

With climate change bringing more extreme events, is the community spirit of volunteer firefighters enough?

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By Colleen Brown

Every Monday night for 23 years, Kingsley Jones has donned his uniform and driven to the Papakura fire station to carry out his volunteer firefighting training. Jones is one of more than 12,000 volunteer firefighters linked to 567 stations throughout the country. People like him devote hundreds of hours to serve their communities, often in the direst of circumstances, for free.

Papakura is a composite station, with paid and volunteer firefighters working alongside each other. On this particular cold, wet Monday night, a group of new recruits cluster around the back of a fire engine, concentrating on the basics, guided by skilled volunteers. The trainees are young. By the time they have completed their 12-month training period, each supported by an assigned mentor, they will have the skills and competencies needed to do the job. Written study modules and assessments are complemented by practising a range of on-the-job scenarios culminating in a 7-day intensive course. That's just for starters. As volunteers achieve basic training and move through the ranks, they can acquire a host of specialist skills along with leadership training – all in their own time.

Jones moves briskly through the station. He's 1 of 4 volunteer officers, and second in charge. His rank as station officer is the highest a volunteer can have in a composite station. His structural firefighting uniform, tucked over his boots, is at the No 1 spot in the changing room, ready to go. His intense pride in the job and his team is reflected in his eyes, gestures, voice, the words he chooses. This is his tribe.

This year, our emergency services have repeatedly been called into action as a succession of extreme weather events devastated much of the country and shook our collective

psyche. In one such episode, Muriwai Volunteer Fire Brigade members Dave van Zwanenberg and Craig Stevens were killed while responding to a landslide. During Cyclone Gabrielle, at about 10.30pm on February 13, they were digging a trench to divert water from a house when a hillside came down on them. Stevens, a competitive BMX rider and sales manager, was found trapped under part of the roof of the house, which had been pushed into the middle of the road. The 39-year-old was taken to hospital but died three days later. Van Zwanenberg's body was recovered 35 hours after the landslide. A veterinarian, he was 41. Both were married with two young children.

After continued deluges, flooding and slips that cut off communities, we're heading for a summer of drought and heightened fire risk, likely exacerbated by strong winds. Climate change is posing questions about emergency services' planning, preparedness, training, funding and capability.

And not everything is as spick and span as Jones' uniform in this vital service that is so reliant on the community spirit of volunteers. Problems arising from the 2017 restructuring of the fire service into Fire and Emergency New Zealand (Fenz), and concerns about the culture of the new organisation, are still being worked through. The volunteers remain worried that while their paid colleagues are covered by ACC for long-term occupational diseases, including many cancers and lung disease, they are not.

The weather emergencies have raised questions about preparedness. An independent review into the Muriwai fatalities noted that Fenz "did not identify landslides as a hazard" in its training programmes. It recommended Fenz review policy, procedures and training programmes around landslides and review its critical risk management programme.

As the *Listener* went to press, more details were emerging of the "mad scramble" to prepare for Cyclone Gabrielle, with RNZ reporting that urban search and rescue and water rescue teams were unable to source enough utes and trailers to move equipment in and out of flooded areas. Staff shortages in call centres, planning and logistics also hampered Fenz's coordination efforts.

Thinly spread

And 6 years after the restructuring, some regions are yet to see local advisory committees or develop local fire plans to focus on local needs, issues and risks.

Gone are the days of thinking about our thin red line as exclusively fighting fires; restructuring has given firefighters broader responsibilities to protect New Zealanders. A lot is at stake: the volunteers cover 93% of the country and represent 86% of the firefighting workforce. As the United Fire Brigades Association (UFBA), which represents both professionals and volunteers and provides services including training, points out:

“[Fenz personnel] are New Zealand’s only broad-based emergency service first responders.”

According to the UFBA, the annual economic value of the time given by volunteers to communities is \$659 million – all of it for free. Our reliance on them makes sense in a country the size of Britain but with only 5 million people, but protecting every community is an ongoing challenge. In some areas, volunteers are the only local responders. A map of the 567 volunteer fire stations reveals the entire belly of the North Island is staffed predominantly by volunteers; the whole South Island West Coast is covered by volunteers. They safeguard small, isolated communities, the outer edges of cities, high-country areas. They do everything from plucking cats out of trees to attending road crashes, medical emergencies, floods, search and rescue and urban and rural fires, alongside police and ambulance staff.

Recently qualified firefighter Jordyn Elder, 19, is in the last year of an apprenticeship as an aluminium joinery fabricator in Drury. He had his first big fire experience in June, when a car yard caught fire on the edge of town. Elder was confident he could do the job as he and 76 other firefighters fought the blaze, which had quickly spread from one corner to engulf most of the yard. “It was pretty intense, but the training kicked in along with the adrenalin.

“I was pretty knackered at the end. We were there from 10.30pm to 3.30am. Then we needed to get our contaminated gear sorted, shower and debrief.”

Ronald Van Lierop, 28, runs his own building business and acknowledges that it is the thrill of helping people that propelled him to volunteer. He’s a calm bloke; considered, thoughtful – the sort of person you’d want in a dangerous situation.

“You just do what is needed at the time. If it is CPR, or finding body parts at the side of the road, you just do it. Your training is everything. You support other crews, obey orders and get on with the job.”

ACC loophole

UFBA chief executive Bill Butzbach is the second of three generations of firefighters in his family and has served at every level of the service for more than 45 years. But his daily concerns of advocacy, membership, budgets and support are currently overshadowed by a flaw in ACC policy implementation directly affecting volunteers.

“ACC will cover gradual workplace diseases such as cancer and psychological trauma for paid staff but not for volunteers,” Butzbach explains. “It sees volunteers’ contributions to the fire service as a leisure activity, so they don’t get covered for any occupational diseases, which means that when we get volunteers working alongside paid staff at the same fire,

that may present a number of potential long-term health risks. By virtue of whether you are being paid or not, one person is covered, the other is not.”

Past governments have balked at extending occupational disease cover to volunteer firefighters, fearing they would then have to extend coverage to other voluntary activities. In 2021, then ACC minister Carmel Sepuloni rejected a plea to change the law for volunteer firefighters affected by cancer, saying this would “introduce fairness issues”. “Providing cover for one group of volunteers and not for the remaining volunteer population would be misaligned with the scheme’s purpose to provide fair cover,” she said.

In May, the UFBA made a submission to a Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) review of the list of occupational diseases covered by ACC. It pointed out that volunteers are contracted to provide certain services for Fenz and as such should be treated as employees who are working without payment. It asked MBIE to create a unique group of employment covering both paid and volunteer firefighters to ensure all are covered by the scheme.

It wants 38 occupational diseases added to the list – including certain cancers, hepatitis, asthma and diseases caused by chemicals that firefighters may be exposed to.

The UFBA is also seeking better cover for firefighters affected by psychological trauma, pointing out that volunteers attend 55% of all medical emergencies.

Covid strains

The beachside community of Pauanui, on Coromandel Peninsula, knows about the precarious nature of survival, both businesswise and through emergency management. Businessman Darron Steer is the community fire chief. His perspective of his volunteer role is that if everyone contributes something, then the entire community benefits. In most instances, the volunteer fire brigade is the first responder to medical emergencies, as the nearest ambulance is at least 20 minutes away.

Although 90% of all callouts for the Pauanui volunteers are run of the mill, it is the 10% of critical situations where training and preparation can make the difference between life and death. Overseeing the long reach of the peninsula is like constructing a jigsaw puzzle, with brigades up and down the coast contributing a range of complementary specialist skills and appliances to address most emergencies. In holiday periods, the population explodes and brigade members need to be able to turn their hands to anything. With State Highway 25A between Kopu and Hikuai closed until March next year, Coromandel communities are even more isolated. There is an urgency within the community for life to return to “normal”. As in all rural communities, volunteer firefighters rely on thriving businesses to support their absences from work when on call. If those businesses fail, it directly affects the local

brigade, and in Pauanui's case, the Coastguard rescue boat as well. Some volunteers belong to both.

“There are no police based here, so when there is an emergency of any kind, we get the callout,” says Steer. “People here are stressed, asking themselves, what’s going to go next? Once-thriving businesses are fragile, people are on edge, and that’s in every small community across the Coromandel. It impacts on every person here, every day.”

Reforms stall

The 2017 legislation that changed the face of the fire service gave the new organisation, Fenz, responsibility for a range of emergency services, not just fires, and the resources to provide comprehensive training for volunteer and paid firefighters who now work for the same organisation.

The restructuring has been tumultuous and culminated in prolonged industrial action by paid firefighters, with a website campaign alleging short-staffing, shoddy equipment, trucks out of commission, a failure to support traumatised firefighters and a toxic culture. The Professional Firefighters Union also accused Fenz of failing to provide sufficient support to volunteer brigades; volunteer support officers were working overtime to ensure brigades had essential equipment and support. The dispute dragged on for 18 months until last December.

Former minister of internal affairs Peter Dunne introduced the legislation to reform the Fire Service. A staunch advocate for volunteer firefighters, he is now chair of the UFBA. He wryly acknowledges the power of the local fire station as a photo opportunity for politicians, none of whom would want to be associated with closing one down. But he notes that with population shifts, there is a significant challenge to make sure all stations are evenly resourced. He acknowledges the demands facing the sector, including the need for upskilling and getting timely support for firefighters following traumatic events.

Dunne expressed concern last year about slow progress towards the aims of the 2017 reforms, which were “about putting volunteers at the centre of the new organisation, and on an equal footing when it came to resources and training”. Five years later, that wasn’t happening.

In this year’s UFBA annual report, he says progress has been made since the dispute with career firefighters was settled. He adds, however, that concern remains about maintaining the independence of volunteer brigades. “Fenz has now agreed to work with us on a new brigade engagement model, including revised rules and an operating plan relative to local risk.”

For Steph Rotarangi, deputy chief executive, service delivery design for Fenz, the volunteers are essential to the provision of a comprehensive and effective fire and emergency service throughout the country. She says specialist trainers deliver training to a high standard to both volunteer and career firefighters.

The service will be on high alert over summer, says Rotarangi. “Based on current forecasting, we expect a hot, dry summer in many parts of the country, increasing the risk of wildfires. It’s also likely there will be increased rainfall and storms elsewhere.”

Water rescue

Fenz’s revenue primarily comes from fire insurance policy levies. The Crown contributed \$10 million in 2019 towards a host of other activities such as medical emergencies. The agency’s 10-year strategic plan includes developing a specialist water response force by 2030. More crews will have specialist training to rescue people in water and use floating platforms to transport stranded people to safety. To date, about 80 career firefighters have received such training as part of a planned nationwide rollout, complementing police as the lead agency for water rescues. Surf Life Saving NZ and Civil Defence also have specialist rescue teams.

In their first deployments, the new flood rescue teams saved 32 Aucklanders in the Anniversary Weekend deluge and February’s Cyclone Gabrielle. But signs of friction emerged in March when the UFBA rounded on Professional Firefighters Union comments about “mingling” with volunteers and others during the training courses “as we need to have the confidence in the prior training and experience of candidates”. The UFBA responded that this was disrespectful and “shows complete ignorance of the expertise of volunteers and contractors outside of their firefighting duties”. It was critical that all fire and emergency personnel were aligned and unified in delivery. “The UFBA believes all our members should have access to furthering their training and response techniques. After all, the emergency incidents they attend are exactly the same.”

Then, in September, RNZ reported that during widespread floods in May, the rescue teams in Northland, Auckland, Nelson and Whakatāne failed to show. The problem arose after Fenz withdrew an allowance that had been paid during the first deployments. The Professional Firefighters Union told the teams to stand down and return to normal duties.

Another issue is slow progress towards local emergency plans – 16 are intended to be in place – and the establishment of 9 local advisory committees, provided for in the 2017 legislation. Coromandel’s Darron Steer: “We need decisions to be from the local community upwards, not bureaucrats down. Every community knows what it wants and needs, which may not be about dollars and cents. We need agencies to support us to deliver that.”

On with the job

Gore's chief fire officer, Steve Lee, heads a team of 40 other volunteers. When the town experienced flooding in September, Lee's brigade was backed up by 3 smaller communities collectively contributing another 60 volunteer firefighters, plus paid firefighters from Invercargill. Together, they saved 20 homes from severe flooding. "When you look at people's faces and they are 1 inch away from water flooding their homes, then they see the pumps in action and the water receding, you never forget the look of relief on their faces. Never."

In August, 46 volunteers from the wider Southland region were trained by Fenz in rescuing victims of structural collapse in the event of a magnitude 8 Alpine Fault earthquake. The specialist volunteers will be able to swing immediately into action when the big quake occurs – for Lee, it's not a question of "if" but "when".

Lee has 25 years' service to his name. He and his team attend some confronting situations in this small rural area, often involving people they know. "When I joined as a volunteer, the culture was more macho. Now, it is seen as appropriate to reach out after a firefighter has been involved in a traumatic event. We are all about the wellbeing of the team and their families. We need to make sure our members have the right support wrapped around them. If they need it, we'll get it."

Volunteering can be intergenerational. Lee has a powerful memory of a newly trained recruit being handed his certificate by his grandfather, who had given 25 years of volunteer service. "I'm in an extremely privileged position to be the leader of an outstanding team of individuals who give their time so generously.

"When our farming community – who have lost so much through the floods – still have time to ask us how we are going and provide baking for the team, you know you are part of something incredibly special."

Disaster lessons

All 30 years of Kim Hall's experience as a volunteer firefighter was used in perilous conditions when Cyclone Gabrielle hit Hawke's Bay. The years of training couldn't prepare Hall and his fellow firefighters for going out time and time again in sometimes waist- to chest-deep water to rescue people in unpredictable situations.

Hall, a commercial door installer, found himself and his crews carrying out dynamic risk assessments to determine if it was safe for them to proceed – and it often wasn't. He and his crews were initially out all night, then throughout the following days, isolated by bridge collapses, with no power and no way of communicating.

Worst of all, after rescuing 120 isolated orchard workers from chest-deep water, the firefighters had to leave them at a nearby property, as they had no way of contacting their employer or transporting them into town to a safer location.

Hall has had time to reflect on those frantic days as deluges and destruction pounded the region, a relentless call on his brigade's workforce.

His commitment to, and understanding of, the community runs deep. He's had first-hand experience in living through a national state of emergency, knowing he didn't have the training in mass evacuations and water rescue to do the job to the standard required. Neither was there back-up in qualified support staff, because no one had anticipated the level of need.

Hall is concerned about the public's lack of preparation for adverse weather events, and councils' under-resourcing of Civil Defence in his region. He's frustrated by the slow progress in clearing up the devastation in some areas, and says mental health issues are emerging in the community.

"As firefighters, we talk about any trauma affecting us. We have professionals to help us, plus counselling. Officers keep an eye on each other and their teams, and it works successfully. If someone is injured, we'll help out, because there is this deep camaraderie.

"But what worries me is businesspeople, who've withstood Covid, had a rotten summer, and now have this. There is nothing left in the system, and generally speaking, many people aren't coping well at all."

He knows it will take time to clean up the devastation, and that it is moving faster for Hawke's Bay communities than in Canterbury following the earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. But he cautions that all sectors of the community must work together and that inter-agency collaboration must be better.

In future, he says, communities will need to be better resourced, and people will need to take personal responsibility, if they are to survive such disasters as more intense cyclones.