



## Employer Supported Volunteering - Frequently Asked Questions

### Question 1: Am I under obligation to release my emergency services volunteer employees to attend an emergency?

**Answer:** No, you have full discretion as the employer and are under no obligation to release your employees. However, during a declaration of an *Emergency Situation* or *State of Emergency*, employers are encouraged to release their employee volunteers (see question 10).

### Question 2: Approximately how many times will my employee need to attend emergency incidents during a year?

**Answer:** This will depend on the emergency service your employee is a member of and the local risks - are you in a high bushfire risk or tropical cyclone area? Is your group located near a high recreational boating area? Does your brigade respond to road crash incidents and structure fire? - And how many available members in your employee's brigade, group or unit who are also able to respond. On average a volunteer may be asked to respond between 2 to 10 times a year. Most of this is seasonal so during winter there would be no calls to fight a bushfire or support a community affected by a tropical cyclone for example. However road crash and structure fire response are not seasonal.

### Question 3: How long will an employee's absence typically last?

**Answer:** The absence of your employee from work will depend on how long you have agreed to release him or her for. Your employee may discuss their volunteer role and the magnitude of the incident with you to help you decide. You could expect your employee to be away for only several hours (for road crash and structure fire response) or between 1 to 3 days for a major bushfire or tropical cyclone impact (these are indicative timeframes).

### Question 4: Approximately how many hours of training will my employee have to attend during working hours?

**Answer:** DFES focuses on providing training outside of normal business hours to reduce the amount of time a volunteer may be away from work for training; though a prearranged amount of time for release from work for training would be beneficial.

**Question 5: Are volunteers required to attend every incident when they are called upon?**

**Answer:** No, volunteers are not obligated to attend every incident that they may be called upon to assist.

**Question 6: Are casual employees entitled to apply for Community Services Leave?**

**Answer:** Only employees working for a “national system employer” can take Community Services Leave. This includes casual, full time and part time staff (see page 7 of the Employer’s Guide for more details).

**Question 7: What if my employee is injured whilst on volunteer duties?**

**Answer:** DFES holds a *Personal Accident Policy* which provides a level of insurance and compensation cover to its registered volunteers, with benefits that are similar to workers compensation arrangements for paid staff. Members of a bushfire brigade are covered under their respective Local Government insurance policy. Details can be obtained from DFES’ *Worker’s Compensation and Injury Management Branch* on 9395 9300.

**Question 8: If my employee is injured while volunteering, is there opportunity for me to gain compensation through loss of productivity?**

**Answer:** Unfortunately there is no budget available for reimbursement if an employee is injured while volunteering and needing to take time away from work. DFES encourages you to have this conversation at the beginning to minimize risk and to achieve a mutual agreement between the volunteer and the employer – for example will there be capacity to provide temporary ‘light duties’ employment in the workplace?

**Question 9: What do I do if my employee is suffering emotional stress and/or difficulty following his/her return to work after emergency services volunteering?**

**Answer:** DFES recommends that if an employee is suffering an emotional crisis then immediate attention is provided to keep them safe (call a family member or ambulance) and don’t leave them alone. DFES can provide general support, assistance and counselling for all volunteers and their families. Below are some numbers and services.

- PeopleSense @ 1300 307 912
- Access @ 1300 66 77 00
- DFES Chaplain @ Pager (08) 9485 78 00
- DFES Peer Support Program – 9395 9874
- LifeLine @ 13 11 14

**Question 9: What types of documentation as evidence of attending an incident could employees provide?**

**Answer:** Individual brigades, groups and units may have different arrangements. However, it might be in the form of a letter signed by the commander, brigade

captain or unit manager (see the “Evidence of Attendance” sample form on page 11 of the Policy Template). If an emergency situation is declared, it will be published on the DFES website. If you require specific information, this should be discussed with your employee at the time of making the volunteer arrangements.

**Question 10: What are my obligations as an employer when there is a *State of Emergency* or a declared *Emergency Situation*?**

**Answer:** In the event that an incident escalates to a level where significant resources are required to respond to a high level of threat or impact from an emergency or disaster, the Minister for Emergency Services can declare a *State of Emergency* and the DFES Commissioner can declare an *Emergency Situation*. Employers don't have to release their employee volunteers if they feel their absence would be unreasonable; but in order to respond to the crisis and reduce impact on the community and environment, employers are encouraged to release their staff.

Under either of these declarations your obligations as an employer of an emergency services volunteer are linked to 3 main issues under the *Emergency Management Act 2005*. During a 'declaration' an employer must ensure:

Leave entitlements: All leave, including long service, paternal/maternal leave, sick and recreational leave, are to accumulate as if the employee is at work.

Pay entitlements: An employer must pay their employee volunteer their ordinary rate of payment for the time that they would have ordinarily worked while they are carrying out an emergency response.

There is no discrimination: This includes but is not limited to - An employer cannot dismiss an employee because they are an authorised emergency services volunteer who attends emergencies. This employee cannot be excluded from promotion or transfer or be excluded from entitlements as above.

If an employer is found to be in breach of these provisions they may receive a civil penalty of \$50,000 (a fine) and for each separate office be fined \$5,000 under the Interpretation Act 1984.

**Question 11: How do I manage employee fatigue following a volunteer's deployment?**

**Answer:** Depending on the nature of the emergency and period of deployment, volunteers may generate fatigue issues for their work place. Occasionally volunteer activities may be prolonged, stressful and vigorous and they may need to take some extra time to rest before returning to work. This is to ensure their personal safety and the safety of other staff at the work place.

The insidious nature of fatigue means that people who are fatigued are not always able to gauge their own level of impairment. For example the volunteer

may not realise how fatigued they are or they may try to “push through” their fatigue so as not to take too much time off work. Typically employees should have had a least 6 hours sleep in the preceding 24hours to manage fatigue effectively, this may vary depending on the individual’s needs.

By monitoring the employee for sign and symptoms of fatigue coupled with open and honest communications creates an opportunity to put control measures in place to reduce any risk. For example you may be able to provide increased supervision of the employee or assign the employee to a lower risk task which does not require operation of plant and machinery.

It is recommended that you and your employee discuss how fatigue will be managed should the situation arise.

Interesting fact: “Staying awake for 17 hours has the same effect on performance as having a blood alcohol level of 0.05 per cent and after 21 hours awake you demonstrate the same deterioration as having a blood alcohol concentration of 0.1 per cent.”

End.