young people in NSW, including possible incentives to volunteer:

- Agencies need to better promote the opportunities for young people to gain skills and experience in volunteer organisations eg: Through School career advisors
- Establishment of a youth advisory group within the organization (preferably with a communication channel direct to the CEO). To make sure ideas and recommendations are not filtered out before reaching decision makers.
- Introduction of awards specifically for young members.
- Removal of unwarranted restrictive policies
- Streamlining of systems relating to the engagement of young people
- Sponsorship for young people to undertake development programs eg: Leadership programs, fair access to general training courses.
- Create pathways for advancement eg: Creating junior rank structure, mentoring programs, freeing up of leadership roles (without displacing older members)
- Implement system to allow easy alignment of credits for Duke of Edinburgh programs etc.

Best practice in supporting and promoting safe opportunities for volunteering and unpaid work placements among children and young people in other jurisdictions, both in Australia and overseas

- Involve children and young people in the decision making process
- Agencies to develop a Code of Conduct
- Integrate with Schools and use Teacher supervision for younger age groups where practical
- Keep processes streamlined and non-threatening for Adults.

The role of the Commission for Children and Young People and the office of the Children's Guardian in supporting and promoting safe volunteering and unpaid work placement opportunities among children and young people in NSW;

- Advice as subject matter expert
- Relevant Training
- Updates on legislation, policy and procedure
- Provide templates for structuring procedures and instructions
- Coordinate information sharing between agencies
- Provide examples of best practice
- Help with busting myths
- Developing overarching policy to enable opportunities, not just impose restrictions.

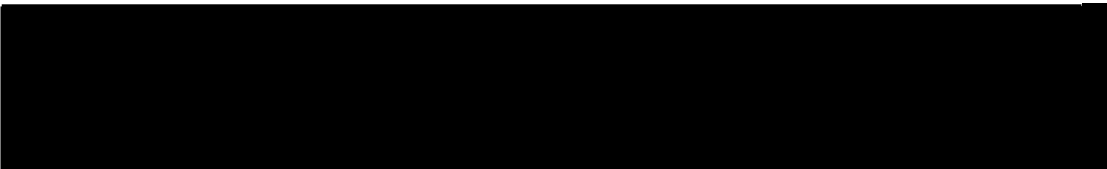
Providing the NSW Government on advice on how it can better engage with and support children and young people in volunteering and unpaid work placements

- Streamline any of the relevant regulatory systems-The New Working with Children Check is excellent. The Crim Check system is cumbersome in comparison and organizations often overuse the system by checking the same person each year with the belief that it will make their organization safer or reduce the likelihood of litigation eg: requiring volunteers and staff to complete the check every year or when changing roles or locations.
- Encourage organisations to create opportunities for young people to engage rather than creating the perception that it's too difficult.
- Sponsor and champion ongoing development programs and awards for young volunteers.
- Focus on developing opportunities for young people rather than a focus only on the risks.

Reasons I've heard as to why we should not engage young people

- They're too immature
- I don't want to be a babysitter
- They don't have enough life experience
- The risk is too high
- There's too much red tape involved
- I will have to do too much paperwork
- They wouldn't be allowed to do much
- I won't be able have a drink (alcohol) in front of them
- They won't stay for long
- I don't want to get sued if something goes wrong



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Signed



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