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"VOLUNTEERISM – A FRESH PERSPECTIVE. A STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO RESEARCH FROM SA AMBULANCE SERVICE"

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Integration between volunteers and paramedics is fundamental to effective service delivery for SA Ambulance Service (SAAS). The following paper outlines the strategic response to research literature (Stand Up and Be Counted, Value Your Volunteer or Lose Them, and Asking Volunteers) that was undertaken by SAAS.

SAAS, like many other community organizations, faces the challenges of high volunteer attrition rates, diminishing regional resources, continual changes in community profiles and competition from other community agencies for volunteers. SAAS' goal is to become the **Volunteer's Choice** however to achieve this vision, a strategic management approach must be adopted. How does SAAS differentiate and leverage its brand within the local community and position itself as the most dynamic and rewarding volunteer organisation? What is the true impact of volunteerism on the 'paid' side of the service? How do we successfully integrate volunteerism and ensure that expectations of volunteers, career staff and community are achieved?

SAAS has 800 paid staff and approx 1850 volunteers. All volunteers are located in country SA and support 74 volunteer ambulance stations. Until recently there has been limited documented evidence and understanding of the key drivers and motivations of volunteers within emergency services and other cluster industries across Australia. June 2002 saw the launch of Asking Volunteers and Stand Up and Be Counted. To complement these research and planning resources, findings from the Value Your Volunteers (or lose them) conference (held in Canberra in 2001) are also available. Collectively, this literature was to provide the cornerstone of SAAS' new volunteer strategy.

During 2002, SAAS identified the number one risk to the sustainability of the organisation was the effectiveness and stability of its volunteer workforce. SAAS volunteers commit on average 120 hours per month. This is a significant contribution from a relatively small group of individuals who provide an essential community service - but at what cost? Preliminary analysis highlighted the plethora of issues and problems that are associated with volunteerism and the integration of volunteer ambulance officers within an organisational structure.

In April 2002, SAAS confirmed its commitment to creating a more satisfying and rewarding experience for its volunteers and career staff by firstly, creating a new position - Director, Regional Services, who would not only be responsible for Country SA but also the development of a volunteer strategy aimed at retention, development and recognition of the volunteer services.

In response to the volunteer literature nine key strategies have been developed and implemented in SAAS.

SAAS is committed to ensuring that future volunteer strategies, processes and support structures are sustainable and relevant to the changing needs of volunteers and the organisation as a whole. SAAS also acknowledges that volunteer initiatives cannot be developed in isolation of the 'paid' side of the business and a fully integrated and cross functional approach across all facets of service delivery is the only 'winning formula'. SAAS is experiencing significant change — both cultural and organisational, the greatest challenge will be to engage and mobilise the staff and successfully lead the organisation through this momentous period.