

The Rising Importance of Volunteering to Address Community Emergencies

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Introduction

This past summer, Canada faced multiple disasters concurrently as we slowly emerge from the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic along with a wildfire and flooding season that required assistance from the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). As a result, Canadians can no longer deny the present reality—new methods of approach to emergency management at the municipal level are required. With climate change expected to worsen over the next few decades (World Meteorological Organization, 2021), and resources at peak utilization or overwhelmed to the point of requiring provincial requests for assistance (RFA) from the CAF, communities are increasingly being left in devastated states following less than timely or adequate responses.

To mitigate this increasingly complex issue, the involvement of volunteers at the municipal level is becoming a prominent option over the past few years with the commitment of various disaster relief organizations, such as Team Rubicon and the Canadian Red Cross. Furthermore, with the most recent COVID-19 pandemic and disaster events in British Columbia, Alberta, and Newfoundland, St John's Ambulance has established an emergency management framework working group, seeking to further define the role of its volunteers within the scope of emergency management. Accordingly, community volunteerism leverages participants' intimate knowledge of their respective communities, as well as their ability to provide situational awareness on local situations & demographics. As a result, they become ideal resources to manage smaller, less specialized tasks in support of professional emergency management efforts.

Consequently, through the shared experiences of three emergency first responders within the firefighting and paramedical communities, this article explores community volunteerism within the scope of emergency management, demonstrating its growing importance at the community level. It further provides practical recommendations on the expansion of such involvement, including ways that municipalities can continue to support first responders moving forward, seeking to establish the

framework for something like the military approach to the Joint Interagency Multinational and Public (JIMP) environment.

Community Medical Services Emerging from the Pandemic

Specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, the healthcare community is one that has been significantly impacted over the past two years. This became increasingly apparent as it was identified that availability of resources was one of the limiting factors in the nation's ability to respond to and care for patients with COVID-19, but also with infection prevention and control. Consequently, many organizations, such as the Canadian Red Cross and St. John's Ambulance, stepped in within many provinces, providing assistance to the emergency medical system (EMS) with more routine tasks such as screening or testing in both paid and volunteer roles, thus freeing up the specialized resources to adequately address the more serious issues of patients or suspected cases (UNDGC, 2021).

Many of the volunteers available for such organizations already had professional backgrounds in the emergency medical services domain. These members, already familiar with community events through provision of services such as first aid and registration at reception centres, integrated seamlessly into the EMS chain of command, and were able to alleviate pressures on the latter links in the chain of survival. Specifically, this freed up staff to address the treatment of COVID-19 patients in the health care system, which was a particular focal point for many news outlets throughout the pandemic as a whole.

Robert Colwell is one such volunteer, both a medical technician with the regular force of the CAF, and also a medical first responder with St. John's Ambulance. Having been now deployed on more than one occasion for operation LASER—the CAF response to the COVID-19 pandemic—Robert underlines the importance of volunteering in such situations as providing the link between the affected population and the responding professionals. It was particularly evident to him working in both remote communities in Manitoba as well as the urban communities of the Greater Toronto Area.

He highlights how community volunteers provide “an added layer within the health care system, creating a resource between the activation stage via 911 and the professional medical response by paramedics.” This is a concept that has already been proven in the United Kingdom through the Community First Responders program, as well as at home with historical ambulance services such as with St. John Ambulance’s role in provisional service prior to the formation of Ambulance NB in 2007 (Ambulance NB, 2021).

In consequence, as the medical community grows following the resolution of the pandemic, Robert points out that the overall volunteer workforce will continue to expand with the oversight and guidance of professionals. Accordingly, this workforce is poised to encapsulate the medical chain of survival and the different cogs that play a role in ensuring that patients are identified, treated, and processed accordingly over to the right medical services. “The medical response volunteer community would benefit from an injection of professionals who have a keen mind to mentor and lead,” he explains. “This would, in fact, enhance the overall EMS ability to provide excellent care, while also helping it to grow as a trusted entity within communities”. Conversely, Robert identifies the interoperability as the key factor that could hinder this growth. “When taking into account the backgrounds of those members coming in, not everyone arrives with standardized communication training, or perhaps the same command structure”.

Accordingly, studies are currently ongoing at various levels to seek synergy between different types of volunteers, while also streamlining the onboarding process when arriving onto emergency scenes in preparation for operations. In waiting for analysis and results to be published, some organizations are taking action. For example, St John’s Ambulance is currently in the midst of standing up its emergency management framework working group in anticipation of future mass community emergencies, seeking to identify key terms of reference for its volunteers, as well as potential onboarding training requirements to bolster its members’ abilities to work in such environments.

A Growing Flame in Volunteer Firefighters

Another domain faced with increasingly complex challenges is that of the fire service, whose scope is no longer limited to structure fires in many rural communities, but also other incidents such as motor vehicle collisions, medical assistance to the local EMS, and forest firefighting. Moreover, with the flooding in many provinces over the past decade, fire services have been called upon to provide assistance to local disaster relief organizations for their water rescue expertise. Consequently, as the disasters grow in frequency and intensity, so must the fire departments in staffing and specialty capabilities. This is especially true for smaller or remote communities where most departments depend on either composite departments (a mix of career and volunteer members), or wholly volunteer based compositions.

Craig Price is one such volunteer who, as a professional firefighter with the Saint John Fire Department in New Brunswick, has also volunteered his time for a plethora of local surrounding departments such as Hoyt, Fredericton Junction, and Oromocto. In his experience working in urban settings and rural communities, as a third generation firefighter, he puts significant emphasis on the ability for volunteer firefighters to provide in-depth knowledge of their community based on their personal experiences living amongst the locals. “Take for example a professional carpenter who also serves their community as a volunteer firefighter,” he explains, “they could potentially be responsible for construction or renovation of affected buildings in such a small community, which would provide them first-hand experience combating fires within void spaces.”

With an intimate understanding of their respective communities, volunteers become the linchpins for overall disaster response, providing provincial or federal authorities situational awareness as observed by the ground. To this effect, Price underlines that “whereas the professional firefighter working in an urban environment is responsible for different types of structures without the ability to investigate each building in depth on a constant basis, the community volunteer is already committed

to the service by virtue of their volunteerism, and is more likely to have in depth knowledge of their own community. These members, who are also citizens of the community remain engaged and learn from senior members who have years of working within the local fire district.”

Rural communities make up over 18% of Canada (Trading Economics, 2021). Price emphasizes the growing need for fire service volunteers, in rural communities. “Some volunteer fire departments in small communities are struggling to meet operational needs and are seeking new members. Although many communities have industries to draw volunteers from, such as military bases or manufacturing mills, not all of them are so lucky, and it doesn’t necessarily mean people want to volunteer.” To this effect, Price points to the growing administrative requirements for interested firefighter volunteers, including a long-list of qualifications which lead to an incredible time commitment. “For people working full time jobs, it can be difficult to make ends meet with so much time spent dedicated to applying to a volunteer force, no matter the importance of the effect such volunteerism creates”. Qualification time and issues aside, Price highlights that volunteer firefighters have a local understanding of their communities, “volunteer firefighters play a more diverse role in the emergency management structure than ever before”. Their innate involvement with their citizens, as well as their presence on the ground acts as a pool of information that can and should be immediately tapped upon arrival of response forces on the ground.

Accordingly, one of the methods to abridge long training times and streamline the effectiveness of the training altogether is through training exercises. For instance, the New Brunswick Association of Fire Chiefs hosts an annual workshop in Miramichi which caters to development of members’ skills across a wide array of experience levels. Furthermore, this weekend-long workshop allows members from various departments across the province to enhance interoperability, which becomes crucial when more than a singular department is required for “mutual aid” in larger emergencies. This was evident during the TRACC fire of December 2019 in Minto, NB, which saw

more than 17 different departments respond to a fire at one of the largest employers within the area (Bonang, 2019).

Institutionalizing Community Response

As disasters and emergency situations grow in complexity, so too must the response within the emergency management community. For example, as flooding becomes more prevalent in both rural and urban areas, it requires response not only from organizations such as the Canadian Red Cross or municipal authorities, but also often from the CAF to stem the damage caused by the event. Furthermore, other agencies such as local fire departments and medical services become involved to prevent and mitigate secondary effects including electrical fires and required resident evacuations. This overlap of agency movement within an area of operations can become incredibly cumbersome and ineffective without a centralized command structure, particularly if, and when, organizations are not communicating between themselves or with the key stakeholders involved within the affected communities.

Canada currently has an emergency management framework, with the third edition in 2017 outlining the emergency management components and phases, as well principles that reflect the essence of emergency response in Canada. The document is published by the emergency management policy and outreach directorate within *Public Safety Canada*, and is currently slated for revision on a five-year basis. (Public Safety Canada, 2017) Although the document provides a generic framework and includes participation from stakeholders, it fails to identify a streamlined command structure or an onboarding process to incorporate spontaneous volunteers or community volunteers into any such response.

A previous issue of the *Canadian Journal of Emergency Management* outlines in detail the command structure of one such organization—the CAF—illustrating the complexity of command as well as the scale to which such an entity must tailor itself depending on the type of response (Fremis, 2021).

Accordingly, this author witnessed an encumbered environment during the 2019 operation LENTUS response to the National Capital Region flooding as representatives from agencies such as Team Rubicon, the Canadian Red Cross, the City of Ottawa, local fire department and community leaders, struggled to achieve synergy early on in assessing the key issues at hand, then tailoring consequential response plans.

Ultimately, an effective collaborative effort was achieved in response to the floods, due to the CAF's implementation of the JIMP environmental approach. In broad terms, JIMP is a doctrinal term to describe the environment that military operations take place in, with certain links established between the various entities, subsequently leading to principles that allow for efficiency amongst the actors (Simms, 2008). Although JIMP generally describes the contemporary environment of military operations, it can also be drawn upon to look at the domestic operational environment, specifically within the scope of emergency management.

Many of the principles from the JIMP environment are part of command structures that already do exist, such as the Blue Card System or the Incident Command System (ICS). In fact, both are popular with fire departments already, and have seen extensive use in streamlining the assignment of assets during fire operations since Canadian exposure following assistance to US wildland departments in 2000 (Wildfire Alberta, 2012). Moreover, as a reaction to yearly flooding in both rural and urban areas, the New Brunswick Emergency Measures Organization has implemented training courses using ICS to ensure overall synergy during incident response among its organizations (EMO NB, 2021).

When applied in principle, one can see the theoretical effectiveness of JIMP in addition to the practical application mentioned above. To this effect, following the 2013 Alberta Floods, the Calgary Emergency Management Agency and Defence Research and Development Canada's Centre for Security Science (DRDC CSS) published a joint report entitled *Building a Framework for Calgary's*

Emergency Volunteers. This report sought to document a “capability-based planning approach to building a framework to integrate volunteers with the official disaster response” (Waldman, Verga & Godsoe, 2016). Although it proposed conclusions underlining the importance of community volunteerism, it outlined outstanding questions speaking to the liaison and coordination of community volunteers, management of spontaneous volunteers arriving at the area of operations, and potentially pre-affiliating community volunteers based on capabilities into clusters. Consequently, JIMP addresses these issues by outlining the separate nodes of joint, interagency, and potentially multi-national approaches, all within the public domain in this context. Accordingly, it outlines the importance of a centralized node overseeing the command structure, thus flowing the information through its structure.

Regardless of the command system in place, the important notions are based on standardized communication, and that it centralizes overall incident command to ensure that lines of effort work in parallel, and not in contravention to each other. Moving forward, it may also become important that systems hold international recognition to ensure standardization within the international community, particularly considering the increase in international aid that has become available through the support of both professional organizations and volunteers in the recent years. This will particularly be relevant if we consider the multi-national node of JIMP, and is of particular importance considering the most recent efforts in places such as Australia and Turkey, where overwhelming emergency situations have actually required international aid.

Conclusion

In conclusion, with emergencies and disasters in Canada increasing in frequency and causing more stress than provincial and municipal capabilities alone can bear moving forward. As communities continue to grapple with the new reality of annual emergencies and natural events that require

addressing, it is evident that organizations—both within and outside these affected communities will play an increasing role in prevention, mitigation, and response as depicted above.

Accordingly, this article outlined the current state of volunteerism, leveraging specific examples of entities within the greater emergency management community. As the rising importance of volunteerism becomes apparent in addressing such emergencies, the need to institutionalize the response within such a complex environment grows. It would be beneficial to standardize and follow previously established principles, such as those of the CAF's JIMP environment or a command structure based on existing resources, such as ICS or Blue Card.

Taking a note from history, it was James Doolittle who is fabled to have said, "There is nothing stronger than the heart of a volunteer". In this statement, the commander of the fated Tokyo raid was issuing a call to arms to his brothers and sisters with the United States plunging into World War II following the Pearl Harbor attacks. Although Canada is not heading towards an all-out war or sending airmen to bomb a city in a far-away land with little hopes of returning, it *is* facing a challenge with natural emergencies and disasters that will require further commitment from the average citizen toward maintaining security and readiness for society as a whole.

Moving forward, it will be a collective effort between professionals and volunteers that keep communities safe, prosperous, and able to face any adversity lying ahead. The question only remains about who will answer the call, and how we will manage the overall response in an organized manner to ensure efficiency and effectiveness towards the protection of our friends, families, and the places we call home.

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