

# Community Matters

VICTORIA STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE



# CONTENTS

## Highlights from the autumn edition



### FIRE SUPPORT

THE POWER OF ORANGE

09

VICSES KILMORE UNIT BOOST CAPABILITY AT INCIDENT CONTROL CENTRE

11



### FLOODING

VICSES SORRENTO UNIT PLAYS PIVOTAL ROLE IN MULTI-AGENCY COASTLINE RESCUES

16



### CAMPAIGNS & EVENTS

VICSES DUNKELD UNIT VOLUNTEERS MARK OPENING OF NEW FACILITY

19



### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

CELEBRATING COMMUNITY AT MIDSUMMA FESTIVAL 2026

26



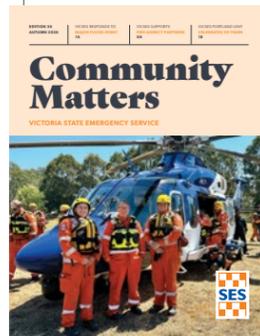
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### Front cover:

VICSES Seymour Unit land based swift water training.



# Welcome

## Hello everyone, and welcome to the autumn edition of *Community Matters*.

It's been an incredibly busy start to the year in our sector with fires tearing through multiple parts of the state, flash flooding and several major rescue operations. I want to express my gratitude to all VICSES members who gave their time over this period to support our partner agencies and communities.

Throughout January, our members played a crucial role in contributing to fire support locally, as well as at incident, regional, state and regional control centres. Many VICSES members were deployed to fire impacted areas on short notice, and I am deeply grateful for the immense dedication and professionalism shown. You can read more about these deployments and our role in fire support across the state on pages 06-15.

I also thank all those who participated in leading response and supporting recovery efforts following the Great Ocean Road flash flooding. VICSES members responded rapidly as Lorne Cumberland and Wye River became inundated. I was lucky enough to see VICSES members leading the unusual and complex task of retrieving cars which had been swept out to sea in the days following. For a full recount of the event, check out page 17.

Congratulations to Di Dale and George Haitidis, who were awarded the Emergency Service Medal by the Governor General as part

of the Australia Day Awards. Both members have demonstrated exceptional commitment to VICSES and their communities across over 40 years of combined experience. You can read more about their achievements on pages 24-25.

On 1 February I was delighted to attend the Midsumma Pride March alongside many of our VICSES members and partner agencies. It was a wonderful opportunity to celebrate diversity and champion inclusion both within VICSES and in the communities we serve. Thank you to all those who made this incredible, high-energy activation happen, which you can read about on page 27.

Other events we've celebrated recently include exciting unit milestones, such as the VICSES Portland Unit's 50th anniversary, and the opening of the brand new VICSES Dunkeld Unit facility. Find out more about these events on pages 18 and 19.

I hope you enjoy this edition of *Community Matters* and stay safe.

Kind regards,

**Rob Purcell**  
CEO Victoria State  
Emergency Service

## MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES

COMMUNITY MATTERS AUTUMN EDITION, 2026

This year has already been an incredibly busy one for VICSES members, who have helped keep Victorians safe through severe fires, storms, floods and heatwaves during a relentless summer period. I cannot thank you all enough for stepping up to support our fire agencies and communities during this time of need.

At the height of these extreme weather conditions, I visited the State Control Centre to meet with key sector leaders and members, and to be informed on the statewide response. I also spent some time at the Emergency Relief and Incident Control centres in Seymour to better understand the situation at a local level.

Seeing the response in action was a sobering experience, knowing that so many Victorians were living with deep uncertainty about their safety, homes and livelihoods. Yet it was also heartening to see such strength and care from people across the state who showed up to help those in crisis – whether as first responders, members of community groups, or local councils.

It was incredibly moving to travel to Wye River in the wake of the devastating flash flooding along the Great Ocean Road in mid-January. I met people who had been at the frontline, protecting the local community, on top of supporting recovery already underway. I am grateful to the VICSES crews and their inter-agency counterparts who came to the rescue when this community needed you most. You can read more about the flash flooding response on page 17.

Funding and practical support is available to help impacted families, communities, businesses and farmers to recover and rebuild, including clean-up assistance and mental health services. My thoughts are with everyone impacted as community members continue to recover from the distressing events we've seen this summer.

It has been remarkable to see our VICSES volunteers and staff rising to these challenges. When disasters strike, you step up – bringing unwavering dedication, courage and empathy to people at their most vulnerable. As we enter the often busy Easter period, I hope you are all able to take some time to rest and relax in the coming weeks.

**Thank you, stay safe and take care.**

**Vicki Ward**  
Minister for Emergency Services  
Minister for Natural  
Disaster Recovery



### OTHER FEATURES IN THIS EDITION

#### IN THE FIELD

VICSES VOLUNTEERS STEP OUTSIDE  
21

DIFFICULT JOB, DONE TOGETHER  
21

#### GENERAL NEWS

VICSES PAIR CELEBRATED FOR DECADES OF EXEMPLARY EMERGENCY RESPONSE  
24



The Victoria State Emergency Service respectfully acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional owners of the land throughout Victoria and acknowledges their ancestors and elders, past and present.

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# REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE

1 OCTOBER – 31 DECEMBER



STATEWIDE

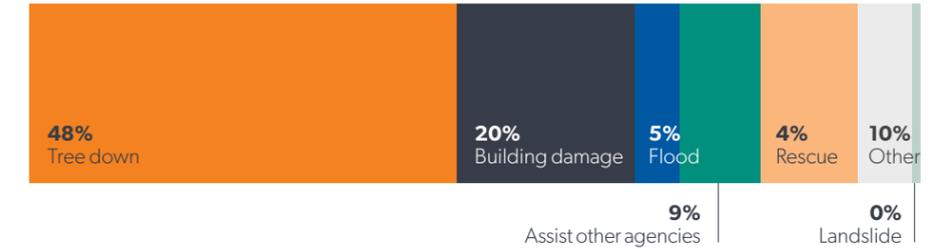
**9,108**

TOTAL RFAS

**5,426**

TOTAL VOLUNTEERS

BREAKDOWN



WESTERN REGION

**4,287**

TOTAL RFAS

**2,526**

TOTAL VOLUNTEERS

Tree down	1,939
Building damage	1,045
Assist other agency	388

BUSIEST UNITS + TOTAL RFAs

**355**   **272**   **236**

Wyndham Unit   Heidelberg Unit   Fawcner Unit

EASTERN REGION

**4,702**

TOTAL RFAS

**2,680**

TOTAL VOLUNTEERS

Tree down	2,506
Building damage	737
Assist other agency	345

BUSIEST UNITS + TOTAL RFAs

**294**   **274**   **246**

Knox Unit   Whitehorse Unit   Emerald Unit



DECLARED OPERATIONS

- 9 January - 2 February: Fire support, statewide
- 8-11 January: Severe weather, statewide
- 15 January: Flash flooding, Great Ocean Road





### MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF OFFICER OPERATIONS

The High-Risk Weather Season has delivered extraordinary challenges, including significant fires, severe storms and flash flooding across Victoria. These events have tested the resilience of our communities and our organisation in demanding and, at times, unprecedented ways.

Throughout this period, our volunteers and staff have risen to every challenge with professionalism, resilience and compassion. VICSES volunteers have consistently stepped forward in large numbers, often setting aside personal commitments to serve their communities when they were needed most. I have been proud to see their efforts recognised by communities, partner agencies and those directly impacted by these events. I also want to acknowledge the strong leadership, coordination and support provided by our staff across regional and state and business units, whose work enables our volunteers to operate safely and effectively.

I was honoured to receive a call from Her Excellency the Honourable Sam Mostyn AC, Governor General of the Commonwealth of Australia, who expressed sincere gratitude and praise for the work of VICSES volunteers and staff. She noted our response to major flooding events and our ongoing support to fire agencies across Victoria. Recognition at this level is a powerful testament to the professionalism, capability and impact of our service.

Throughout January, VICSES members were widely deployed to assist emergency responses across the state, undertaking a broad range of operational, incident management and command roles at local, regional and state levels. On one occasion, members responded at short notice to support evacuation activities, reaching more than 1,100 properties. These efforts were highly valued by partner agencies and provided vital reassurance to affected communities.

Following periods of heightened operational demand, it is a timely reminder to remain mindful of fatigue and the importance of rest. Sustained effort and intense workloads can have a cumulative impact, often felt over time rather than immediately. Taking moments to pause, decompress and reflect on personal limits is essential.

As tasks and projects are restarted, it's important that our members prioritise wellbeing and seek support where needed. Looking after ourselves and each other is fundamental in sustaining our capacity to serve.

I extend my deepest gratitude to every volunteer and staff member, and to your families and employers, for supporting this ongoing commitment. Your service has provided safety, reassurance and support when it was needed most.

**Kind regards,**  
**Alistair Drayton**  
**VICSES Chief Officer Operations**



TALLANGATTA



COLAC



## VICSES supports FIRE AGENCY PARTNERS



KILMORE

**By Lauren Castle, Corporate Communications Advisor, VHO**

This January as devastating fires tore through 400,000 hectares across the state, VICSES members leapt into action supporting our fire agency partners and communities. Members were positioned at local, regional and state control centres and provided on-the-ground assistance, all while maintaining usual response activities.

On 9 January, there was a Total Fire Ban in effect for the entire state with Catastrophic Fire Danger ratings across four weather districts. Fires compounded with extreme heat and severe weather conditions to create a treacherous weather system. VICSES received 875 requests for assistance on this day alone, mainly for trees down, in addition to providing vital incident management team support for fires.

In the weeks following, fires and extreme weather conditions continued to ravage the state. VICSES members played a crucial role in fire support at majorly impacted locations including Cobram, Carlisle River, Longwood,

and Walwa, which you can read about in this edition.

On 26 January, a taskforce of over 140 VICSES members from metro areas deployed on short notice to the Otways to support Victoria Police with doorknocking. Volunteers and staff were tasked to encourage locals to follow Evacuation Warnings issued due to the Carlisle River Fire and extreme fire conditions. Check out pages 8-9 for volunteer stories reflecting on their experience of this deployment.

We cannot thank our amazing volunteers enough for their incredible teamwork and dedication in challenging circumstances this High Risk Weather Season. You truly are amazing. ■

# Deployment through my eyes

Told by Paul O'Donoghue, transcript by Monique Napolitan, VICSES Frankston Unit volunteers



THIS IS THE STORY OF A 442KM ROUND TRIP DEPLOYMENT TO SUPPORT VICTORIA'S FIRE RESPONSE THROUGH THE EYES OF A VICSES VOLUNTEER.

It starts quietly. A call comes through at around 2:15pm, calmly handled by Duty Officer Mick. In that moment, I already know the course of my day - and night - has shifted. Member availability is checked and hands go up without hesitation. Four members respond. Three are deployed. No fuss, no drama. After years at VICSES, you recognise that familiar pull immediately - the one that says, "you're needed".

We divide the town and get to work. Street by street, door by door. The community receives us well - people are open, grateful, and keen to talk. We talk not just about the warning, but about their worries, their plans, and the uncertainty that comes with days like these. We aim to complete the task by dusk, but meaningful conversations take time, and we run over.

**“After years at VICSES, you recognise that familiar pull immediately - the one that says, “you’re needed”.”**

PAUL O'DONOGHUE, VOLUNTEER, VICSES FRANKSTON UNIT

I head out alongside two other members, Vicki and Phil. We leave our local headquarters (LHQ) knowing it will be a long run, travelling toward Colac Police Station with over 140 other VICSES members from across Metropolitan Melbourne. Different LHQs, different roads, same intent. When you've done this work long enough, you can feel the quiet professionalism in that kind of convergence.

As expected, logistics shift quickly. The police station carpark can't handle the volume of people assisting, so the muster point is moved to the boat ramp carpark at the local lake. It's a scene I've witnessed many times before - organised chaos, calm instructions, reflective vests moving with purpose.

The contingency is split into four taskforces, each led by a Deputy Controller. I'm appointed to lead Taskforce 3, and we're deployed to the township of Birregurra. Our task is clear: Knock on doors throughout the town and ensure the community understands the Watch and Act warning in place for a nearby fire.

Before standing down, we met with the town's Country Fire Authority Captain and the Regional Group Officer. Their appreciation for the support we provided to their community is genuine. Those quiet moments of mutual respect between agencies matter. They remind us that we're all pulling in the same direction, especially when conditions are challenging and fatigue is setting in.

With our task complete, Taskforce 3 is demobilised. We turned back toward home, arriving at the VICSES Frankston Unit around 1:30am.

A 442km round trip isn't just distance on a map. It's hours of leadership, trust in your people, adaptability under pressure, and responsibility to both your team and the community you're serving. It's dropping everything without question and showing up where you're needed, even if you'll never return to that town again.

It's why, after all these years, I still answer the call - because it still matters, every single time. ■



# The power of orange

By Matthew Rankin, Deputy Controller, VICSES Whitehorse Unit

On 26 January 2026, the power of orange was unmistakable. In one of the largest rapid deployments in VICSES history, over 140 members mobilised at short notice as extreme bushfire conditions threatened communities across the Great Otways. With the uncontained Carlisle River fire advancing, VICSES volunteers converged at Colac to support emergency warnings and community readiness across several at risk towns.



I deployed from the VICSES Whitehorse Unit with Mindy Hansen and Justin Wilson in our brand new Twin-Cab Support vehicles. On arrival, I was asked to step into a coordination role, helping to organise all three VICSES taskforces as plans were rapidly developed.

Once we had established command and control, the first two taskforces, each made up of 10 VICSES 4WDs from across the state, deployed to

Lavers Hill and Forrest to conduct urgent doorknocking and support evacuations. Across the operation, VICSES crews knocked on more than 1,100 properties collectively, checking on residents, sharing current information, and encouraging them to enact their fire plans.

After assisting with the deployment of Taskforces 1 and 2, I was appointed Deputy Task Force Leader for Taskforce 3, alongside Paul O'Donoghue from

the VICSES Frankston Unit, leading a convoy of 16 vehicles heading to Birregurra. Our mission was to ensure residents understood they were in a Watch and Act zone, were prepared if conditions changed, and had someone on the ground to talk to during an uncertain night.

What struck me most was the capability, professionalism, and heart of our volunteers. Leadership roles shifted constantly, and I want to acknowledge the outstanding efforts of Christos Hatzis, Darcy Brown, George Katris, Goldie Pergel, Scott Bernhard, and Shane Frost, who led and supported taskforces with absolute composure.

I'm incredibly proud to stand alongside such dedicated, volunteer emergency responders who stepped away from their families to protect communities in need. The power of orange has never felt stronger. ■

### MORE INFORMATION

Do you know what a Watch and Act warning is? Get to know your warnings on the VicEmergency website:





# VICSES Tallangatta Unit provides crucial fire support

By Debbie Bonanno and Anthony Wilson, VICSES Tallangatta Unit volunteers

Throughout the devastating Walwa fires in January, VICSES Tallangatta Unit members joined forces with members from neighbouring units to provide support at our local Incident Control Centre (ICC).



**V**ICSES crews provided critical support delivering vehicles, equipment, meals, and personnel with precision and care. Our members took on key roles such as Basecamp Manager, Basecamp Support, Catering and Accommodation Officer, Community Liaison, Emergency Management Liaison Officer, Inter Agency Commander, Peer Support, Public Information, and Radio Operator. It was terrific to

see our team take on such a wide variety of roles, a testament to the versatility of our people.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Country Women's Association, Tallangatta Men's Shed, and community members who have worked tirelessly to create ration packs, significantly easing the pressure on VICSES volunteers. Our thanks also to the Anglican Church for allowing us the use of the hall to make the magic happen.

Special thanks to our dual-response members, Greg, Mel, Nicole, Paul, and Ross, who are both VICSES and Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers, for their inspiring dedication.

We also appreciate the invaluable contributions of our members who played vital roles in ICC Support, including Andy, Anthony, Leah, Mel, Russell, and Vicky.

We thank each and every one of our unit members for their tireless efforts maintaining daily responsibilities while keeping our community safe and supported.

Our appreciation also goes to neighbouring and interstate VICSES units who provided assistance, including the VICSES Bright, Chiltern, Emerald, Frankston, Malvern, Myrtleford, Swan Hill, Wodonga, Wangaratta, and Yackandandah units, in addition to units from ACT and NSW.

Our thoughts are with those who have lost homes, property, or livestock; you are not alone, and we stand with you. Our deepest thanks go to those supporting them during this challenging time. ■



## VICSES Kilmore Unit boost capability at Incident Control Centre

By Jayde Gillot, VICSES Kilmore Unit volunteer

IN JANUARY, WE EXPERIENCED TWO BIG DAYS SUPPORTING THE INCIDENT CONTROL CENTRE (ICC) AND COUNTRY FIRE AUTHORITY (CFA) STRIKE TEAMS, WITH PLENTY OF KILOMETRES, COORDINATION, AND TEAMWORK ALONG THE WAY.

### SUNDAY 25 JANUARY

**T**he day kicked off with our crew leaving the VICSES Kilmore Unit at 9:00am and arriving at the Seymour ICC by 10:00am. After a quick orientation with Nicki, we got straight into logistics mode. Ice runs for the eskies, food pickups, and deliveries started rolling early, including a stop at Gaffney's Bakery for CFA strike teams working along the Goulburn Valley Highway.

By lunchtime, meals were collected and delivered, ICC supplies were restocked, and the afternoon shifted into admin support, helping the logistics team organise invoices and paperwork. As the day wrapped up, dinner was delivered to Seymour CFA before our team sat down for a well-earned meal at the RSL. We rolled back into Kilmore just on 8:00pm, tired but happy to have helped keep things moving.

### TUESDAY 27 JANUARY

**W**e were back at it again, leaving Kilmore at 9:00am and arriving at the ICC before 10:00am. We kicked things off with another ice run, followed by multiple food collections and deliveries to CFA strike teams across Yea and Molesworth. Rowan and I were on the road for most of the day, covering a big patch of the region, while Dean supported logistics tasks and deliveries, including a run out to Ruffy alongside a CFA logistics member.

From Seymour to Yea, Molesworth, Mansfield, Alexandra, and back again, the day was a constant juggle of pickups, drop offs, receipts, and timing. Dinner runs closed out the operational side of the day, with meals delivered to Yea CFA before everyone regrouped back at the ICC.

Just before 8:00pm, we were advised no further support was required, and the team headed home, arriving back at Kilmore a little after 8:15pm.

A big thank you to all those at the Kilmore Unit who put their hand up to help out.

These days are not flashy, but they are critical. Quiet support, long drives, and a lot of behind the scenes work that helps crews on the ground focus on what they do best. I am really proud of the effort and the teamwork shown across both days. ■



VICSES COLAC UNIT

# My experience: CARLISLE RIVER FIRES

During the onset of the Carlisle River fires, I got a phone call asking if I could arrange a VICSES Colac Unit member for the Colac Incident Control Centre as Acting Incident Agency Commander (IAC). They needed someone as soon as possible until region could get a replacement, ideally a member with knowledge of the local area. With time of the essence, we filled this request within the hour.



By Steve Tevelein, Unit Controller, VICSES Colac Unit

**M**ore phone calls came through arranging to put together members for deployment into the Colac ICC. Members would fill two crews of two members for a four-day rotation. Again, Colac members rose to the occasion and from that day forward we hit the ground running filling shifts day and night for 24 days straight.

**“To say our unit had their fair share of jobs for the month is an understatement.”**

STEVE TEVELEIN, UNIT CONTROLLER, VICSES COLAC UNIT



Our amazing crew stood up when needed as this event was right in our backyard, with members knowing locals that had property and homes under threat due to the intense fire.

During the Catastrophic Fire Danger Day on 9 January, we had extra support vehicles placed at Colac Unit to support the rotating roster in place, so that our unit was ready to respond to any rescues which may have come our way so we could still respond promptly. Whenever a request for assistance came through, our crews responded within minutes.

Our crews assisted with day and night ground support and were flexible with any duty that was required of them. It was a fantastic feeling as a Unit Controller knowing we that had such an adaptable group of members.

As Unit Controller I juggled member shifts, rotating them through the ICC daily and making sure each member got their chance to experience being part of supporting the fire response. I also made sure they didn't double up their shifts so they could get the required amount of rest.

For 23 days, our unit ran as usual on top of the requests from the ICC. We still dealt with road rescues, trees down on roads and structures, and to top it off we had the flooding at Wye River in the mix of it all. So, to say our unit had their fair share of jobs for the month is an understatement.

Our unit put in 434 volunteer hours during the month of January with most of those hours being in the ICC space. I am incredibly proud of the huge commitment we made as a unit to the community during this devastating period. ■



# VICSES Brimbank Unit members deploy to Colac

By Zac Sutton, Deputy Controller, VICSES Brimbank Unit

**D**uring the latest round of fires around Victoria, the VICSES Brimbank Unit had four members deployed to Colac assist for six days. I was one of the members fortunate enough to be able to put my own work aside and head down to help. None of the deployed team from my unit had been on a deployment before, so we were all walking into it without any idea of what to expect!

Brimbank assisted with ground support running out of the Colac Incident Control Centre (ICC). We reported to a member of the Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) team, and our tasks varied depending on the priorities at the time. During the first few days, we were involved with escorting essential services like the power

distribution company, water tankers, and food deliveries to the forward fire lines. This was to ensure remaining residents and those fighting the fires had access to essential services. This was critical, as due to the roadblocks and cordoned off zones, their vehicles could not pass without us.

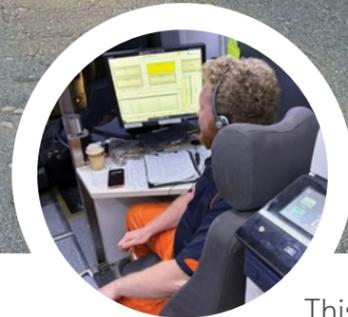
We also played a crucial role in closing down the forward operating basecamps in Gellibrand and Irriwillipe and relocating supplies to the basecamp at the Colac Recreation Reserve. During this we collaborated closely with members of FFMVic and the Country Fire Authority (CFA).

Being involved in supporting the CFA and FFMVic was eye opening. In my time with VICSES there have been times where I was exhausted, but this was incomparable to the exhaustion we experienced post deployment. I learnt a lot about emergency management, and the experience provided a level of insight into the procedures and roles required to successfully coordinate a response to such an event.

While the Brimbank Unit worked hard for those six days, my praise goes to those members of FFMVic, CFA, other VICSES units that attended, and the civilians that showed up and didn't bat an eyelid when asked to produce 600+ meals at short notice, or jumped to it when asked to help out with necessary arduous or mundane tasks.

I am proud of what VICSES contributed and while I was ecstatic to sleep in my own bed once I got home, I would happily put my hand up again to assist. ■





# Longwood fire response: VICSES Euroa Unit joins forces with local CFA

By Georgie Cardillo, Unit Controller,  
VICSES Euroa Unit



This January, the VICSES Euroa Unit was the busiest it's ever been. The increase in activity wasn't because of usual events like flooding or storms. It was because of the fire at Longwood, 15 minutes from Euroa which was spreading like crazy. The Country Fire Authority (CFA) needed our help, so we got to work. We transported water, generators, class A foam (for fighting fires), chainsaw fuel and oil, meals, we helped run their radios and did so much more.

Over the past year we have been working hard to train our support members to be able to help in the incident management space when a flood or storm happens. This paid off and almost all our members - both operational and support - did shifts in the Incident Control Centre (ICC) or running errands from the Euroa Unit. We had members working in logistics, reception, radios, and as Incident Agency Commander among other functions

It was hard work, long hours and a demanding environment, but everyone enjoyed the role they were tasked with and loved that they were finally able to use the training of the past year. What made it even more rewarding was that the ICC was very grateful for the help we provided.

Along with helping in the ICC we also visited a lot of the local CFA stations and spoke to our fellow emergency members to see how we could help them. We sourced donations for them, helped deliver meals, and even transported an injured person to hospital when the ambulance couldn't get through.

Once the road up to Ruffy was accessible, a request came from the locals for some members to come up and talk to the residents. Two of my deputies and I started the drive up to Ruffy, not knowing what we were getting ourselves into, and we were faced with carnage. What used to be houses were now smouldering piles of rubble. The Ruffy store was completely burnt and at the top of the hill the Ruffy CFA station and hall was

still standing, with a burnt-out tractor out the front showing how close the fire got.

We got tasked from the local CFA captain to visit their members' properties and see if they still

**“It was bard work, long hours and a demanding environment, but everyone enjoyed the role they were tasked with and loved that they were finally able to use the training of the past year.”**

GEORGIE CARDILLO,  
UNIT CONTROLLER, VICSES  
EUROA UNIT

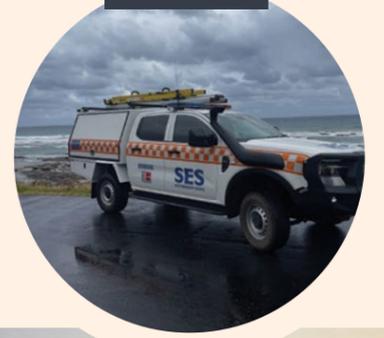
had houses standing or not. This task was very daunting but so rewarding. We spoke to so many people who had lost everything, who in the days prior to the fires were on the CFA truck saving other people's houses but couldn't save their own. They needed someone to talk to. I became the dedicated hugger, the shoulder for people to cry on and tell their story. We built so many connections that day and we will continue to work with Ruffy, supporting them where it's needed.

From this event we have learnt how crucial connections with our local CFA are so we can help them where and when it's needed without hesitation. ■



### MORE FROM OUR FIRE RESPONSE:

BRIMBANK



KILMORE



WODONGA

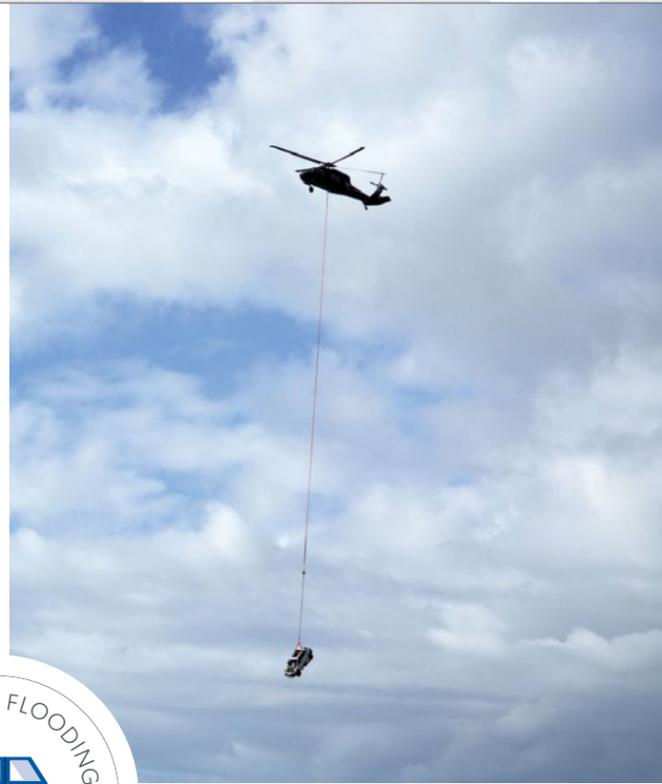


WODONGA



OTWAYS





# VICSES leads response GREAT OCEAN ROAD FLASH FLOODS

By Ryan Malcolm, Media Advisor, VHO



In January, VICSES volunteers provided crucial response to communities in the state's southwest following a devastating flash flood event which impacted multiple townships along the Great Ocean Road.

An intense rainfall event following a series of severe thunderstorms near Mount Cowley and Mount Sabine on the afternoon of 15 January saw each of the Kennett, Wye and Cumberland rivers quickly overflow and threaten ocean-side communities, resulting in significant damage to local infrastructure and the displacement of hundreds of community members and holidaymakers.

Volunteers from the VICSES Lorne Unit were quickly on scene to provide emergency assistance as dozens of vehicles and caravans were inundated with flood water and some swept out to sea following 180mm of rain at Mount Cowley over a six-hour period, almost 60mm more than the area's previous 24-hour period record.

Alongside first responders from emergency service partner agencies including VICSES volunteers, Ambulance Victoria, the Country Fire Authority (CFA), Life Saving Victoria, and Victoria Police provided on-the-ground support to an initial 400 persons impacted in low-lying areas, while further VICSES resourcing was deployed to support incident management functions out of nearby Geelong and Colac.

Within 24 hours, Lorne Unit volunteers were called to 24 requests for assistance in their community, the majority relating to flooding and immediate rescue response alongside Victoria Police.

Remarkably, despite flooding occurring in highly populated riverside tourist areas, no loss of life and only one minor injury were recorded, with most able to avoid flooded roads, bridges and low-lying areas for their own safety.

Over the ensuing days, VICSES volunteers led infrastructure assessments and wider emergency response efforts, with additional crews from throughout the state's western region deployed to the area to clear impacted trees, provide swift-water rescue capability and aid the recovery of community assets such as caravan parks and road infrastructure.

A complex helicopter salvage operation was also coordinated by VICSES with assistance from the Environment Protection Authority, Department of Transport, Victoria Police, and local stakeholders to successfully recover 14 vehicles displaced by floodwater.

VICSES community engagement specialists were also activated to provide vital recovery information and resources to impacted community members in the Lorne area. This included vital information about the Great Ocean Road, which was forced to close between Skenes Creek and Lorne for several days following the flood event, before re-opening.

## MORE INFORMATION

Find your local flood guide by visiting:





### VICSES Portland Unit celebrates 50 years

By Elijah Roberts, Deputy Controller, VICSES Portland Unit

The VICSES Portland Unit has proudly marked its 50-year anniversary with a highly successful celebration evening, bringing together members past and present, their families, our partner agencies, community leaders and supporters, to recognise five decades of volunteer service.

The event was a strong reflection of the unit's history and community connection, with guests enjoying live entertainment, a specially prepared 50-year celebration cake, and a detailed historical display showcasing the unit's

achievements and evolution across the decades. The evening provided a valuable opportunity for generations of volunteers to reconnect, share stories and celebrate the milestone together.

A central highlight of the night was the 50 Year Service Presentation to founding member Gary Hein, recognising his extraordinary dedication to the Portland Unit and his community. The presentation was attended by senior emergency management leaders and founding representatives, who reflected on the early formation of the unit and Gary's legacy of leadership. Gary's family was also recognised, including a special acknowledgement of his wife Dianne Hein for her long-standing support behind the scenes. The tribute concluded with recognition on behalf of the Glenelg Shire community for Gary's remarkable contribution.



#### Service Awards were also presented to several dedicated members:

- Christine Malin — 20 Years of Service
- Scott McFarlane — 15 Years of Service
- Kay Antony — 10 Years of Service
- Robert Telfer — 10 Years of Service

Unit operational awards were presented to recognise excellence in training, leadership, operational response and community contribution.



### VICSES Dunkeld Unit volunteers mark opening of new facility

By Dharni Giri, Senior Media Advisor, VHO

Congratulations to the VICSES Dunkeld Unit volunteers, who have officially opened their brand-new purpose-built facility, marking a significant milestone for local volunteers and the broader community.

VICSES Chief Executive Officer Rob Purcell joined volunteers, partner agencies and community members in Dunkeld to commemorate the occasion and recognise the unit's long and proud history of service to the local community.

While the building is new, Dunkeld Unit volunteers have been diligently serving their community for decades, often operating from shared or constrained facilities. The new station provides a safe, functional and modern base for volunteers to train, respond to emergencies and support their community.

The project was delivered through a strong partnership approach. Land for the facility was donated by Victoria Police, alongside

support from a generous local bequest, significant unit and community contributions and investment from VICSES via the Victorian State Government.

The new facility includes flexible spaces to support training, meetings and collaboration with other emergency services and community groups. It reflects the coordinated approach to emergency management across regional Victoria and supports ongoing volunteer capability, wellbeing and operational readiness.

The Dunkeld Unit is currently home to 24 volunteers and responds to around 50 incidents each year, including storms, floods, road crash rescues, search and rescue operations and support to partner agencies.

The new facility is expected to support volunteer recruitment and retention, ensuring the unit remains strong, capable and connected to the Dunkeld community for many years to come. ■



# VICSES Sorrento Unit plays pivotal role in multi-agency coastline rescues

By Bryce Cameron, VICSES Sorrento Unit volunteer



On 27 December the VICSES Sorrento Unit was paged to assist Ambulance Victoria with the extrication of an Austrian tourist who had fallen six metres down a rockface at Bushrangers Bay, Cape Schanck.

**B**ushrangers Bay is a remote beach known for its amazing scenery, however at times it experiences treacherous conditions, no phone reception, limited radio communication, and can only be accessed by hiking or limited emergency service access via private property.

Upon arrival, crews were met by Ambulance Victoria and Victoria Police. VICSES set up the mule and headed down to the beach approximately one kilometre away. When we had reached the beach, Ambulance Victoria had already relocated the patient across the rocks to a safer place to start their assessment. Due to the remote location, Helicopter Emergency Medical Services (HEMS) and Victoria Police helicopters were both sent to the scene to assist.

An extrication plan was created to winch the patient from their location. This plan had to be altered twice due to the threat of rising tides and increasing swell on the rock platform where the injury occurred. Crews were able to relocate the patient via stretcher to the nearby beach where HEMS winched the patient to the helicopter.

This wasn't the only rescue to take place in the area that week. A few days earlier a teenager had fallen near Diamond Bay, Sorrento. Crews had to locate the individual, before setting up rescue pickets and using an edge protection system so that a member could see and keep contact with the patient who was at the bottom of an eight-metre cliff. HEMS winched a flight paramedic down to the patient while Fire Rescue Victoria lowered a rope technician down to assist with the retrieval. Thanks to this multi-agency effort, the teenager was rescued and is now safe and sound. ■



## A difficult job, done together

By Roslyn Fauvel, Unit Controller, VICSES Mansfield Unit

**D**uring January, the VICSES Mansfield Unit was called to a serious road crash which quickly proved to be complex and confronting. The vehicle was heavily damaged, and the rescue required careful planning, clear communication, and steady teamwork.

Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) was nearby working as part of a fire strike team and was requested by the Bonnie Doon Country Fire Authority (CFA) Captain to assist. Mansfield Unit led the rescue with FRV working alongside us throughout the operation. Maindample CFA also attended.

Crews worked shoulder to shoulder on the vehicle, using VICSES extrication tools while talking through options and adjusting plans as the situation unfolded. FRV and VICSES considered multiple rescue approaches, with safety and respect for the patient guiding every decision. Despite everyone's best efforts, the incident sadly resulted in a fatality and a challenging extrication.

These are the jobs that stay with you. What made the difference on this night was how well everyone worked together. All agencies supported one another, shared the load, and trusted each other's skills to get a very hard job done.

This job was a strong reminder that in the toughest moments, teamwork truly matters. ■

### VICSES PORT PHILLIP UNIT

## When wild weather forces community members inside, VICSES volunteers step outside

By Mazen Althaqafi, VICSES Port Phillip Unit volunteer

**S**ome of the best skills and experiences I have gained from volunteering with VICSES are resilience, adaptability and staying tough in harsh weather conditions. Whether it's strong winds, heavy rain or a heatwave, the best course of action for the general public to follow is to seek shelter indoors and stay safe. However, for us VICSES volunteers, this is the time to step outside the house and turn out to requests for assistance to serve and protect the community.

On 9 January 2026, when the temperature exceeded 40 degrees with wind gusts of

up to 70 km/h, more than 15 volunteers from the VICSES Port Phillip Unit loaded three trucks and headed to the community to assist with fallen trees. Because of our commitment and resilience, we were able to complete all the required assistance quickly, effectively, and most importantly, safely.

It is important to mention that being a VICSES volunteer does not mean putting yourself at risk in outdoor harsh weather conditions. Yes, we love adventure! However, volunteer safety is paramount. This is why we take safety steps such as staying hydrated, are equipped

with full personal protective clothing and equipment (PPC&E), and are educated about the Australian Fire Danger Rating System.

As metro unit volunteers, most requests for assistance we received this summer were related to fallen trees, flooding, or building damage. Our area of service is considered to have a low bushfire risk. However, that did not stop four of our amazing and dedicated volunteers deploying to support an evacuation request in Colac, showing the strong connection between metro and regional units. ■



# VICSES Cobram Unit honoured for outstanding service to the community

By Kate Goldsmith, Deputy Controller, VICSES Cobram Unit



The VICSES Cobram Unit has been recognised as the 2026 Moira Shire Australia Day Community Organisation of the Year. This is an honour which reflects the unit's extraordinary commitment to protecting and supporting the community through one of the most challenging years in recent memory. For more than three decades, Cobram Unit volunteers have stood as a pillar of safety and resilience across the Moira Shire, and over the past year their dedication has been increasingly visible, and more vital than ever.

Our recognition comes in the shadow of the Catastrophic Fire Danger day on Friday 9 January 2026, when a rapidly moving grassfire tore through Cobram, Muckatah, Katamatite, Yarroweyah, and surrounding areas. The blaze burned through approximately 1,531 hectares, destroying 12 homes and many more structures. Residents were forced to flee under escalating emergency warnings as uncertainty and fear spread across the district. Cobram Unit played a crucial support role alongside Country Fire Authority (CFA) brigades, assisting with traffic management, logistics, relief operations, and interagency coordination.

Only weeks earlier on 15 December 2025, the community had endured another tragedy, when a mini van carrying nine overseas workers crashed into a tree on Chapel

Road in Muckatah. This crash resulted in four fatalities and serious injuries to the remaining passengers. In this deeply distressing event, Cobram Unit served as the lead rescue agency, undertaking the complex and time critical extrication of the trapped occupants. Volunteers stabilised the vehicle, created access pathways and worked in close coordination with Ambulance Victoria, the CFA, and Victoria Police, to ensure the injured could be treated and transported urgently. The Cobram team demonstrated not only their high level of technical rescue capability, but also the compassion and calm professionalism for which the unit is known for.

**“The 2026 Australia Day Award honours the compassion, teamwork, and resilience which underpins everything they do.”**

KATE GOLDSMITH, DEPUTY CONTROLLER, VICSES COBRAM UNIT

While major emergencies often draw the most attention, Cobram Unit's day-to-day operational workload tells a broader story about their impact. Over the past year, the unit responded to more than 83 requests

for assistance, including 40 storm or tree related incidents, 22 road crash rescues, nine calls to support Victoria Police and five for Ambulance Victoria, four water rescues, and four responses to building damage. Every one of these responses was achieved within an average turnout time of four and a half minutes, underscoring the unit's readiness, discipline and unwavering commitment to our community. These efforts protected lives, prevented further harm, safeguarded property and supported essential infrastructure across the Shire.

Equally significant is the unit's commitment to building resilience before emergencies occur. The unit's expanding Community Engagement and Resilience Team continues to deliver practical preparedness activities at major community events, such as the Cobram Agricultural Show and other local school events. Through regular involvement in our community, volunteers are empowering locals with the skills and confidence to navigate emergencies.

Behind every response, every rescue, and every community event is a strong

network of emergency responders. Cobram Unit works closely with our agency partners to deliver coordinated, effective, and compassionate service. This strong interagency foundation, combined with more than 30 years of dedicated volunteer service, forms the backbone of the unit's success and is the reason why we continue to be such a trusted presence in our area.

The 2026 Australia Day Award not only acknowledges the technical expertise and operational excellence of the Cobram Unit, but also honours the compassion, teamwork, and resilience which underpins everything they do. In a year marked by catastrophic fire conditions, a devastating fatal crash, and dozens of complex emergency incidents, Cobram Unit has demonstrated once again what it means to serve with courage, professionalism, and an unwavering commitment to community. Their service continues to define what it means to protect and support a community in both its hardest moments and its everyday challenges. ■



# VICSES pair celebrated for decades of exemplary emergency response

By Ryan Malcolm, Media Advisor, VHO

Dianne Dale (VICSES Gisborne Unit) and George Haitidis (VICSES Monash Unit) received Emergency Service Medals as part of the 2026 Australia Day Honours List.



## VICSES GISBORNE UNIT

**A** dedicated first responder with more than 2,200 emergency callouts to her name, Di Dale has been a constant figure both on the ground and in command roles since joining VICSES in 2003, exhibiting strong leadership throughout with a persistent focus on the health and wellbeing of volunteers.

Serving as a Division Commander during the devastating 2022 Echuca floods which impacted thousands of community members along the Murray River, Di used her exceptional communication and coordination skills to oversee the response of more than 100 emergency workers and volunteers from a range of agencies, ensuring vital support could be delivered quickly to those most in need.



While well known for her frontline response capacity, Di is just as revered throughout VICSES for her vital commitment to

**“Di has embodied the values of care, professionalism and leadership and proved a widely respected and heavily relied upon figure for VICSES members throughout Victoria.”**

and extensive peer support training to manage the unfolding incident and support casualties

peer support, implementing several training initiatives and awareness programs to support the mental health of first responders and allow members from VICSES and emergency service partners to cope with any stress associated with their emergency role.

Her diverse skillset was highlighted when responding to a fatal crash at Riddell's Creek in 2024, where Di leant on her road crash rescue expertise

while providing immediate psychological support to responders and bystanders who had witnessed the tragedy.

A co-author of VICSES' most recent Peer Support Manual and a recipient of VICSES' Peter Rabone Shield (for Excellence in Peer Support) in 2016, Di's name is inextricably linked with mental health and wellbeing at VICSES. Throughout, Di has embodied the values of care, professionalism and leadership and proved a widely respected and heavily relied upon figure for VICSES members throughout Victoria.

## VICSES MONASH UNIT

**H**imself a 20-year stalwart of Victoria's emergency response capability, VICSES Monash Unit Controller George Haitidis radiates passion for his community and his fellow volunteers, showcasing intense dedication, expertise and calmness whenever he wears his orange uniform.

Having joined the VICSES Monash Unit in 2005, George's commitment to the cause quickly saw him identified as a future leader among his cohort. By 2008, George was identified as a section leader, before being successfully elevated to Unit Controller that same year, a position he continues to hold 18 years on.

A highly trained and experienced land-based swift-water rescue specialist, George's diverse skillset has made him a key figure in flood response in his own community and across the state, leading operations to carry out inland water rescues locally and major riverine flood responses more broadly.

In recent years, George's drive to assist others on their worst days has seen him lead large-scale response to the Maribyrnong River floods of 2023, overseeing the rescue of community members trapped by rapidly rising waters. George also played a vital role in rescue nine residents from their homes during flooding of the same river in October 2022.

When VICSES Monash Unit volunteers were called to more than 1,000 storm-related requests for assistance in February of 2024, George worked diligently to assist his volunteers on the ground while consulting local government stakeholders on ways to streamline coordination between agencies to ensure the community could receive timely and highly effective assistance.

Inducted as a VICSES Monash Unit Life Member earlier this year, George's contributions to emergency response extend well beyond his local unit and exemplify the vital role VICSES volunteers can play in the broader community. ■

**“George Haitidis radiates passion for his community and his fellow volunteers, showcasing intense dedication, expertise and calmness whenever he wears his orange uniform.”**





# Celebrating community at *Midsumma Festival 2026*

By Jo Lee, Publicity and Events Officer and Tracey White, Senior Advisor Events, Publicity and Partnerships, VHO

Once again, VICSES members were excited to connect with our community at the 2026 Midsumma Festival, participating in both the Midsumma Carnival and the Midsumma Pride March.

## MIDSUMMA CARNIVAL

Our involvement at this year's Midsumma Carnival highlighted the important role community connection plays in preparing for severe weather. We were part of a multi-agency activation at Alexandra Gardens alongside Ambulance Victoria, Emergency Management Victoria, Fire Rescue Victoria, and Life Saving Victoria.

As one of Victoria's most vibrant community celebrations, Midsumma Carnival provided a meaningful platform to demonstrate our commitment to diversity and inclusion, both within the emergency management sector and across the wider Victorian community. By supporting these events, VICSES strengthened connections with diverse communities and created opportunities to share preparedness messaging ahead of and during high-risk weather. With fires and extreme heat affecting communities across the state, it was also a timely opportunity to speak directly with attendees about practical preparedness actions and staying safe during severe weather.

VICSES volunteers and staff engaged directly with attendees, sharing clear and accessible information about local risks and the steps households can take to prepare before emergencies occur.

A key feature of the activation was the interactive *Do 1 Thing* activity, which builds on its award-winning success at the 2025 Melbourne Royal Show. Community members were invited to select a *Do 1 Thing* box and make a personal commitment to a simple preparedness action, such as clearing gutters, securing loose outdoor items, preparing an emergency kit or downloading the VicEmergency app.

By breaking preparedness down into manageable steps, the activity reinforced that small actions can make a meaningful difference. Encouraging people to actively commit to one change helped turn awareness into intent, empowering individuals and families to take ownership of their safety before severe weather occurs.



## MIDSUMMA PRIDE MARCH

VICSES was delighted to take part in the 2026 Midsumma Pride March alongside our agency partners and community. It was a day filled with joy, connection and celebration, reflecting the diversity within the communities we serve and within VICSES itself. Our participation demonstrates our ongoing commitment to celebrating, representing, supporting and serving all sections of the Victorian community. We thank everyone who marched with us and helped make the day so memorable. ■

# Have you checked your Local Flood Guide?



**Local Flood Guides help you to understand your flood risk, prepare for and respond to flooding in your area. Find yours on our website.**

