AFTER THE fires

RESULTS FROM QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

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Contents

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Introduction

The 2019-2020 bushfire season in Australia is described as the 'Black Summer' due to the unprecedented magnitude, duration and intensity of the bushfires, which started earlier than expected and were far more widespread and destructive than usual. All Australian states and territories were affected, with the most significant impact felt in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland. In total, 33 lives were lost, more than 3,000 homes were destroyed, wildlife was decimated, and over 20 million hectares of community and farming land and national parks were burnt. In the 2.5 years since the fires, Australia and every other country has endured and continues to endure the ongoing and protracted health, social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the regions impacted by the Black Summer fires have more recently also been impacted by devastating floods. Nature has been busy.

The After the Fires Project set out to investigate the impacts of the bushfires on the mental health and wellbeing of Australia's emergency services personnel. A quantitative survey of over 4000 people was carried out in 2020-21 (Wave 1) and repeated in 2021-22 (Wave 2). In tandem, two qualitative studies were undertaken, and this report records the Wave 2 responses of firefighting volunteers and community workers who were invited to reflect on their lives since Wave1 and to contribute their thoughts and judgements about the influence of the fires.

It is in this context that this report offers unique insights into the mental health and wellbeing of those who volunteered during the Black Summer fires, then and now. Unlike much research which captures the individuals' perspectives at a single moment in time, we revisited many of the participants who had shared their experiences in the first 6-12 months after the fires to hear how their lives were now – more than 2 years since the fires. Their evidence provides a complementary perspective to the quantitative survey results; it may help explain some of the trends that have emerged from the survey, and also provide insights into further areas not raised in the quantitative survey.

Methods

This report is based on interviews and a focus group conducted 2+ years after the end of the 2019-2020 bushfire season (March- June 2022) and 16-18 months after the first wave of interviews and focus groups (Nov 2020-April 2021).

Interview questions for this second wave were informed by the questions asked and responses given in the first wave of interviews. Some questions were revised to reflect the context (e.g., *Current motivation to continue being a fire fighter / volunteer?*), and further questions specific to the purpose of the second wave were added (e.g., *What would you tell a Royal Commission if you were there?*) Other questions served to revisit and explore areas of interest arising from the analyses of the first wave of interviews (e.g., *Reflecting now on what acknowledgement of the volunteer role means and looks like for you?*)

Of the original 29 first-wave participants we interviewed, we were able to re-interview 18 individuals (16 as individual interviews and 2 in a focus group). This included 15 of the first responder volunteers across Australia who had helped to fight the fires, and 3 community leader volunteers who had contributed to the recovery effort during and since the fires. Of the volunteer firefighters, 8 were from South Australia, 3 from Victoria, 3 from New South Wales, and 1 from Queensland. All 3 community volunteers were from different parts of South Australia and were considered by them and their community peers as informal community leaders and good 'thermometers' for the mental health and wellbeing of their communities.

Interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes in length, were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed, then analysed thematically. Most interviews were conducted via phone for convenience and due to ongoing COVID-19 concerns. The focus group was conducted face-to-face at the participants' fire stations.

Findings

The following themes sit within a context of time and place, acknowledging that when people share their personal experiences, they move between the present and the past to tell their stories. This is fitting given that understanding the cumulative impacts of any events sit within a broader context and history. During the initial round of interviews, we saw this when many of the participants spoke of the Black Summer fires, but also of the significant fire events in the history of their volunteering experiences. In this report on the second round of interviews, we see this in themes that focus on the individual, organisation, and community context, but also where the past, present and future mingle.

The five themes identified are as follows:

- **Theme One: Learning, Reflection, Growth**

  A shift in attitude has occurred since Wave 1 and many respondents experienced an improvement in their mental health. This resulted mainly from interaction with family and firefighting colleagues and was sometimes supported by formal therapy. However, some individuals with mental health struggles continue to resist help, for a variety of reasons.

- **Theme Two: Recognition**

  Meaningful recognition of respondents' contributions to firefighting resulted in positive mental health outcomes but some of the public attempts (e.g., medals) to recognise contribution were divisive and harmful for some.

- **Theme Three: Lack of Acknowledgement of Expertise**

  Many volunteers believed their skills and experience, locally acquired over many years, were undervalued, silenced or not respected, and they felt blamed for losses and that their post fire feedback was unwelcome. This perpetuated mental health problems.

- **Theme Four: Cumulative Mental Health Impacts**

  Respondents described events and issues that emerged since the fires and that intensified the mental health impact.

- **Theme Five: Peer Support, Camaraderie and Seeking Formal Mental Health Support**

  Peer support, and events that foster this, were perceived as crucial to the recovery of mental health. Formal psychological support is growing in acceptance, but considerable barriers remain.

The following discussion expands on these themes. Participants describe shifts in their thinking and coping, over time, and the lessons they've learned from the Black Summer fires as part of making meaning and sense of it, more broadly. For this reason, some of the direct quotes from participants are necessarily long and detailed.

Theme One: Learning, reflection, growth

With the passage of time, many participants' comments demonstrated a processing of their experiences that involved a 'coming to terms' with what had occurred, meaning making, and finding a clear context in which to understand what happened and why it happened. In distinct contrast to the first-round interviews, this involved a shift in learning and reflection on their experiences.

Sub-theme 1a: Realising it's a Case of 'Not If But When'

Since the previous interviews, participants showed increased self-reflection, prioritising and understanding about their own mental health. This also included a shift to speaking about 'not if but when' the next big fire would happen. This 'acceptance', whilst expressed with conviction and concern, seemed to help give participants a greater sense of 'knowing' about their mental health, being prepared, and the potential for further trauma in the future. They no longer expressed a sense of having no control or being as naïve. These processes of learning, reflection and growth were described as predominantly situated within everyday peer interactions, with some being gained from more formal therapy.

> *This is something that's not just, you know, it's not a case of if, it's a case of when… they've found that it actually is helpful to them because…they're prepared, they're realistic, they're not naïve anymore. (Firefighter, talking about his fire crew, SA)*

> [Reflecting on how the community is going] *I think because visually, I mean the forest has grown … and you can still see views of the ocean where you couldn't see it before, but people have grown used to that you know, and I don't even think people even remember what it used to look like anymore … the forest has grown back, and you know COVID's over and all those sorts of things…. I think that we have to get the message out that this is what fires are going to be. (Firefighter, NSW)*

> *Irrespective of what governments do about addressing the impact of the global crisis it is likely that the damage that has already been done will continue to trigger more disasters. We cannot escape the conclusion that the new normal will be characterised by uncertainty. This makes it important that we learn as much as we can from our responses to these disasters.* (Community Volunteer, SA)

Subtheme 1b: Saving Others, Saving Ourselves

Participants were able to 'unpack' their trauma to understand it more, rather than simply feeling overwhelmed by it. This was particularly exemplified by the focus group participants who, in the first-round interviews, had previously struggled to come to terms with their near-death experiences whilst fighting the fires, and were expressing significant trauma, anger and distress at that time. They now had a greater understanding of their mental health reactions. Even though they had lengthy experience as firefighters, this time was not wholly about saving others; this was personal.

> *What I think is different is that we were 4 individuals, and we each had something to do. And if any one of us had panicked, or had thrown in the towel, it could have been fatal for us. We were so dependent on each other to do the right thing. And I've never been in that sort of situation before or since [25 years as a volunteer] …. I think our situation was, it was our situation. We weren't dealing with a third party. It wasn't a car crash where we had to manage that. It was us that were actually looking to survive during that time. Whereas, I certainly could go to an incident now … I just need to do what I need to do. I can then switch off from that.*

Unless it's really confronting like blood and gore, and that sort of stuff, I … have more problems with it. But I – I think, I can … I've done the job. And we've got the success at the end. Whereas, after the [fires] stuff, I felt a lot of guilt. And I felt a lot of hopelessness. I had felt really angry about a whole lot of stuff. And the – and the guilt was about responsibility. Did I make right decisions along the way? And I – and as the psychiatrist pointed out, well they're still talking to you, so you probably did alright basically. And I … you just – I just needed someone to actually – to put it into – into context. For me the way I rationalise using the psychologist is I've got a filing cabinet, and suddenly everything's been turned upside down. And I need this person to come and put them back into order for me, so yeah…. Putting things into perspective now that I probably wasn't ready, or even able to do back when I spoke with you last time. I've been more able to think things through…. And we benefited from having XXX who is still – has issues with mental health. But having someone who knows is – has been really, really good to be able to talk to, because…instead of having a video, he says, I'll bring someone live. And it's – a couple of times it's been me. And that in itself has been helpful for me because I can then, I can talk about my issues. But I can also reflect upon how I've actually come through. (SA Firefighter Focus Group)

Subtheme 1c: Reflection on and Processing Trauma Takes Time

Participants emphasised the importance of needing 'Time' to process and learn from their experiences as part of a learning, self-management process that could be drawn upon in future. They also emphasised the importance of doing so with others who had directly shared their experiences, and how this process of 'recovery' strengthened the group's bonds.

[Talking about being together over time] *They had space to learn for themselves what they needed for themselves. And that it was a learning – how they were learning themselves. It wasn't about some external sort of expert treating them for something. It was about them themselves learning it. (Firefighter, SA)*

- *I now look back, and actually think about our Kangaroo Island experience with a lot of pride, because I've had the time to look back, and – and be introspective about what – what we actually did. And I think that's been really important because – we left Kangaroo Island after being really badly treated over there. And to think that we actually didn't achieve anything.*
- *And when we went back just to – to visit, because we needed to bury some – some ghosts.*
- *We actually – I certainly felt that we'd achieved some stuff, especially in the days before, – and just – just really just thinking now, that day was really important, because actually it built a relationship between the 4 of us, that was really important for – for – for the next day.*
- *No, no and it was important for me to go back with these guys. It had – would have initially had no benefit to go back with other people. We had something special that only we-*
- *There was only us that knew what we'd – what we went through. And we needed – I – I wanted to be with these guys to – so I knew I had support. Plus, I knew I could support was – was my – my sense.*
- *- (SA Focus Group)*

Although, they also acknowledged that this could not be a one size fits all approach. They also recognised that each individual was undergoing their own process of recovery and therefore, their individual needs may vary.

- *I don't want to blame people. I'm over that. But it's better for me if I don't get angry. XXX wants to maintain the rage. Well, I don't.*

- *No, no I've had to shut myself down away from XXX on several occasions. He actually still wants us to pursue legal issues. And he hasn't accepted that there's actually not. And he thinks well it's not right. And yes, it's not right. But under the legislation we won't achieve anything. So, I'm just going to leave it. (SA firefighter Focus Group)*

There was also a sense that overcoming perceived stigma related to mental health was an evolving and potentially a developmental process; one that younger volunteers in particular may struggle with.

What you find with the volunteers is that I think that they are the stronger, more determined people in your community, and because they are stronger and more determined they resist, they resist a lot of this - my doctor reckons I've got PTSD, and I don't believe that that's the case…. They tend to want to look after their problems themselves. And as much as you can say to these fellas, look there's no harm in going to talk to somebody…. They will resist that because it is a sign of weakness, isn't it? They're used to being independent, autonomous, you know used to being the problem solver…. I don't know how to encourage these young fellas to go and seek help, because they will put it off. Yeah, it's like as soon as you show a sign of weakness the others will eat you…as soon as you show a sign of weakness, that's it, you're finished you know. (Firefighter, VIC)

Theme Two: Recognition

A major process that was described by volunteer firefighters (and community volunteers) was how others (the government, their organisations, the community) recognised their role after the fires. In the first round of interviews, virtually all participants raised the issue of lack of acknowledgement; however, most struggled to identify what it looked like. In the round-two interviews, participants were asked to describe what they meant by this, and it became apparent that there were two distinct elements: recognition and acknowledgement. The first of these is described here, with a separate theme dedicated to describing what they meant by acknowledgement.

When the recognition process was perceived by them as problematic, mental health distress and trauma continued to be felt. When it was aligned with their volunteer values, and their perceived role and purpose in serving their community, the recognition process helped them make sense of their traumatic experiences, to support healing and closure. Recognition was multi-dimensional and included the following forms which will be described in turn below.

The first four dimensions of recognition relate to more practical responses that were delivered by the communities, first responder organisations and government in the immediate days, weeks and months after the fires. Their intention was to positively recognise volunteers' contributions and support mental health and wellbeing:
- Everyday community valuing of the volunteers' contribution
- Genuine versus 'staged' thanks
- Equity and fairness issues with award-giving
- Self-acceptance for what they achieved and being reluctant heroes

Subtheme 2a: Everyday Community Valuing of the Volunteers' Contribution

Participants valued the everyday gestures of thanks from their own communities as much, if not more than, more formal events of ceremonies. These informal gestures where more aligned with volunteers' values and purpose in volunteering.

Yeah, the politicians wouldn't have clue ... We went to Sydney, and they gave us a hat, oh we got a cap, we got a cap with bushfires 19-20 on it or something, but I never wore it…I've never worn it, and I probably never will bloody wear it…the kids are just saying "We reckon you blokes were alright" you know, that's all it is isn't it, it's nothing, it's nothing special…Yeah it's hard to explain because all you're doing is you're going down with a lot of blokes and they're your mates, and you're doing what you can to help out in the community. (Firefighter, SA)

We're all there together and we're working together, and we know that there's a job to be done and we're the people that can do it. But the recognition is not … we had, the kids up at the school did some paintings, and they brought it down for us, and we hung them up in the radio room. And that's beaut you know, because the kids are, you know these are the primary school kids, the young ones, and they've all done a picture of a fireman or a fire truck, or a tree on fire or something you know, and then, you know you go off somewhere and then a week later someone will drop in a card and a beer. And just say, look you know thanks very much for coming out and doing whatever…those things mean as much as what any politician's handshake would mean, if not more ... It's ordinary people just being proud of other ordinary people because yeah you know it's not like, you wouldn't, this word bloody hero gets thrown around all the time you know, and that's garbage you know, there's not a hell of a lot of heroes around, and quite a few of them bloody end up dead anyway. (Firefighter, SA)

Subtheme 2b: Genuine Versus 'Staged' Thanks

Participants did not appreciate recognition events such as media events. Such events were perceived as 'staged' for the benefit of others such as politicians and bureaucrats rather than truly honouring and recognising the effort, sacrifice and trauma that was experienced by those directly involved in fighting the fires.

That's, what's his name bloke, that Scomo [Scott Morrison, Prime Minister at the time] … come up to the [station]…and we were told that they wanted 20 blokes at the fire shed on this day at this time, and all had to wear our gear and all the rest …. And I was taken aside and spoken to, because they said "If you do come you've got to watch what you say" … it sort of defeats the purpose doesn't it? … takes away the genuineness of it somehow and then he turns up in his big flash car and he gets out, he wants to shake everyone's hand, … and says "G'day how you going, you've done a good job", and he gets back in his air-conditioned car and he disappears. It was more for the television crews and the photographers to take photos of him than anything else.… Do I want to go through all that rigmarole to stand there in front of some joker and make him look good? Whereas the kids and the, you know getting their thanks freely and without conditions … it's something about it that's just, just a genuine exchange…it comes from within your own community you know. (Firefighter, SA)

Subtheme 2c: Equity and Fairness in Award Giving

Several participants had received medals to recognise their service during the Black Summer fires and they were personally proud to receive them. However, because participants viewed their volunteer roles and contributions to their communities within a close and cohesive peer structure, they were particularly sensitive to issues of equity and fairness in how medals and formal gestures of thanks were determined. Handled poorly, these recognition processes had the potential to upset and devalue volunteers, especially those who did not receive an award, undermining their sense of self-worth and contribution to the team which was the opposite of what was intended. For some, it triggered their poor mental health. For others, it made them even more sceptical, and it damaged trust in bureaucrats and organisational management.

Yeah, our issue with that medal was that it was that poorly run. That you sort of alienated 50% of the crew. They had a list with the names, and some people weren't on that list. And we wondered what the hell's going on. Yeah, so it defeated – defeats the purpose of it I guess- Well it drove a wedge between us. And so, some of us put our nice blue uniform on, and went and met the governor general and his wife, and got an award for – I don't know what was it? Going above and beyond. So obviously, if your name wasn't on list, you might have thought you didn't do enough. But then we were told that, "oh no it's going to happen again later down the track". And – so that second list will be put together, and maybe even a third. But it was just for the governor general's time. We – no one holds any ill will towards that. And others went out of respect for the governor general. And a couple went just to get their medals, and pretty proud of that, which they should be. But I think it should – just should have been explained better so no one felt left out. (Firefighter, SA)

I received two medals. One was from the Federal Government which was an emergency services medal and the other one was a national medal, which will probably just get put in a sock drawer and never seen again. Look, I'm quite chuffed to receive it, but I'm not the sort of person to go wear it around and showing it off if you know what I mean? …I don't think I've done anything, it's, we all worked as a team really and we all work to the best we could at the time so. (Firefighter, NSW)

I felt after the anniversary of the XXX fire, I had been so involved in a paid and unpaid capacity, yet I wasn't remembered even for my contribution on the anniversary. And others were and they had their ways. But because I'd been an outsider coming in for the most part I wasn't directly impacted. It was like I was never there. That made me sad more than angry. I think that my reactions to things are, have been at times disproportionate and they may not have been even remotely related to the fires. You know I think that's where I'm saying I'm realising that it comes out and manifests in other ways. But ultimately, it's all part perhaps of the same experience. (Community volunteer)

Subtheme 2d: Self-Acceptance for What They Achieved and Being Reluctant Heroes

All participants struggled with the concept of being considered heroes. This was vividly described by the SA focus group participants who, although they still felt awkward about this form of recognition, made sense of it as a shared commitment to each other in the face of fear, trauma, and survival.

- *I was embarrassed at first. And there were some people there and they gave a clap. And I thought, what in the bloody hell are you doing that for?*
- *I feel in a lot better space about that than I did last time I saw you.*
- *Yeah, yeah. I think we were – we were all given medals – the South Australian Emergency Service Medal. Which was – initially it was a – I think we – well I certainly felt this is shut up medal. I now look back, and go, I'm actually proud to have it because for me I actually have earnt it. It wasn't – I – I – this – this happened, and we've been acknowledged that we actually did alright.*
- *But it used to upset me about being called a hero. It really doesn't sit well, because at that stage it – it didn't sit well, because I didn't feel like I'd actually done anything special other than just kept alive basically. It now sits a lot better that I think in the sense we looked after each other, and that in itself is heroic.*
- *A friend said to me, "So what do you see as a hero?" And I said, this, and this. And she said, "Well didn't you do that?" I went, "Okay. I – I guess we did".*
- *It was about looking after each other. About going there, doing a little bit extra…. But it's – I guess that was unpacked about doing something that was risky, because we're concerned about another person…. I went in because I was concerned about him. I wasn't concerned*

about me going in…. Yeah, because we'd made the commitment. We weren't leaving the site unless we had all the people in the truck. (SA Firefighter Focus Group)

Theme 3: - Lack of Acknowledgement

The next four dimensions of acknowledgement relate to a more complex set of processes that were part of volunteers, first responder organisations, and the community seeking answers. This involved acknowledging what happened, why it happened, who was responsible, and steps taken more formally to account for the devastation caused by the fires. The intention was accountability, and volunteers' mental health was impacted positively or negatively depending on how these forms of acknowledgement played out:

- Lack of formal acknowledgement of 'expertise by experience' of volunteers
- Lack of acknowledgment and respect for the volunteer perspective and experience ('The Truth')
- Negative acknowledgment: blame
- Acknowledgment of the psychological harm inherent in the role

Subtheme 3a: Lack of Formal Acknowledgement of 'Expertise by Experience' of Volunteers

Acknowledgement was embedded in volunteers' perceptions of how they felt others valued and recognised their lived experience as volunteer firefighters. As part of making sense of their experiences during the fires and analysing what had occurred and why, many volunteers perceived that their input was under-valued, despite their skills. This was apparent, particularly with those who had significant 'expertise by experience' (also understood as 'lived experience'), and local knowledge that they felt was largely ignored and under-recognised, or only of value within a one-way exchange that favoured the established authority and left some skilled volunteers feeling somewhat used, then dismissed.

> *When I sat on this workshop and we talked about this training stuff, and they gave this example of a guy … which is a big sheep area down the south-western state. And this guy had been a senior firefighter group officer for 40 years, he was on the land, he was a … grazier, he was the go-to guy for any fire in the district. And you know they went through his, they checked back through his training history, and he'd never done the first basic firefighting course cos farmers never did, you know they were on the land, they knew all that stuff. And they told him he had to do it, and he went "well I don't want to do it". So basically, they pushed him out. When the big fires were on, his son took over his role, and when one staff went out to see how the son was going, and there was dad sitting in the seat beside him. And they went "Oh isn't it great that he came back, and he sat there and he helped us out". And I'm thinking "mate are you guys for real, like you've taken all this experience and drop kicked it in the bin. And then you're happy that he was … enough to come back and do it and help you out, like you guys are unbelievable". (Firefighter, NSW)*

This participant went on to give an example of how his organisation was not listening or acknowledging volunteers' expertise and advice; instead, favouring other bureaucratically driven without practical evidence of their value.

> *I'm on another committee that's looking to integrate cultural … between the local Aboriginal community here on the coast and the fire service…. But there's just so many people now are going that that cultural burning's going to be the cure … you know, we should hand the ropes back to the First Nations people, and we won't ever have this problem again, and that's just not true. So, there's a place for it in the way we do things, but it's … to stop losing lots of houses in big fires, it's*

not feasible you know…. People have just jumped straight onto that bandwagon. (Firefighter, NSW)

Similar to the first-round interviews, community volunteer participants also described their ongoing perceptions of being shut out and used, and their expertise not being acknowledged.

Many of the ideas from the workshop were picked up by council staff with little reference back to the communities. It is not enough to get things done – it is equally important to develop strategies to ensure that the communities do not feel side-lined. This was to be an ongoing gripe – there was a feeling amongst some members that the good ideas generated by community members were picked up by professionals who it seemed used our efforts to legitimize their work. (Community volunteer, SA)

Problems with this form of acknowledgement reinforced a sense of 'us and them' between volunteer firefighters with significant "experience by expertise" and the management of their organisations which are perceived to have "experience by education".

There are a lot of blokes in paid staff who I believe shouldn't be there. Some of them have gone off, some of these young kids have gone through Uni, they've got a degree in environmental land management or something, which makes them an expert in fighting fires, and I reckon that's rubbish. Then you've got others in there that are old fellas that have been around the traps, volunteers for a few years, and they see an opportunity to get a job and they take it. And of course, once they take that job, you get on the paid stuff, they fall into line, and they forget where they've come from. …in our group…we got some fellas there that are an absolute whizz at firefighting, absolute, and I'm not talking about dragging hoses, I'm talking about management of firefighting…. And these fellas have gone off and they've fought fires everywhere, at Kangaroo Island and Sydney … the whole works and jerks. (Firefighter, SA)

Subtheme 3b: Lack of Acknowledgment and Respect for the Volunteer Perspective and Experience ('The Truth')

Participants stressed the importance of there being transparency and accuracy in how decisions were made during the fires as well as how these decisions and the events of the fires were assessed and formally recorded and acted upon in the aftermath. Several felt that the reports didn't accurately reflect the full scope of what had occurred, with some participants perceiving details as inaccurate and apportioning blame inappropriately. Acknowledgement, in this context meant listening accurately to the volunteers about what had occurred in the field, and truth-telling about failures that occurred during the process of fighting the fires, but also in command-and-control centres, and by those coordinating the response process.

Certainly, when the final report came out from the CFS, which they delayed, and delayed, and delayed. And they didn't want us to get a hold of it. And we just fronted up at the release. Finally getting that report made a difference in – it confirmed to me that there was some really major stuff ups here. And that was an acknowledgement about how we believed. But from that report it made us angry because nothing actually changed from that report. Well, it didn't seem to be anything changing. And now I know that there have been some changes. But that's subtle changes that actually haven't impacted on us yet. (SA Firefighter Focus Group)

Several participants described how they were 'shut down' in meetings held to debrief, assess the events in hindsight, or communicate the findings of reports. This lack of acknowledgement of the volunteers' perspective was particularly problematic for their mental health and recovery. For some, it was a source of ongoing anger, a sense of betrayal and distrust in the management of their organisations.

If we speak up about the problems, you find yourself in lots and lots of trouble…. We're going down there, yeah now he's in strife again because he said something. I got chatted up myself because I made a comment, and I was actually tapped on the shoulder and a bloke said to me, "You need to watch what you say because you can end up in a lot of trouble here", and I said "Oh I don't care, you know I'm an old man, I've been in that much trouble through my life that it doesn't matter", you know. I say things as I see them, and if they're not happy with it then bad luck. (Firefighter, SA)

They will ask for feedback, but it doesn't get written down if it's spoken and if you send it to them, they won't prove they ever wrote it down if you ask to see the list…. The guy at the front asked people for feedback, and I looked around and no one put their hand up, so I gave some feedback. It was a fairly sensible suggestion, and after speaking to everyone afterwards, everyone agreed that my suggestion was sensible, but in a public forum, I outspokenly said, "we should do this, that and the other", and he shot me down. I was publicly humiliated for having made a suggestion, and the guy … just dismissed what I had said as if it was nothing…. And the outcome of that is, of course, no one gave any other feedback out of all these hundred people. (Firefighter, QLD)

Subtheme 3c: Negative Acknowledgement: Blame

Several participants reported ongoing experiences in their communities that served to trigger them and hamper their mental health recovery. Perceived and actual receipt of blame from individuals in the community was something that volunteers had to deal with routinely as also being members of their communities. This left some participants struggling to move on from their traumatic experiences. Mental health impacts included unresolved guilt, helplessness, continued hypervigilance, defeatism and disillusionment. For some, the events during the fires remained unresolved because the volunteer firefighters could see the risks then and now, they remember how close the communities came to even more disastrous outcomes, and they understood more fully than the community the limitations around what could and couldn't be achieved and what was totally beyond anyone's control.

Well, for us I know that they had a meeting of the local villages' association, and they invited all the people that were firefighters on those days, on the day that it actually hit here, when this place was impacted…and the captain gave an address, and all the other guys were asked to stand up the community gave them like a standing ovation you know…. But then if you go across to the other side of the lake where they lost all those houses, I mean we were held accountable for that, and there was a point where we, that those guys get called to some kind of a job, like a backyard fire or whatever, and they get abused…like they lost 80 houses in one little area, one little sub-village of the village you know. And you can understand people being upset. And unfortunately, they have to target somebody to take the blame, and they targeted the firefighters of course, they weren't where they were supposed to be, and that's because there just weren't enough of us. And then they targeted the fact that we, that, you know they reckon it was the back burn that jumped up, we put a, we tried to put a hazard, the back burn into the fire to try and slow it down, and they say it was our incompetence slowing the back burn, and that you know on that day, like I've seen predictions for that day since then, and they pretty much predicted that every village for 100 miles on the coast was going to be wiped out, so. (Firefighter, NSW)

I had our car in for service yesterday…. And there was a guy there and he was talking to my wife and then he was talking to me…he lived in an area that got hit pretty bad but it's, he's sort of typical of the person that he can tell you what should have been done, but he's not a firefighter…. And the fire was in inaccessible areas, and he said, "we had these firefighters sitting at my property and they couldn't, the RFS wouldn't give them aircraft". And I said, "well

but there was no aircraft available" …. I said, "mate, I said half the State was alight", And I said half of Victoria was alight. And he went, "Oh" …. I don't get upset about stuff much these days, but I was really starting to get upset yesterday, it's bringing back a lot of memories that I really didn't want to talk about. But he's a person that, he's quite vocal in his own community, he's very politically motivated as well…. I was starting to get a bit upset about it, but my wife stepped in as well and because she's been looking after me for the last couple of years as well. But it's been as hard for her as well…. So, every now and again you still have the random community member that will come out with things. It's nowhere near what it used to be and when you look at the, all the royal commissions and inquiries there's been no blame apportioned anywhere at this stage as to what caused it…. So that issue of there being blame or no blame is pretty important. You would hope that the decisions that were made by our, our leaders for want of a better word were the right decisions at the time, given the information they had and the conditions that we were trying to work under. We were working under, like well everybody else, we were working under horrific conditions. And the average, the average fire fighter was doing the best he could…. You can't ever control nature…. It was bigger than all of us really. (Firefighter, NSW)

Some participants expressed ongoing hypervigilance and agitation, especially in the face of perceived complacency, ignorance and misplaced blame by the community, and lessons from the fires not being learned. These failures served to re-trigger and perpetuate mental health problems and delay individual recovery for some participants.

And look at the amount of regrowth now. We were going to do a bit of a training exercise yesterday with the local brigades, which would involve running some hoses from point A to point B, and when we went to try and walk through the bush we couldn't walk through it because of all this scrubby, crappy sort of regrowth stuff that's come up. And it's just running amok and we couldn't walk through it. So that's, that's kind of the issue, the issue around the village with people still dumping clippings in the bush and all the rest of it, and you've had a fire go through and knock everything out, so all those, all those introduced species that are really quite ferocious. (Firefighter, NSW)

Participants also described ongoing negative mental health impacts of organisational responses and reports that have been released since the fires. They described these processes as damaging and re-triggering; and perceived their purpose as 'finding someone to blame', rather than constructively learning from the events and improving future responses. This organisational failure to learn, from the Black Summer fires and countless earlier inquiries and reports, was cumulative in its impact on poor mental health, and contributed to some participants having difficulty resolving their anxiety about the future. The prolonged nature of these processes, whilst understandable, also contributed to perpetuating and prolonging volunteers' struggles with their mental health.

There's opportunity to learn and reflect, but the reports that have come out, they've haven't really sort of gone down that path. In fact … a couple of the workshops where they discussed the reports came out pretty much all the guys that did divisional command work, the report pretty much threw them under the bus…. And we try to say to them, like you know the reason it didn't work was there weren't enough of us, … you can't run a fire without a communication plan that works from top to bottom, and there was no middle, there was no one to put in the middle …, so you had individual trucks … straight through the command centre which just caused havoc you know. We had a division here that was 60 kilometres long. How can you control multiple fires, you've got to remember that the guys running this, there's two people sitting in the middle of a paddock, trying to run all this stuff, and this comes out that we were all to blame, throw us under the bus, not the fire patrol centre where there's 60 people working, and … with screens and all the rest of it you know. So that's a bit of a hard pill to swallow….

The people that were actually on the ground knew exactly what could and couldn't have been achieved, but yeah it was you know looking for people to blame. (Firefighter, SA)

The other problem is that the accountability has a long tail…because you wait for reports to be prepared and you – then they hold on to them and then they release them and then you see the damage of the reports and the consequences when they start implementing some of the recommendations of them, about who's going to get the chop and whatever and what's going to happen. (Firefighter, QLD)

Some participants struggled to move on from their traumatic experiences when they perceived that accountability for mistakes made had not occurred.

I still feel a lot of angst about the local council here, because you know the fire had been going for weeks before it got over onto the coast, and we were never going to stop it, that was obvious, the fires … to … up and down the state, you know we were just nipping at its heels … not doing anything. And you know Christmas Eve here, there's still people being allowed into the caravan park. They should have closed all the caravan parks at the start of December, just closed them…there was thousands of people, were all forced out onto the sand … at the lake…. You know if the wind did … a few points further around, a couple of thousand people would have been stuck in this, on this point with nowhere to go. (Firefighter, NSW)

Subtheme 3d: Acknowledgment of the Psychological Harm Inherent in the Role

Participants described their own processes of reflecting on and acknowledging the cumulative impacts of their role and career as a volunteer firefighter on their mental health and wellbeing. This was perceived as most helpful where volunteer role and identity could be maintained, albeit in new forms.

And you look at it and you say, "look gees, you know these fellas here are doing alright you know". It gives you some hope I guess…and we can step back, and every time you take a step back you know there's going to be someone who's going to step up, and finally you can sort of step right back and say, look I still want to be involved with the brigade, you know social aspects, but that's about it you know, I'm still, technically I'm still a member of the brigade and I can do things like, I can work on the logistics side and I can work on the communication side and things like that. (Firefighter, SA)

Whereas before it was expected of me, now it's not, and if I go up there, you know the chances are that, like if we had a day of total fire ban, we always had a standby crew that used to be at the brigade, at the station waiting to roll…. I could just sort of think, well no I don't have to say yes to those anymore, I can pick and choose what I want to do in the role, and you know it gave me more satisfaction about what I do actually then do….And that's important you know, because all of a sudden, after all this time you no longer, you know you're not, what's the word, indispensable anymore. (Firefighter, VIC)

A participant described how many in her community continued to struggle with their mental health and how this impacted her, given her strong commitment to others in her community. She emphasised the importance of governments and emergency service organisations acknowledging the inherent harms that are part of the role for all firefighters. In this sense, acknowledgement was about responsibility as a whole of service issue, not one left to the individual to make sense of the damage caused.

I guess it [the realisation of ongoing mental health trauma] creeps up on you. You become maybe quite bitter, and I think you end up seeing the negative side of pretty much everything. So, whatever the source of your major frustration was, I think it sort of blows in many areas. I have become even more protective over the community. And I've become perhaps critical and angry

towards those who don't have the same view. And part of that would be a readdress to thank all those in this service and to apologise for oversights of the past…. I think to me it's not a possibility but a probability that when you work in a disaster response or recovery space that you will be exposed to risk of psychological harm and that psychological safety is not built into current operation procedures. And I think that there is an acknowledgement that some may be impacted afterwards. But I would argue that it is more probably than possible that everybody will have some impact. You're all exposed to it as you might be a chemical or a noise…. So, I think it's still left a lot to individuals to self-manage…. I think it should be the fabric of the organisation to acknowledge, especially when we don't pay people, that this job may have a lifelong negative impact on your psychological wellbeing…. But we also, as an acknowledgement for their service, whether it's paid or unpaid, an acknowledgement to their family, that we make the services available for life…. The Heads of the MFS and the CFS they just didn't understand. They said, "Oh well, you know we've had awards; we've said thank you". (Community volunteer)

Theme Four: Cumulative Mental Health Impacts

Subtheme 4a: Mental Health Impacts Continue to be Experienced

It was noticeable that all participants still recounted vividly the events of the Black Summer fires, down to the details of days, dates, hours, specific interactions, decisions taken, and so forth. Several participants had sought psychological counselling or other formal mental health support. Several participants were aware of other volunteers who were still struggling with mental health who had not sought support or refused to do so. Both scenarios had ongoing impacts on the whole group – positively by encouraging them to then seek support for themselves, or negatively by mentally unsettling the crew, more broadly. Mental health impacts were seen as a process that lingered over time, not only arising from distinct events, then resolving.

> *I know that a couple of them in particular aren't doing, like it's a slow road back to what, you know to where things were, you know. And for some of them it's taken, even now they're still not; you know they're still working their way back you know. (Firefighter, SA)*

> *It's just the great denial, you know. I'm alright, but you know they're not. But yeah, it'll be, everybody in the brigade is seeing it, there's always a bit of an edge when it's about-it's unsettling. Just don't know when someone's going to go off -tipping the other way you know. So, yeah anyway we'll do, we'll move on and they'll have to find support where they can, we do as much as we can, so…. It's difficult for the other brigade members, but I guess there's a lesson in it isn't there? (Firefighter, NSW)*

> *I need to be careful about what I read. So, if it's in the context of firefighting, I've got to be really careful about picking that. Also, what's on TV, or – or Netflix or whatever. There's some really good stuff that I need to be really careful about that, because I know I can then – that night I usually probably don't sleep very well. (SA Firefighter Focus Group)*

Community members also experienced ongoing triggers in their daily lives that hindered their mental health recovery. Notably, the researcher delayed interviews with one community which has experienced lightning strikes which 'set everyone on edge again', many months after the fires. Sometimes, the triggers were less obvious.

> *Every Monday when I hear the CFS siren or a plane overhead, I stand there and look up and catch my breath without really realising I'm doing it. These triggers are clearly just under the surface. (Community Volunteer, SA)*

Subtheme 4b: Acknowledgment of the risks/impacts of cumulative trauma exposure which is an inherent in the role

Participants described a range of circumstances that had adverse cumulative impacts on their mental health, as noted above in the Acknowledgement theme. Some participants sought out formal treatment and therapy (some continue to receive regular clinical support), whilst others expressed feeling defeated and have left the volunteering role. The decision to leave was also underpinned by the accumulation of traumatic events and experiences over time. One such circumstance was the ongoing volunteer role and their attendance at other potentially traumatic incidents (such as road and other accidents and other fires), which continued regardless of the crisis period of firefighting passing for major events like the Black Summer fires, and which tested their resilience.

> *And then not long after that [the fires], you know we had a, we had a fellow who had a bad accident out at the recycling plant…and we spent, oh an hour and a half I think doing CPR on this bloke. And you know they flew, the rescue helicopter came in with a doctor and crews, and we couldn't save this bloke, and it's the same thing isn't it you know we've lost. You look at it and you think all this work that we've done, and you're put in a position where you can't win, you know you can't even bloody break even. (Firefighter, SA)*

> *Look I had, it sort of took a little while, but after the fires come through, the last, well not the last thing but we got to a house up on XX Road and only really had a small crew. Look it was late in the day and everyone was just falling down with exhaustion. And we went up there, and we tried to put this house out and we couldn't you know, and we lost the house. And you know I'm standing there pouring all this water into the house, and you know it's not going to do any good, and I sort of walked away thinking this is just one too many you know, we're just over, over 30 years in the CFS, you know we've just lost too many houses and people have lost too much, you know you stand there and you watch people's lives just disappearing in front of you, and- the decision to leave] It just gnawed at me you know. (Firefighter, SA)*

Subtheme 4c: Absence of 'Transition' Post Large-Scale Fire Events

Volunteers described how they were expected to switch straight back to their community roles and identities after major events. This phenomenon was discussed in the analysis of the first round of interviews which described volunteers as positioned across firefighter and community member identities. Volunteer firefighters' role requires them to perform this emotional adjustment repeatedly and regularly in their head as part of their role because they often live in the spaces where each role is played out. A more explicit 'transition' support process similar to that identified as needed for veterans transitioning from the military was suggested by some participants, given the intensity of the firefighting experience, role step-down problems, hypervigilance, and so forth. Whilst informal debrief and SPAM support is available to volunteers, there was a sense that there was little acknowledgement of role and identity liminality issues for volunteers.

> *And the other side of that is, particularly in that fire, like in the end, when it eventually came to a stop, it was like what do we do now? You know what's, I guess you're just running on adrenalin, and you know that whole deal. When all of a sudden it comes to a crunching stop, and you could just go, well you know what's happening? What do I do, I'm going back to the normal work…. You fall out of that world back into your own world, and that's a transition that we don't really look at. Everybody goes, "Oh you must be glad that's all finished", and you go, oh yeah, you know like it's, we did, it's something that really needs to be addressed and it doesn't … you know from one identity to another…. You know some of the practical stuff can be supported, but it's actually your whole mindset isn't it that's got to transition…it's like your, you know it's like pull the valve out of a tyre and it just deflates…it's kind of like the diver with the bends you know, you've got to find a way that maybe you've got a have some … at the*

station or some light training …, or something just so that you're still got the feeling that you know it's happening, but you're just … out of it…. I know across the board it's really, really common. (Firefighter, NSW)

You can't expect people to just day after day be in that situation, then have it just all of a sudden stop and, like it didn't happen, because you've just gone from normal to a new normal, and then you've got to go back to the old normal again, you know. All of a sudden, you've got all these, this other stuff running around in your head that you keep kind of thinking about…. That doesn't get probably any attention at all as far as volunteers go…. Because you're in a volunteer role, you're constantly sitting in those two worlds a bit, you know you're a member of the community but you're also, you know in this volunteer very sort of structured role. I think the other thing too is, if you take things like police or fire rescue New South Wales, the metropolitan sort of fire brigade, they go through this stuff, but then next week they're back at work in the same environment. Whereas the volunteers, you walk out of the fire station and you go back to, you know go back to being at home or your, you know get the bus to work or the train to work or running a farm or whatever it is you do. (Firefighter, NSW)

Theme Five: Peer Support, Camaraderie and Seeking Formal Mental Health Support

Subtheme 5a: The Importance of Informal Peer Support

Many participants recounted processes of learning through their traumatic experiences, over time, as described in Theme One. Participants did this as individuals but also with others in their immediate crew or station. They continued to emphasise the value of informal emotional support among volunteer firefighters as the main trusted form of ongoing mental health support and as the key vehicle for supporting volunteers to receive and seek support and eventually, for some, to seek out more formal mental health support.

Help-seeking and help-offering need to fit with firefighter volunteer culture which is predominantly underpinned by and starts with informal peer support, and also an emphasis on self-reliance, stoicism and community leadership, being 'strong' for the community and being there for each other. (Firefighter, SA)

[Informal peer support] Yeah that is the most important thing you know, because it's not just within your own brigade either, it's, but it's also within our group you know … healthy banter…but at the same time you could sit there and you could talk with them, and you could discuss any of these sorts of problems that might come up…. And you get that sort of practical support, but at the same time you can sit down with a beer, or a cup of tea, which you prefer, and you can sit down and you can say, "Geez what a shit of a day today was", and yeah well you probably don't even have to say it, you can just sit down and they'll know.

You can talk to your mates because they know exactly, exactly what you're talking about because they've been there…. And half the time they were there with you anyway you know. And they understand, and because they're your mates they won't think that you're lacking in any way you know.
They won't think that you're weak or they won't think that you're not up to scratch, so they, you know, they will back you up and they'll help you out. But if it's someone that you don't know, someone from outside. (Firefighter, SA)

For some participants, the process of healing was even more explicit and occurred as a group, such as revisiting the fire ground together, which was emphasised as a significant activity that must be done with informal peers, as explained by an SA fire crew:

- [Revisiting the fire affected areas with family] *And I haven't been able to go. And that was holidaying. And I just really, I – I didn't want to.*
- *I think my wife understood, yeah. Hard to explain because I couldn't really understand it either. But I know, I've been back with these guys [peers] twice. It was different going back with them, rather than going back as a family holiday, because we – when we went back it was about repairing for us basically. And – and trying to get some positives out.*
- *And we did.*
- *It was really worthwhile doing. Part of the reason I wouldn't go back is I didn't know how I'd react with – with family – with my wife. But also - there was a couple – another couple as well. And I – I - the potential to get really messy really quickly is – is there. And I didn't know – really need to – need to manage that.*
- *My wife wanted to go with me and see where I'd been. And we did it. And I found it was quite a positive experience. It didn't bring back any memories. (SA Firefighter Focus Group)*

A number of volunteers mentioned dedicated group retreats for volunteer firefighters as a safe model of peer support.

> *[Talking about joining a veteran/first responder peer retreat (Trojans Trek)] It was actually a bit useful to be just a little bit out of your comfort zone, definitely was. It sets you up for just telling the truth, and not brushing stuff aside. And – and you're putting in – for what you put in is what you get out. And I think if you're with all your mates you kind of just gloss over the details, and she'll be right mate…. And the prospect of going to a full-on therapist, or someone complete – that's a – a step too far for some people…. There's no way I'd go to a therapist. I'd probably get something out of it. But the cost, and etcetera – this is a lot more informal, and more up my alley. And I think most people's alleys would be – more people would be suitable to this than getting some professional from the city over. But yeah, especially (with what) these people (have) been through – you're not talking to a professional that's been to uni for 10 …. But someone else who's gone through their own shit…. But all we had to do on the trip – all we had to worry about was lighting the fire for breakfast, lunch, and tea, and boiling the billy…. And it's the pressure of the expectation when you completely step into an unknown – yeah, it's – it's a big thing. Two of the lads wanted to pull out the night before. But I had a chat with them and got them over the line. And they were probably the 2 that needed to go the most. (Firefighter, SA)*

Subtheme 5b: The Cumulative Pathway to Formal Mental Health Support

For several participants, contact with formal clinical mental health services (e.g., General Practitioners, Psychologists/Therapists, Psychiatrists) following the Black Summer fires was the first time they had sought out formal mental health support, despite some volunteers describing long careers as volunteers. In contrast to the first round of interviews where it was apparent that few participants had sought formal mental health support, the shift towards being more open to this support seemed to arise from it now being legitimised by the volunteer firefighter group; being embraced as 'normal' within the culture of the crew and the station, often modelled by captains or other senior or longstanding volunteers. This again took time, after first drawing on the support of peers and realising that they were still struggling. Often peers prompted this realisation of the need for more formal help as part of everyday and ongoing contact with the person in the context of their volunteer role.

> *We've always made sure we have debriefs after every event and after every training, just sit down and talk about, you know what we plan to do, what worked, what didn't work, and by*

actually doing … training exercises you're giving people just the idea that you're going to sit down and delve through things you know. I did a number of them after the fires, and I've found that it's hard to be honest with how I was feeling and what I'd done and the experiences I've had, and just you know just sort of pulled, that pull your heart out and put it on the table, so they can see that, you know it's not something you've got to keep hidden and you can talk about it. So, you're modelling it for them. But somebody's got to cast the first stone and say, "I've had these experiences and I've sought psychological help and …, and this is what, this is how it's come". And then gradually, you know someone else will pop up his, a thought or a feeling and then the ice is broken and away they go…. There's the quiet ones and there's the ones that are all bluff and bluster, and I don't care, none of that shit bothers me you know, and then you go, "Okay well you're a prime candidate". But yeah, it's all kind a softly, softly suggestion; why don't you, rather than you will, you know. (Firefighter, NSW)

However, despite some apparent shifts, as demonstrated by a more comprehensive and explicit focus on talking about mental health at the local level, some of the more unhelpful cultural features of the role lingered.

[Emphasising the need to focus on mental health] We've got four new members and we all drum them poor guys…. These ones are definitely getting drummed and it's not only by me anymore; they're all doing it. And are they receiving that, they're not questioning why that's the case. They totally understand because not only that we have shown them videos and pictures of – which we have never shown the public – of what we've done and what we've been through and that's when they went "No, we've got it". (Firefighter, NSW)

What you find with the volunteers is that I think that they are the stronger, more determined people in your community, and because they are stronger and more determined they resist, they resist a lot of this - my doctor reckons I've got PTSD, and I don't believe that that's the case…. They tend to want to look after their problems themselves. And as much as you can say to these fellas, look there's no harm in going to talk to somebody…. They will resist that because it is a sign of weakness, isn't it? They're used to being independent, autonomous, you know used to being the problem solver…. I don't know how to encourage these young fellas to go and seek help, because they will put it off. Yeah, it's like as soon as you show a sign of weakness the others will eat you…as soon as you show a sign of weakness, that's it, you're finished you know. (Firefighter, VIC)

Subtheme 5c: Qualities Volunteers Value in Formal Mental Health Support Providers

Participants emphasised several qualities they saw as crucial for mental health professionals to demonstrate in order to support volunteers' engagement with them. These qualities (many that were also apparent from and therefore aligned with the earlier examples of everyday informal peer support and peer group retreats) including ensuring transparency regarding expectations, not making the person retell their story or feel that they have to justify why they are seeking help, presenting as calm and attentive, being invested and proactive in monitoring the volunteer's wellbeing, being responsive in being available and flexible with appointments, and helping them feel safe and not retraumatised.

- *Well, the doctor said to me – are you suicidal? And I said, "hell no". So that's something a doctor can say, where someone else couldn't say it. They don't muck around. They just – they just ask you. And they say calmly. And – and then it gives you permission then to not keep it to yourself, or just think, oh okay this is yeah.*
- *I was lucky my – my GP just – just walks on water. And I'm pretty convinced that if I made it – well not now but if, during that 20 months I'd made a phone call to make an appointment, then I almost always got him the next day. So, I get the sense that he was actually looking out for me.*

- *And mine was ringing -how you going?*
- *And he knew me well enough that I wouldn't call him unless I really needed to. The other person was the psychologist…she could always ask the right question. And there were times when – there was – there was one time when I went – went down, and made an appointment, and got again in a couple of days. Which again I thought was pretty amazing. That I actually walked in there to see – that I was actually suicidal.*
- *Yeah, and that you don't have to justify why you're contacting.*
- *That they – they get past that bit made you – you don't have to surmount that hurdle – you know, I'm going to have to go in there. I'm going to have to justify why I'm here. I'm going to have to tell them this. And then I'm going to have to get to the why. And she – she had the ability – she'd just know it straight away. Without her actually asking me about whether I was suicidal. She – she just talked. And I can remember looking back at the conversation. And at the end she said, … you're okay. You're actually going to be okay. If she says that…I'm okay. I found that really, really valuable. (Firefighter Focus Group)*

However, participants also raised a number of concerns about available mental health support and a range of barriers to seeking it. These included actual or perceived inexperienced or unaligned counselling and treatment options, fear of stigma or being misunderstood and feeling vulnerable in unfamiliar settings, and organisational 'red tape' that undermined their attempts to connect with support services.

[Recounting veteran/first responder inpatient ward closure and move to general psychiatric hospital inpatient ward] *And a young fella, he and I were having a bit of a chat and he said, "I can't go to that place", he said "None of us will go to that place because when we went to [the dedicated veteran/first responder inpatient ward] we walked into there, the people knew who we were and why we were there because they were all the same…it didn't matter if they were patients, it didn't matter if it was the families of the patients, it didn't matter if it was the staff, they all knew who we were, and they knew why we were there. But at this new one, you walk in there and no one knows you, and no one knows why you're there…. We don't want to go down there and have people think that there's bloody something wrong with us…. You know not the pressures of having to be confronted with strangers who may or may not understand, and that you, you know the pressure of having to try and explain yourself. (Firefighter, SA)*

We attended a real bad accident, and we had a couple of members that were pretty upset about this, so somebody actually rang downtown and they got a counsellor to come up…. So, when we got back to the brigade there was a counsellor there, a young lady. And we came in and as we backed the truck in and we started cleaning up, she actually come out and she said, "Do you mind if I have a look at your truck, I've never been this close to one before?" And she's coming into counsel the firefighters on an incident that they've been to, and she has got no, hasn't got a clue, not a clue about what we've done or where we've been. (Firefighter, SA)

They've got this SPAM group that they, they've got up and about, and which is much better than things used to be, but it still gets to the stage where, the CFS is self-insured, so if they get a chance to wipe their hands of anybody, they will right. And … you know blokes that have been injured, they've said "no look you weren't wearing the right socks or something, so you're on your own" …they were looking for a reason that they can get out of it. (Firefighter, SA)

Conclusion

Material from the interviews conducted for this study confirms that the mental health impacts of fighting bushfires are real and longstanding. In the words of a community volunteer:

> *It's not a possibility but a probability that when you work in a disaster response or recovery space that you will be exposed to risk of psychological harm and that psychological safety is not built into current operation procedures*

> *I think it's still left a lot to individuals to self-manage…. I think it should be the fabric of the organisation to acknowledge, especially when we don't pay people, that this job may have a lifelong negative impact on your psychological wellbeing*

Where improvement in mental health is observed, this has been a slow process and is largely attributed to the trusted support provided through informal peer networks, who are also the conduit to more formal mental health support.

Challenges to recovery and a decline in mental health remain associated with a perceived lack of recognition and acknowledgement of the firefighter's perspective, identity, experience and expertise resulting in feelings of betrayal and exclusion.

Despite these remaining challenges however, participants are more accepting of the likelihood of a further trauma and the potential ramifications of this on their own mental health. This implies they are on a journey of learning, reflection and growth which will not only enhance their preparedness for future disasters but will assist their understanding of their own health and well-being over time.

Insights provided by the respondents to this qualitative study have been used in developing the recommendations aimed at supporting the ongoing mental health and wellbeing of volunteers in bushfire prone communities.