

Breaking Down the Barriers - New & Emerging Communities and the Emergency Services

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Background & Purpose

From a historical view point the issues of dealing and working with community members from diverse backgrounds dates back to as far as Australian public records care to show us, on a global scale the issues date back to as far as we care to look.

From an emergency services position specifically the Metropolitan Fire Brigade of Melbourne one can date these issues back to the European migration of the 1950's and further.

Of all the issues, problems and working difficulties faced by the emergency services when dealing with community groups from diverse backgrounds, the hurdles and / or barriers faced when engaging with the new & emerging groups is unique.

Today's hurdles / boundaries are unique to what we commonly refer to as our current new & emerging communities such as; African communities, varying communities from the Middle East and the Burmese community.

What remains as a constant today as was with the migration of the 1950's is, new & emerging communities of any given timeline face difficulties unique to them and outside of the mainstream and other more established ethnic communities. The issue of uniform being a standout both today and from the generation that has passed, for people that come to us from war ravaged countries, having an absolute distrust of uniform and authority remain that one very strong constant.

Experience further tells us that young people provide us with the opportunities to break down barriers, provide the pathways for the services to engage, provide an understanding of the needs and the gateway into long term sustainable relationships with the emergency services.

Research / Observations

Over the last 3 years the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) through its Equity & Diversity Unit, has engaged in programs targeting youth, specifically young people from new and emerging communities. The programs are run in the form of youth leadership programs covering areas of understanding, awareness and needs.

Understanding being the key word here, the word that is spoken by the fire crews "do they understand what our roles are", on the reverse side of that the refugee groups will state "do they understand what our experiences have been"

Our observations have also shown that in building a process where we deal with issues such as uniform we also have the need to be flexible, what diverse community groups mean to those fire crews from the west of the metropolitan fire district can be and are very much different to that of the fire crews from the east.

Ongoing consultation and working in partnerships with the varying ethnic groups has proven to be the foundation of growth and moving forward for the entire community as a whole, inclusive of the emergency services when trying to unlock issues such as perception of uniform. Having attempted to do this on our own proved to be a creator of larger problems than we had initially, working together in partnerships with these communities has guided us as an emergency service as to how best promote the fire service to these communities allowing us to provide the best possible service to these communities without the issue and hurdles of uniform to overcome.

From the platform of new and emerging communities, youth leadership programs have been a significant catalyst in allowing the emergency services to deliver key messages - be they uniform, understanding of the roles or simply looking at the needs from both sides – the fire service and the community.

The young people from new and emerging communities have not only been the pathway into their broader community groups, but look at the process of being one of future opportunities of employment within the services.

Building Partnerships

Throughout the 3 years of the youth leadership programs, partnerships have been formed, some being very proactive others have somewhat faltered, what has come from all though is direction and what does and does not work best for specific ethnic groups, more so when working with new and emerging communities.

The creation of partnerships is not only one for community and fire services, the proactive positive approach has been one of bringing in or working with significant services such as Victoria Police, the Metropolitan Ambulance Service and Local Government Authorities.

New and Emerging communities have brought a real challenge to the table for the fire services, creating partnerships when there are issues based on previous experiences of trust can virtually make the task of empowering specific ethnic community groups near on an impossible task.

The example of African communities highlights many of these issues, empowering the new and emerging communities through their young people, can be flagged as a real showpiece of what can be seen as success. Various African communities outside of enriching the cultural diversity of Melbourne brought with it specific problems not faced before. The Somali community being a prime example here, how do we spread our message as a fire service when we cannot even translate the words “fire brigade” in the Somali language, following initial tentative steps where our messages were somewhat lost, we now find a strong working relationship with this community and a lesson was learnt in this instance that assumptions mean nothing and that we need to work together.

Building of partnerships, firefighters and ethnic communities agree, is a position of strength and the foundation for moving forward with the young people of the new and emerging community providing a solid platform for this to occur.

Programs & Processes

So how best to create a formal process with the MFB and ethnic community groups?

Firefighters are well aware of their turnout area in the main they have an interest in - what that turnout area is made up of inclusive of the cultural and ethnic mix and what the needs are.

Youth leadership programs have allowed the opportunities for not only developing young people’s leadership skills but, importantly for the services, specifically the fire services, the opportunities for key messages to be delivered.

The programs run for a prolonged period of time, engage with various services, deliver consistent strong messages of emergency service roles and the need community has to understand these roles.

Local government has been the other point where formal processes can be built and maintained as they, too, have an obvious interest in the make up of their own council / shire and are very aware of the needs of the community.

It has been pivotal to the success in working in partnerships with the community that the local government of the specific areas be involved also. It has not only created formal programs and processes that involve ethnic communities but allows for these same programs and processes to be ongoing and supported.

Outcomes

The 3 years have provided the MFB with a strong platform in the ongoing process of community consultation and engagement when, the outcomes have pointed to an understanding that processes have to have flexibility. As one set of community groups is / can be very different to another, similarly the dynamics of one fire station can be very different to another.

Community groups know what the issues are for them, assumptions can be very misleading, ask the people involved, to date they have been very helpful in the information they have provided and importantly they are enthusiastic in working together in partnerships, young people also bring long term focus and sustainability to the processes

Local government an important cog in making this wheel turn, they have an interest in their community, they can provide the structure and support allowing the community the opportunity of empowerment and moving forward, this in turn impacts the MFB as we can work together and spread our messages in a more structured and formal process.

Summary

The summary of what has taken place in the past 3 years and will continue in the future is encompassed in simple but strong messages.

The notion of the term “new and emerging communities” having a differing dynamic when talking emergency services is a true one. Uniform, 000, authority, trust are all significant components that make the engagement process unique to emergency service.

Furthermore, as with mainstream community the new and emerging communities in the main come into contact with emergency services, fire services to be more specific, in times of need or very high levels of anxiety and / or distress, again the dynamic shifts from what common place community engagement might be.

Community engagement is seen, or at least should be seen, as a long term process one that looks at needs from both sides be that community and fire services. With new and emerging communities, the long term view is paramount; young people allow the opportunity for a sustainable long term approach that has meaningful positives outcomes for all.

It has been said that our young people are the future leaders of the world.... Yes they are.