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Community Matters

VICTORIA STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE



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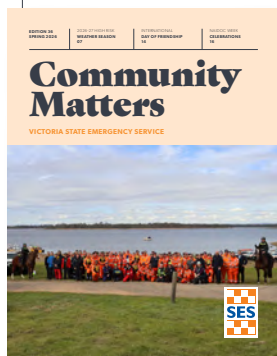
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Front cover:

VICES leads major multi
agency search and rescue
exercise at Lake Eppalock



Welcome

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

It's been a busy winter period with members responding to over 6,000 requests for assistance statewide throughout the season in response to storms, flooding, rescues and more. A huge thank you to all those who responded – often during dark, rainy nights – to clear fallen trees, attend to rescue operations and many other callouts to keep our communities safe.

In June I had the privilege of attending the State Controllers Seminar held in Creswick. It was terrific to come together with members of our VICES leadership team to connect and take part in discussions on the key challenges and opportunities shaping leadership across the service. It's always a privilege to catch up with members in person, listen, hear their challenges, answer their questions and celebrate achievements together. You can read more about this fantastic event on pages 10-11.

Thank you to all those who supported our VICES activation at the NAIDOC in the City event on 10 July at Federation Square. Members participated in the march through Naarm (Melbourne) and got involved in community engagement efforts including a barbecue to raise funds for Ngwala. Funds will go to supporting their services which include alcohol and drug treatment and recovery, homelessness programs, counselling, youth services and more. Thank you to our members for taking part in this important event to celebrate and recognise the history, cultures and achievements Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. You can read more about our involvement on page 16.

With the International Day of Friendship on 20 July, I'd like to recognise the incredible connections often forged between VICES members at their units and beyond. Volunteering in emergency services is a wonderful way to form and sustain meaningful friendships. The nature of what our volunteers do encourages teamwork, prosocial behaviour, and a shared purpose of keeping communities safe – which are all supportive factors for developing positive connections. You can read about some inspiring volunteer connections on pages 14 and 15.

With the warmer months close on the horizon, we're gearing up for the High-Risk Weather Season. The season has been declared to commence on 5 October. Across Victoria we're expecting hotter and drier than average conditions. We're also predicting an increased risk of heatwave, drought and bushfire activity as the season progresses. As always, we know our members are ready to respond whenever they're needed. Thank you to all those involved in preparing our units every day and particularly for the upcoming season.

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

I'm delighted to welcome you to the spring edition of *Community Matters* as I take on my new role as Victoria's Minister for Emergency Services.

Having served as a firefighter, I know first-hand the strength of Victoria's emergency services comes from the people who put their hands up to help others – often at a moment's notice, in difficult and dangerous conditions. I know the long hours, the training, the teamwork and, above all, the commitment to community that defines our emergency services.

That's what makes it such a privilege to take on this portfolio. I look forward to working alongside our first responders, volunteers and emergency services organisations to keep Victorians safe.

As we emerge from a busy season, with VICES members responding to storms and flooding across the state, I am grateful to the wonderful volunteers who have kept our communities safe through yet another cold and wet winter.

Thank you to all the VICES members who rolled up their sleeves to donate much-needed blood and plasma as part of the Emergency Services Blood Challenge from June through to August. The annual Australian Red Cross Lifeblood blood drive boosts blood supplies during the winter months, when many regular donors are impacted by cold and flu. This year, VICES alone made more than 280 donations, helping to save more than 850 lives.

As the days grow longer and warmer, our sector will be preparing intensively ahead of the High Risk Weather Season – making sure we're ready to respond to spring floods and storms, as well as bushfires over summer.

Thank you, take care, and all the best for the season ahead.

Hon. Paul Edbrooke
Minister for Emergency Services

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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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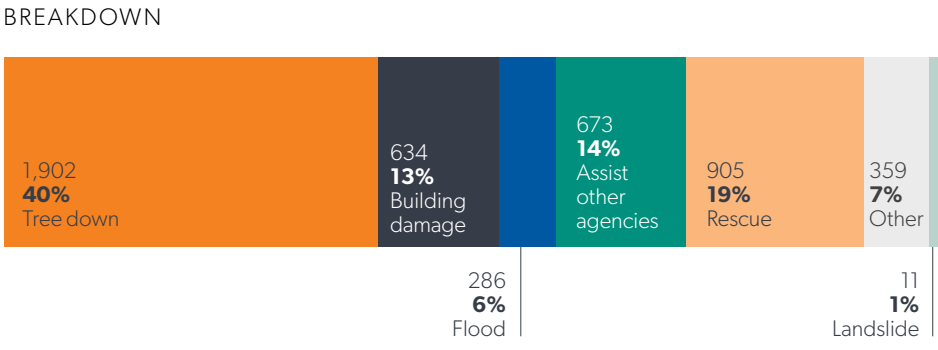
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REQUESTS
FOR ASSISTANCE

1 APRIL – 30 JUNE



STATEWIDE
4,770
TOTAL RFAS
5,101*
TOTAL VOLUNTEERS
*includes active and non-active volunteers



WESTERN REGION

2,037
TOTAL RFAS

2,448
TOTAL VOLUNTEERS

Tree down	748
Building damage	317
Assist other agency	300

BUSIEST UNITS + TOTAL RFAs

131 Heidelberg Unit	117 Ballarat Unit	111 Fawknor Unit
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EASTERN REGION

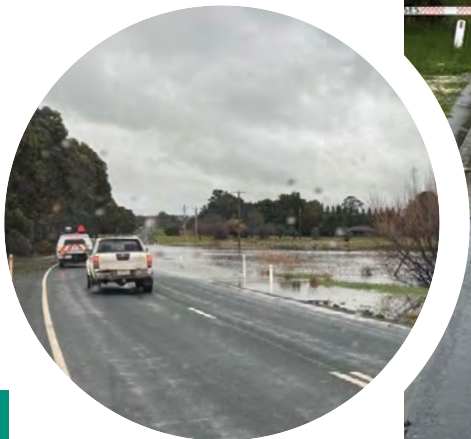
2,665
TOTAL RFAS

2,625
TOTAL VOLUNTEERS

Tree down	1,148
Assist other agency	333
Road rescue	306

BUSIEST UNITS + TOTAL RFAs

215 Emerald Unit	143 Sorrento Unit	129 Frankston Unit
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PREPARING FOR THE 2026-27

High Risk Weather Season

By Lauren Castle, Corporate Communications Advisor, VHO

During Australia’s High Risk Weather Season (HRWS) it is more likely that we will be impacted by severe weather and environmental conditions such as storm, flood, extreme heat, fire and more.

This year, the season will take place from October 2026 through to April 2027. We’re expecting that Victoria will experience hotter and drier than average conditions, with an increased risk of heatwave, drought and bushfire activity as the season progresses. As we saw during the last summer period, storms and floods can strike at any time of the year, including the warmer months.

In the lead up to the HRWS, our members are busy preparing our facilities, vehicles and equipment so that we are ready to respond when we’re needed most. In addition, members are making sure their training and qualifications are current, and we’re implementing plans to look after their wellbeing during what can be challenging period.

So, what does this mean for you? With the HRWS just around the corner, we want you to get prepared now so you can keep yourself and your loved ones safe during whatever conditions come our way.

Now is the time to prepare your property. Trim back trees and branches around your home to reduce potential damage amid strong winds. Clear gutters, downpipes and drains to avoid blockages which can lead to water damage.

Check that your home insurance is up to date. Ensuring you have adequate cover can give you some protection if you are impacted by severe weather such as flooding or fire.

It’s also a great time to make an emergency kit or give it a refresh if you already have one. Your kit should include essentials like first aid supplies, medications, non-perishable food and drinking water, batteries and chargers, a portable radio and any important documents you might need like passports and birth certificates.

During the HRWS it’s especially important to stay informed about your emergency risk, never relying on just one source of information. Keep an eye on weather forecasts and warnings on the Bureau of Meteorology website and set your watch zones on the VicEmergency app.

It’s also a great time to make an emergency kit or give it a refresh if you already have one.

When you know stormy weather is on the way, prepare early. Tie down loose outdoor items such as furniture and trampolines and park your car undercover or away from trees. You can find more tips on how to be storm ready on our website.

Get prepared and stay safe this HRWS. Thank you to every single one of our amazing VICSES volunteers for always being there when we need you most - no matter the weather. ■



GET PREPARED:

Keep an eye on weather forecasts and warnings on the Bureau of Meteorology website, set your watch zones on the VicEmergency app and find more tips on how to get storm ready on our website:



Bureau of Meteorology



VicEmergency



Are you Storm Ready



VOLUNTEERS BATTLE THE ELEMENTS

Through winter storms, flooding and landslide

By Lauren Castle, Corporate Communications Advisor, VHO

Winter often sees our dedicated volunteers getting on the tools amid strong winds and heavy rain, and this past season was no exception.



WOODEND



LORNE



KILMORE



August

Victoria was struck once again by severe weather as the season progressed. From 12:00am 9 August to midday 17 August, VICSES received over 600 RFAs state-wide including over 100 RFAs for flood related incidents. More than 200 Flood Advice messages and warnings were issued across the Hume, Loddon Mallee and Central regions during this period. Some warnings remained in place for several days with saturation of catchments resulting in floodwaters being slower to recede.

Our busiest units included the VICSES Ballarat Unit (32 RFAs). VICSES Wangaratta Unit (28 RFAs) and VICSES Maryborough Unit (23 RFAs).

June-July

During the week starting 29 June, VICSES volunteers responded to over 1,100 requests for assistance (RFAs) across Victoria due to storm impacts, with several northeast catchments subject to flood warnings or under a flood watch. The VICSES Kilmore Unit received the most RFAs (61), followed by the VICSES Whittlesea Unit (55) and VICSES Woodend Unit (52). Requests were primarily for fallen trees (714), building damage (131) and flood response (107).

Areas impacted by the summer bushfires earlier this year were deemed potentially more susceptible to landslide during this rainy period. On 2 July, the VICSES Lorne Unit responded to a landslide impacting the road Smythe Creek which was partially blocked off by some large boulders.

KILMORE



GISBORNE



WHITTLESEA



During this wet, stormy weather, VICSES urged community members to prepare their property, stay informed about their local risk, and never enter flood water. It only takes 15cm of water to float a small car and you never know what's underneath the surface. Always find an alternate route if you approach floodwater when traveling.

Thank you to our wonderful VICSES volunteers for working tirelessly through this week and beyond to protect our communities during this stormy winter weather. ■

VICSES member excellence honoured at State Controllers Seminar

By Ryan Malcolm, Media Advisor, VHO

VICSES volunteers and staff from across Victoria have had their exceptional efforts honoured as part of an annual conference for volunteer leaders.



Hundreds of VICSES members gathered in Creswick for the 2026 VICSES State Controllers Seminar, sharing experiences, engaging with senior VICSES staff and reflecting on a busy year for the organisation, with the event culminating in the award of organisational excellence awards and the conferral of VICSES Life Membership to a host of the organisation's most dedicated members.

Among VICSES' most prestigious honours, Life Membership acknowledges at least 20 years of exceptional service and dedication to emergency response, cementing the incredible contributions of members held in the highest regard by their peers and the communities they serve.

Having been awarded the rare Emergency Services Medal as part of the 2026 Australia Day Honours, the award of VICSES Life Membership to VICSES Monash Unit Controller George Haitidis ESM continued a landmark year for the 21-year veteran of the service now in his 18th year in the unit's top job.

A trained divisional commander and willing operational volunteer who has been instrumental in the coordination of response during large-scale storm and flood operations, George's trademark calmness under pressure and undying support of his fellow volunteers exemplify the characteristics of a VICSES Life Member.

A VICSES member of more than 40 years, having spent almost 19 years as VICSES Whitehorse Unit Controller before joining VICSES staff and becoming one of the service's most well-travelled members, Alan Barnard ESM has left his mark on communities across the state.

Over his more than 20 years on staff, Alan has managed regional operations in the state's northeast, southwest, northwest and central regions for extended periods, while lending his voice to a host of committees and working groups to strengthen the volunteer experience locally and outside his immediate vicinity.

A persistent advocate for member wellbeing, Alan has also played an instrumental role in driving and promoting the use of mental health resources to support volunteers and the broader development of the VICSES

Peer Support Program, greatly strengthening the welfare of members.

The trio of newly minted life members was rounded out by VICSES Rushworth Unit pillar Christopher Doig, an operational volunteer of more than four decades whose expert response to major flood, road crash rescue and other complex emergencies has had a profound impact in his community.

Having spent more than 20 years as part of the Rushworth Unit Management Team, including a decade as Controller, Chris's exemplary leadership

has been instrumental in developing local volunteers, while also finding time to contribute to training initiatives across the state to mould VICSES' next generation.

Chris' ability to build partnerships in his community, build resilience locally and lead dependably has seen him widely respected by those he serves and wholeheartedly embody the spirit of VICSES.

VICSES Cobram Unit Controller Luke Herezo and Deputy Controller Kate Goldsmith were also awarded the rare Commendation for Service as part of the ceremony, acknowledging their life-saving reaction after a community member fell unconscious during a local ANZAC Day Service last year.

The pair, in attendance at the annual Cobram Secondary College ANZAC Day service on behalf of the unit, rushed to the patient's side as they became unresponsive and stopped breathing, working tirelessly and with great composure in front of a 300-strong crowd to provide CPR until Ambulance Victoria paramedics could arrive.

The patient's heartbeat was successfully restored through the Cobram pair's intervention, with Ambulance Victoria and the patient's family confirming the results would have been tragically different without VICSES' quick response.

Throughout the evening, additional awards were also presented to members going above and beyond to improve the volunteer and member experience across the state.

Staff member Lisa Psaila was conferred the VICSES Values Award in recognition of her remarkable commitment to refining the service's Honours and Awards guidelines and processes, promoting increased visibility and accessibility to awards to ensure volunteers and staff are adequately recognised for their service to communities.

Additional awards were also presented to members going above and beyond to improve the volunteer and member experience across the state.

Fellow staffer Brendan Corboy was awarded the State Excellence in Innovation award, having designed and implemented a refined VICSES Member Deployment process to improve efficiency for command staff and ensure volunteers can be better deployed where they need to be,

with the necessary skills and with considerations of fitness and fatigue built into the platform.

George Haitidis joined VICSES Heidelberg Unit volunteer George Katris in accepting the VICSES

State Excellence in Learning and Development award, acknowledging the pair's leadership and coordination of a large-scale boating skills exercise on the Maribyrnong River last year.

The pair expertly managed the safety and learning outcomes of more than 70 volunteers from across the state and enhanced attendees' critical operational skills, ensuring members are better prepared to respond to flood emergencies and support communities in times of need.

The annual award of the Peter Rabone Shield, in recognition of State Excellence in Peer Support, was conferred to VICSES Portland Unit stalwart Ray Polaski, a Peer Support Team Leader whose professionalism and compassion as well as his advocacy for mental health and wellbeing has normalised help seeking in his community and beyond.

Finally, the VICSES Wedderburn Unit was awarded the State Excellence in Diversity and Inclusion award, after volunteers undertook Auslan training to truly include a deaf member in unit operations, improving internal teamwork and external community engagement in the process and contributing to a broader cultural shift across their region. ■



A NEW CHAPTER

For flood forecasting and warning services

By Melanie Gill, Assistant Chief Officer Emergency Planning, VHO

After two years of working through the detail and changes required, the transition of Melbourne's riverine flood forecasting and warning service to the Bureau of Meteorology, was completed on 1 July.

While the change itself is significant, the real success is the knowledge, experience and local insight that went into the project from VICSES, Melbourne Water and the Bureau of Meteorology.

Flood forecasting in Melbourne has a long history, and a key focus of the project was making sure that decades of understanding about local rivers, gauges and flood behaviour was carried forward into the future.

VICSES was proud to be involved every step of the way. Volunteers and staff took part in five catchment tours to share knowledge and experience, along with countless workshops and meetings for the core project team. All with the aim of understanding how flooding affects local communities and what information is most useful during operations. When asked for his thoughts on the experience of the Werribee catchment tour, VICSES Wyndham Unit Deputy Controller, Tyler Smith said "We really

appreciated being considered for the opportunity. Local knowledge is such an important part of emergency management, and it really is good to see when it's taken into account."

VICSES regional teams also provided input on the warnings and alerts they rely on during flood events, offering valuable and widespread expertise to the project.

Just as importantly, the project brought people together. Over hundreds of conversations, meetings and workshops, stronger working relationships have been built between VICSES, the Bureau of Meteorology, and Melbourne Water. And these relationships are set to continue long after the transition.

While responsibilities for riverine flood forecasting and warning services have changed, the shared commitment to supporting communities before and during floods remains the same. ■



A FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

On volunteer road crash rescue response

By Fiona Dearn, community member and wife to Ali Sarisandal - Deputy Controller (Training), VICSES Heathcote Unit

It's 10:00pm on a wintry Tuesday evening. We're settled in, the fire is on and the cat is sleeping comfortably in his basket.

The siren breaks the mood: harsh, demanding and repetitive. A call to arms signalling a road crash.

We are an SES family, and road crash rescue is one of the many emergencies my husband is trained for. His overalls and boots are always nearby and ready for any call: a tree on the highway, flood damage, storm destruction, or any emergency threatening life and limb.

A road crash sits at another level. In a small town where everybody knows everyone, one question lingers: is it someone we know? Many crashes on country highways with 100 km/h speed limits involve fatalities. Sometimes the cause is a tree or a truck; other times it is distraction, speed, drugs, alcohol, or a combination of them all.

Dressed in orange from head to toe, my husband tells me he loves me. I reply, "be careful," and off he goes. He meets the other volunteers at headquarters. One drives, another manages communications, and some head directly to the scene if the incident is close to home.

Tonight, the incident involves a car and a truck. In the pitch black of night, the crew immediately gets to work. Lights are set up, risks are assessed and communication begins with police and Country Fire Authority (CFA) personnel. Traffic is diverted and controlled so the team can operate as safely as possible.

My husband joins the rescue effort using hydraulic tools to clear the crushed front of the vehicle and create access to the driver. There are two fatalities. It is not a pleasant sight. Drawing upon their training and professionalism, the road crash rescue team undertakes the difficult task of extricating the deceased. The bodies are respectfully covered and transferred into the care of ambulance personnel and police.

After the operation, the crew returns to the station for a debrief. Are you okay? What worked well? What could we have done better? These conversations matter because they support learning, wellbeing and resilience.

It is around 4:00am when I hear my husband return home. He gives me a summary before heading to bed. He always lets me know when he is home, so I do not worry. I never want to hear the graphic details. Those conversations belong with the team members who understand that side of the work.

I am incredibly proud of my husband and of SES crews in our town and throughout Australia. These men and women volunteer their time, day and night, to serve their communities. They are not paid. Many units must also fundraise to secure new trucks and equipment.

These volunteers are remarkable people. Rather than simply talking about community safety, they actively do the hard work while the rest of us remain comfortable in our homes. Their commitment deserves both respect and support.

Not everyone can do this work, but everyone can help reduce the need for it. We can lower the number of road crashes by driving to the conditions, avoiding dangerous overtaking, and respecting speed limits on dark country roads. While we cannot prevent storms or floods, we can take responsibility for our behaviour on the road. Fewer crashes and deaths mean fewer call-outs for the people in orange (SES), blue (police), and yellow (CFA) who work tirelessly to keep our communities safe. ■



REVIEWED KIEWA RIVER

Flood warning levels at Bandiana

By Glenn Mercer, Community Resilience Coordinator, Eastern Region

During his recent visit to northeast Victoria, VICSES Chief Officer Operations Alistair Drayton toured the Bandiana area along the Kiewa River following a review of local flood classification levels.

The review was undertaken through significant consultation and collaboration between the Bureau of Meteorology, Wodonga Council, VICSES and the local community. As a result, the minor flood level at Bandiana will be increased by 10cm, increasing from 2.8m to 2.9m.

The adjustment is intended to better reflect local flood impacts and help reduce warning fatigue for both the community and emergency management agencies, ensuring flood warnings are issued when they are most relevant and meaningful.

We really enjoyed catching up with Alistair face-to-face. It was a great opportunity for him to see firsthand the local flood environment and acknowledge the strong partnership between agencies and the community in improving flood preparedness and warning arrangements. ■

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FRIENDSHIP:

Spotlight on unit connections

By Lauren Castle, Corporate Communications Advisor, VHO

30 July marked the International Day of Friendship, a day to acknowledge and celebrate the important role friendship plays in promoting peace and understanding in our societies. In recognition of this special day, we spoke to some members about the treasured friendships they’ve formed at their VICSES units.



Michael and Bray

VICSES CAMPERDOWN UNIT

How did volunteering at VICSES help your friendship develop?

Our friendship started long before VICSES when we played cricket together at Boorcan. After Bray finished playing cricket, he joined VICSES a few years later, which gave us another opportunity to work together.

Volunteering has strengthened our friendship through weekly training, responding to emergencies, and supporting the community.



Whether it’s storm and flood response, road crash rescue training, or community events, we’ve shared plenty of experiences that have built trust and strengthened our friendship.

What qualities do you most value in each other?

We both value each other’s reliability, teamwork, and willingness to help. We trust each other’s judgement, and if one of us isn’t sure about something, we discuss it together and work through it as a team. We know we can rely on each other, whether it’s at training, on a job, or supporting the rest of the unit.

Who is most likely to:

Check the weather forecast multiple times a day? Both of us. While we don’t check it multiple times

a day, but we do check it every night. As we both work outdoors, it helps us plan our week.

Get caught telling the same SES story for the hundredth time? Michael.

Be the calm one in a crisis? Michael.

Have formed friendships with everyone at the unit? Both of us.

Do you have any shared interests/hobbies outside of VICSES you’d like to share?

We used to play cricket together for Boorcan, which is where our friendship began. After Bray gave cricket away, he joined the SES a few years later, giving us another opportunity to work together. We both enjoy spending time outdoors and being involved in our local community.

How important is your VICSES community in providing a sense of belonging and support in your lives?

VICSES has given us much more than the opportunity to volunteer. It’s provided lifelong friendships, a strong sense of belonging, and the chance to make a real difference in our community. We’ve also made great friendships with members from other SES units across the state. We know that if they ever need a hand, they can give us a call, and we’ll do whatever we can to help - and we know they’d do the same for us. Whether it’s supporting our own unit or helping one another, that’s what being part of VICSES is all about. It’s that mateship and support network that makes VICSES feel like a second family.

Tori and Shanleigh

VICSES GISBORNE UNIT

What were your first impressions of each other?

Tori: I thought Shanleigh was great as she was willing to help, then I just stuck to her like glue.

Shan: I didn’t really have much to do with Tori from the start but was impressed by the fact she turned up to a community engagement event four weeks postpartum at the Gisborne Steam Park. We had to stand out in the cold and rain and direct traffic.

How did your friendship develop?

Tori: Through community engagement. Particularly my first event four weeks postpartum.

Shan: Community engagement. We both have the same values.

You’re known as a ‘package deal’ at your unit. How do your personalities and skills/strengths complement each other?

We are both equally passionate about community engagement. I would say we are both empathetic, supportive, approachable, and willing to give anything a go.



Who is most likely to:

Take charge when things get hectic? Shan.

Keep everyone’s spirits up during an operational period? Both.

Give the best advice? Shan.

Take on photography responsibilities for the crew? Both.

Do you have any shared interests/hobbies outside of VICSES you’d like to share?

Tori: I would have to say the Girls on Fire program (we are both mentors) and definitely crafting, although we do start projects and take time to complete them.

Shan: Country music, crafting and empowering women and young girls – especially via the Girls on Fire Program.



VICSES volunteers add splash of orange to NAIDOC Week celebrations

By Ryan Malcolm, Media Advisor, VHO

VICSES volunteers have thrown their support behind Victoria’s Indigenous community, proudly attending and engaging with community at the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) in the City event for the very first time.

Beginning with a march through the northern suburbs of Naarm (Melbourne) commencing at Fitzroy’s Victorian Aboriginal Health Service location, VICSES volunteers wearing orange walked in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to Federation Square, where they were greeted by a community-led festival featuring live music, an artisan market and a VICSES activation and sausage sizzle.

With perfect winter weather and the event falling at the culmination of Victoria’s school holiday period, Federation Square was awash with families and community members showing their support for NAIDOC Week by enjoying a concert headlined by popular First Nations artists including Christine Anu and Bumpy and engaging directly with VICSES volunteers throughout.

Boasting plenty of activities for younger visitors and allowing members to share vital storm and flood safety information with attendees of all ages, the VICSES activation also raised important funds for Indigenous support services, with all proceeds of a VICSES-run barbecue donated to Victorian organisation Ngwala.

Renowned as a provider of alcohol and drug treatment and recovery services, homelessness programs, counselling, family violence and youth support services across Victoria, Ngwala Willumbong Aboriginal Corporation plays a vital role in delivering positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in need of holistic care and support.

It was terrific to see so many VICSES members join our efforts to recognise and celebrate the cultures, histories, and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at this year’s NAIDOC in the City event. ■



Interfaith tour boosts cultural awareness

By Malvina Tsecoutanis, Program Officer Metropolitan Flood Risk Engagement, Western region

On Sunday 24 May, volunteers and staff from VICSES, Fire Rescue Victoria and the Country Fire Authority came together for an interfaith cultural awareness tour across Melbourne’s west.

With the aim of strengthening connections with the diverse communities they serve, the tour gave participants the opportunity to visit three significant places of worship - the Shree Swaminarayan Temple, the Melbourne Grand Mosque and the Hoppers Crossing Gurudwara. At each site, valuable insights were shared into the beliefs, traditions and cultural practices of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities.

Throughout the tour, community leaders welcomed participants and shared the significance of each place of worship, while discussing customs, festivals and the important role faith plays in bringing people together. The experience encouraged open conversations, fostered mutual understanding, and highlighted the value of respectful engagement with people from all backgrounds.

The interfaith tour was a great success, strengthening relationships between emergency services, partner agencies, and local faith communities. By visiting places of worship and engaging with faith leaders, participants gained valuable insights into different faiths, cultural practices, and the

role these communities play before, during, and after emergencies.

“The interfaith tour was an incredibly valuable experience that provided a unique opportunity

The positive response to the initiative has led to interest from other agencies, with additional interfaith tours now being planned.

to connect with community members and gain a deeper understanding of their beliefs and cultural practices. As someone who is committed to broadening my knowledge of different faiths and strengthening relationships within our diverse community, I found the experience both insightful and rewarding. Given the nature of the work we do, building this understanding is essential as it helps

ensure that we engage with community members in a respectful and culturally sensitive way, while being mindful of the beliefs, customs and practices that may influence their needs and experiences during emergencies. Opportunities like the interfaith tour also strengthen our ability to build trust, foster meaningful connections and provide more effective support to the communities we serve,” said Sidra Batool, VICSES Community Resilience Coordinator, Southern Metro.

The positive response to the initiative has led to interest from other agencies, with additional interfaith tours now being planned. ■

VICSES HOBSONS BAY UNIT

Celebrates transformation

By Michael Casha, Deputy Controller Operations and Administration, VICSES Hobsons Bay Unit

The VICSES Hobsons Bay Unit recently marked a special milestone, officially reopening its renovated building after months of work by VICSES volunteers and staff, Hobsons Bay City Council, and a strong network of local community partners.



The reopening was the result of genuine collaboration. Hobsons Bay City Council staff pitched in on painting walls and stairs, removing unused appliances and installing a new door. Through the state government's Volunteer Emergency Services Equipment Program, new lockers were installed, adding to a medium rescue truck secured through the same grant in previous years. VICSES delivered refreshed epoxy flooring and carpet tiles that have transformed the look and feel of the space.

Local and corporate supporters Community Bank Altona and Laverton, Heidelberg Materials, Dulux Paint, Energy Australia, The Fabric by Mirvac Altona North, Bunnings Altona North and National Australia Bank also contributed financially, materially and practically to bring the project to life.

And, as always, it was volunteers who rolled up their sleeves to get the job done. Members painted, cleaned, demolished, rebuilt, wrote grant

applications and sourced materials, all on top of their operational roles responding to storms, floods and rescues across the community.

The crew celebrated their hard work with an official unit re-opening night. Guests including the Hon. Melissa Horne MP, Member for Williamstown, Hobsons Bay City Council Deputy Mayor Lisa Bentley and Councillors, VICSES Chief Executive Officer Rob Purcell, Deputy Chief Officers Greg Swindells and Cain Trist, and representatives from our corporate and community supporters joined volunteers and their families to celebrate the transformation.

Hobsons Bay Unit Controller Mel Smith told guests the renovation was about more than fresh paint and new flooring.

"For our volunteers, this is more than a renovation. It is a sign of progress. It is a sign of investment. And it is a sign that our community stands with us. You did this on top of your operational workload. You did this because you care about your community.

And you did this because you care about each other."

The evening gave newer members a chance to share why they joined. Tash Peterson, who joined the unit earlier this year, spoke about discovering that VICSES life is about far more than storm response.

"Our volunteers come from all walks of life. We're IT consultants, tradespeople, ticket officers, students, retirees, parents. We don't all have the same backgrounds or skills, but we do share one thing in common, and that's a desire to make a difference."

Thank you to everyone, staff, councillors, community partners and volunteers alike, who helped bring this project to life.

Tash also reflected on the training every member receives, from operating lighting towers and running land searches to swift water rescue and casualty care, and the friendships built along the way.

"Many volunteers here say they joined to help others, but I actually think they stayed because they found a second family" Tash said.

The refreshed building gives Hobsons Bay volunteers a safer, cleaner and more welcoming space to train, prepare and support one another, and it's a facility the unit and its community partners can be proud of. Looking ahead, the unit will keep working with Hobsons Bay City Council and state government toward a larger, purpose-built home for the future — but for now, there's plenty to celebrate in what's been achieved.

Thank you to everyone, staff, councillors, community partners and volunteers alike, who helped bring this project to life. ■



VICSES WIMMERA REGION

Volunteers heralded for exceptional service

By Ryan Malcolm, Media Advisor, VHO

VICSES stalwarts from across the Wimmera region have been celebrated for their tireless commitment to their communities, with more than half a millennium of cumulative long service celebrated at a weekend awards ceremony.

Volunteers representing VICSES units from Kaniva to Ararat gathered at Horsham Golf Club, where they were recognised for their local impact during careers spanning between five years and multiple decades of emergency response.



Alistair Drayton with Jordan Bush



Alistair Drayton and Jennifer Rook

The event also provided an opportunity to present a host of National Medals, acknowledging diligent service of at least 15 years with VICSES or other volunteer emergency service agencies.

VICSES Stawell Unit volunteer Jennifer Rook joined colleagues in receiving an initial National Medal, honoured alongside

her Stawell Unit colleague Glenton Gough and VICSES Warracknabeal Unit volunteer Geoffrey Stewart.

Two National Medal 1st Clasps were awarded to signify 25 years of remarkable service, conferred to Gary Frost (Horsham) and John Bish (Warracknabeal), while a National Medal 2nd Clasp was also awarded to Jason Woodhart.

The event also saw the presentation of rare National Medal 3rd Clasps to two volunteers in celebration of their 45 years of undying service to their communities, with VICSES Ararat Unit member Russell Graham and VICSES Stawell Unit stalwart John Hooper in receipt of the honour.

Finally, an organisational excellence award was conferred to VICSES staff member and Ararat Unit volunteer Jordan Bush, celebrating his constant personification of VICSES values and exceptional commitment to community.

The VICSES Values award acknowledged Jordan's pivotal role in developing the Grampians Landslide Emergency Response Plan following destructive fires, his coordination of VICSES crews during the high-profile search for Samantha Murphy near Ballarat and the broad respect he has earned across the organisation both on the ground and behind the scenes.

VICSES Chief Officer Operations Alistair Drayton was on hand to offer his congratulations to all award recipients and thanked them for their exceptional response across a diverse landscape inclusive of the Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park, Dyurrite (Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park) and the Big and Little deserts. ■



Centuries of volunteer service honoured at VICSES Hume region event

By Ryan Malcolm, Media Advisor, VHO

Volunteers from across VICSES' Hume region have been celebrated for their undying support of their regional communities as part of the organisation's long-service awards initiative.

More than 650 years of volunteer experience was present at the Wangaratta Gateway for the event, which saw a host of members boasting between five and 50 years of persistent service recognised for their vital role in emergency response and preparedness across the region.

Among the longest-tenured recipients was VICSES Euroa Unit stalwart Neville Lynch, who was recognised for an incredible 50 years of continuous service and as one of only 15 VICSES founding members still serving with the organisation in 2026.

VICSES Myrtleford Unit volunteer and former long-time Controller George McPherson was honoured for 45 years of service, having held the unit's top job for 14 years shortly after joining the service in 1979, while VICSES Yackandandah Unit pillar Joe Riella was acknowledged for 40 years of outstanding service to his community.

VICSES Wangaratta Unit duo Vincent McKenzie (30 years) and Colin Warden (25 years) were celebrated for their remarkable commitment over multiple

decades, as was VICSES Numurkah Unit volunteer Kylie Knight (25 years), while VICSES Operations Officer Dan Walton and VICSES Wodonga Unit volunteer Annette Armstrong received clasps signifying 20 years of tireless service.

The quartet of Debbie Bonanno (Tallangatta), Tracey Harper (Wangaratta), William McRae (Bright) and Michael Sidoti (Yackandandah) were honoured for 15 years of service, while a further 17 others were acknowledged for either five or 10 years of dedicated involvement.

The event also allowed the presentation of the National Medal to several volunteers in recognition of at least 15 years of diligent service with VICSES or other volunteer emergency response organisations.

Karen Bradshaw (Kilmore), Tim Watkins and Tracey Harper (Wangaratta) and Megan Vearing and Zachary West (Tallangatta) were presented an initial National Medal in acknowledgement of their remarkable contributions over several years, while Neville Lynch and fellow VICSES founding member and Beechworth Unit volunteer Ian Sinclair were awarded a 3rd Clasp to their National Medals, signifying at least 45 years of exceptional service.

The event was rounded out by the presentation of a series of organisational excellence awards.

VICSES Kilmore Unit volunteers Corey Finger, Jo Catanzaro, Carly McDowell, Karen Bradshaw and Maddy Moncrieff were awarded the Excellence in Community Engagement award, recognising the unit's increased presence at community events

in recent years, driving emergency awareness, fundraising and volunteer recruitment across their response area.

VICSES staffer Brendan Corboy was awarded the Excellence in Innovation award for his work developing and streamlining systems used to plan and execute intra and interstate deployments during major emergencies, utilising online forms to gauge volunteers' availability and allow command staff to more efficiently establish taskforces.

VICSES staff member Sara-Jane Bowering was awarded the VICSES Values award for her work underpinning local service delivery, displaying unwavering commitment and exceptional credibility while building and fostering relationships with volunteers, fellow staff and partner organisations, enhancing VICSES' reputation in the process.

Fellow staff member Liz Frazer was awarded the Excellence in Community Engagement award in acknowledgement of her tireless work behind the scenes implementing innovative approaches to emergency preparedness, on which she presented at the 2025 Flood Management Australia National Conference and was conferred the Young Flood-plain Manager Outstanding Presenter award.

Finally, VICSES Seymour Unit Controller Christine Welsh was conferred the VICSES Values award, recognising her incredible work supporting the redevelopment of the VICSES Murchison Unit and the rallying of the local volunteer-base, allowing the unit to regain its footing locally and build community confidence and trust in its emergency services. ■

Phenomenal service of VICSES mid-west region volunteers recognised

By Ryan Malcolm, Media Advisor, VHO

VICSES personnel from across the organisation's regional mid-west have gathered to have their extensive contributions to local communities celebrated and acknowledged as part of VICSES' annual long service awards initiative.

Convening for a ceremony held at Bacchus Marsh Golf Club, volunteers with between five and 45 years of continued service were on hand to celebrate with their peers and special guests including VICSES Chief Officer Operations Alistair Drayton and Minister for Emergency Services Vicki Ward MP.



Cameron Maher, Stewart Riddell, Debbie Mann

VICSES Ballarat Unit pillar Gary Hickson celebrated 45 years of VICSES service at the event, the longest-tenured recognised on the day having joined and been a consistent presence at his local unit since 1978.

A VICSES Life Member with an extensive history of operational response, Gary was also awarded a National Medal 3rd Clasp, in recognition of at least 45 years of outstanding and diligent service and a National Emergency Medal for exceptional service during the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires.

VICSES Ballarat Unit was well represented on the day, with fellow members Leonie Sharp (30 years) and Sandra Koole (20 years) honoured for multiple decades of service, while Stewart Riddell and Damian Slater received medals signifying 10 years of VICSES involvement.

VICSES Gisborne Unit trio Dominico Bonanno, Harley Kent and David Thomas were also part of the

cohort recognised for a decade of service, as was VICSES Sunbury Unit volunteer Daniel Edwards.

A further six volunteers representing VICSES Woodend, Gisborne and Bacchus Marsh units were conferred pins in recognition of their five years of VICSES involvement.

Initial National Medals celebrating 15 years of diligent service were presented to VICSES Gisborne Unit pair Rex Pilgrim and David Thomas as well as VICSES Sunbury Unit volunteer Jacinta Hall and VICSES Woodend member Kevin McNair.

VICSES Bacchus Marsh Unit volunteer Denis Purcell was also honoured with both his National Medal 1st and 2nd Clasps, signifying 25 and 35 years of diligent service respectively.

In all, more than 400 years of long-service was celebrated at the event before VICSES Ballarat Unit's Craig West and Gary Hickson and VICSES Sunbury Unit volunteer Jacinta Hall were awarded the New South Wales (NSW) Premier's Flood Emergency Citation, in recognition of their incredible service on deployment to NSW during major flood events between 2021 and 2023.

Stewart Riddell received further honour as the recipient of the VICSES Values award, acknowledging his vital staff role in supporting the health and safety of VICSES volunteers across Western Region.

The ceremony was rounded out with the presentation of the rare Commendation of Service to VICSES Woodend Unit volunteers Tobin Connell and Ben Tyrell, in acknowledgement of their remarkable response during severe storms on the night of June 9, 2021. ■



Tobin Connell, Ben Tyrell, Vicki Ward



Alistair Drayton, Brett Neve, Tim Connor

METROPOLITAN VICSES

Volunteers celebrated for centuries of care

By Ryan Malcolm, Media Advisor, VHO

VICSES volunteers from across Melbourne's eastern, southern and bayside suburbs have been honoured for their continued support of communities in need, as part of the organisation's annual honours initiative.

Almost 150 VICSES members attended Cranbourne's Amstel Club on Sunday, 28 June to acknowledge the service and excellence of local members, with more than 600 years of VICSES long service awards conferred across the cohort.

VICSES founding member and Frankston Unit stalwart Brett Neve was the longest-tenured volunteer acknowledged on the day, awarded a clasp in recognition of 50 years' service and celebrated as one of only 15 members across the state to have volunteered continuously since the inception of VICSES in 1975.

Brett's VICSES Frankston Unit counterpart Margaret Graham was honoured for four decades of involvement with her local unit alongside VICSES Glen Eira Unit's Anthony Jones, while Timothy Douglas (Knox), Tyler Pereyra (Frankston) and Jarrod Ko (Monash) received clasps in recognition of a quarter century of service.

Clasps representing 20 years of service were also presented to Mark Lindupp (Frankston), Brett Mceachern (Knox), Mandy Caulfield (Lilydale), Paul Ricci (Manningham), Emma Wright (Monash) and Stephen Monro (Pakenham).

A further six members received awards denoting 15 years of service to their communities, with staff member Dimity Lynch, Douglas Hammerton (Whitehorse), Bryce Wickham (Narre Warren), Martin Channon (Manningham), Callum Slinn

(Healesville) and Damian White (Frankston) each acknowledged for their ongoing commitment. Some 26 others were recognised for either 10 or five years of VICSES involvement.

The event also saw 13 members awarded the prestigious National Medal, in honour of exceptional and diligent service with volunteer emergency management organisations over a period of at least 15 years.

Having previously received the National Medal, several other eligible members were awarded clasps, with a new clasp presented for each additional 10 years of service completed.

VICSES Frankston Unit volunteer Warwick Grassick and VICSES Monash Unit member Jarrod Ko were each presented the National Medal 1st Clasp in recognition of at least 25 years of service, while Tony Hoeboer (Sorrento), Jim Kokkalos (Port Phillip) and Shaun Caulfield (Lilydale) were presented their National Medal 2nd Clasp for 35 years of service.

A pair of National Medal 3rd Clasp awards, signifying incredible service of 45 years or more, were also awarded to VICSES Frankston Unit pair Brett and Jane Neve.

VICSES Chelsea Unit volunteer Phil Wall was conferred the VICSES Excellence in Community Engagement award in celebration of his efforts driving mainstream and social media engagement with his unit and greatly increasing VICSES awareness across bayside communities.



Danielle Eyssens, Rob Purcell

VICSES Cranbourne Unit also received the VICSES Excellence in Community Engagement award, acknowledging the unit's innovative and interactive approach to its inaugural open day, showcasing their hydraulics and other emergency response resources to a crowd of more than 1,200 community members, greatly increasing the profile of the unit in the process.

VICSES Sorrento Unit Controller Mark Daw was acknowledged with the Excellence in Learning and Development award, in recognition of his incredible commitment to knowledge sharing and supporting training initiatives statewide as well as his work fostering multi-agency relationships in his local area to improve interoperability.

A trio of volunteers were celebrated for their personification of VICSES' ethos, with Brett 'Dutchy' Holland (VICSES Hastings Unit), Danielle Eyssens (VICSES Glen Eira Unit) and Vincent Ciardulli (VICSES Manningham Unit) awarded the VICSES Values Award.

A member of the VICSES Hastings Unit for almost a decade, almost all of which as part of the Unit Management Team or as Unit Controller, Dutchy was recognised for his commitment as a mentor for volunteers and aspiring leaders, his championing of a junior program within his unit and his advocacy and inclusion of women across the service to ensure units accurately represent the communities they serve.

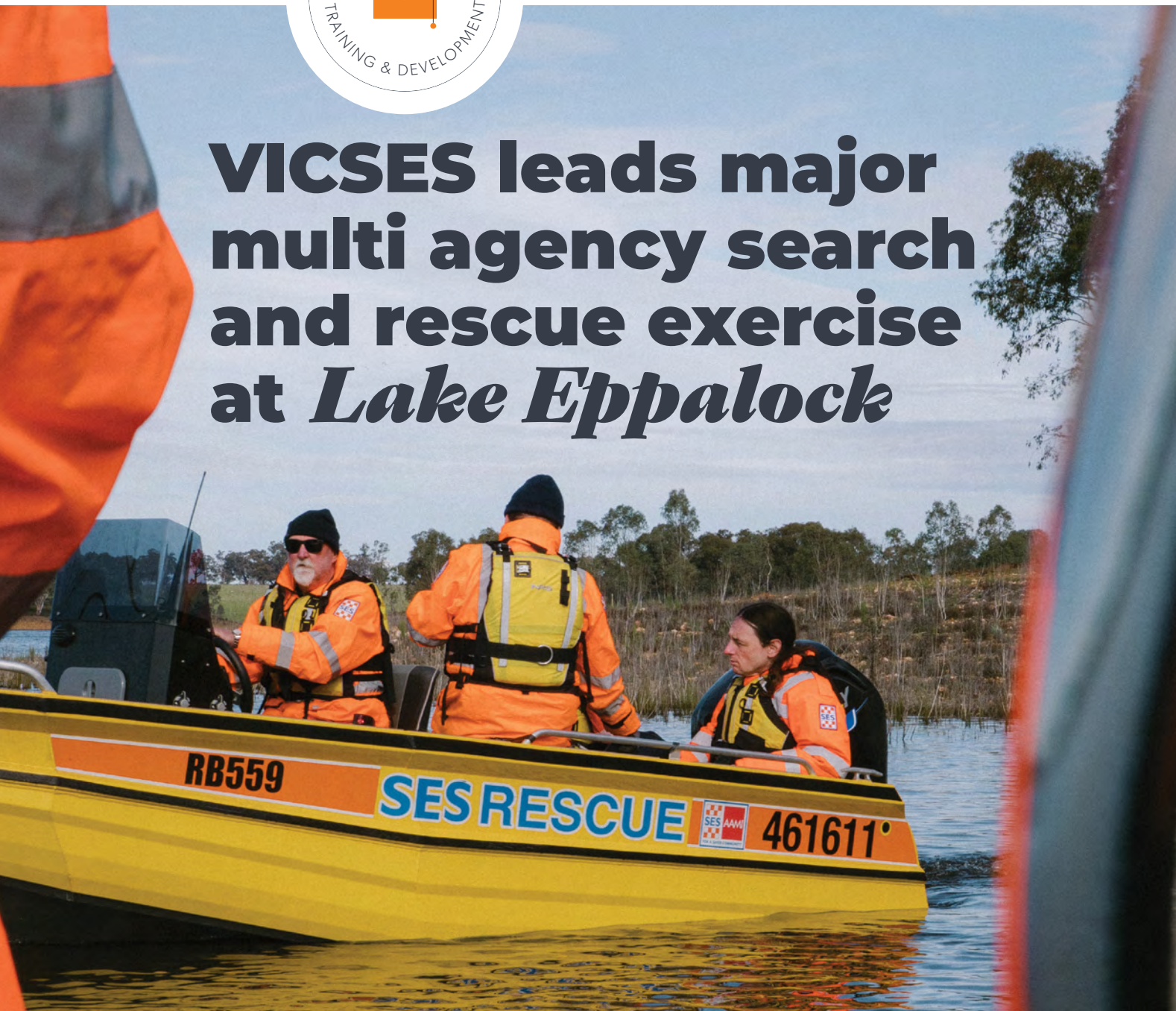
Also a former Unit Controller with 18 years' of VICSES experience behind her, Danielle was acknowledged for her tireless commitment to driving unit standards, building a strong occupational health and safety culture to ensure members prioritise their wellbeing while leading from the front as one of VICSES' most accomplished volunteers in the Incident Management space.

As VICSES Manningham Unit Controller, Vincent has set the example for his volunteers to follow, constantly working to create an inclusive environment within the unit and ensuring members maintain a higher-than-average level of skill and safety when responding to emergencies, championing professionalism throughout.

Finally, VICSES staff member Joshua Jacobs was awarded the VICSES Excellence in Innovation award, acknowledging his vital behind the scenes work streamlining data input for team and regional action plans, creating a formula now widely used statewide to support staff and managers in reporting important unit data. ■



VICSES leads major multi agency search and rescue exercise at *Lake Eppalock*



By Dharni Giri, Senior Media Advisor, VHO

VICSES led one of its largest search and rescue training exercises in recent years at Lake Eppalock in August, bringing together up to 120 VICSES volunteers and emergency services partners to test and strengthen their response to complex incidents across land and water.

The two-day exercise brought together VICSES volunteers alongside Victoria Police, Water Police, Marine Search and Rescue (MSAR) and Country Fire Authority (CFA) personnel, who supported the exercise with drone capability.

For the first time, Victoria Police Mounted Branch personnel also supported the exercise, giving VICSES volunteers the opportunity to train alongside specialist emergency services and strengthen coordination across land and water-based search operations.

The exercise featured two realistic scenarios designed to test the skills and coordination required during complex search and rescue incidents.

The first simulated a missing skydiving aircraft, with VICSES boat crews and land search teams tasked with searching Lake Eppalock, the shoreline and surrounding bushland for simulated debris and casualties.

The second scenario focused on vehicles caught in floodwater, with crews responding to simulated casualties trapped in vehicles, a person on the roof



of a floating vehicle and a person who had self-extricated before becoming lost in nearby bushland.

VICSES volunteers worked across marine and land-based search teams, using coordinated search patterns, navigation, radio communications, casualty management and dynamic risk assessment throughout the scenarios.

CFA drone capability also supported the exercise, providing an additional perspective to assist with searching and developing a shared operating picture across the exercise area.

The skills tested during the exercise reflect the work VICSES volunteers regularly undertake alongside other emergency services during real incidents.

In the 12-months from August 2025 to August 2026, VICSES volunteers responded to almost 3,500 requests to assist other emergency services

and agencies, an average of almost 10 jobs every day. This can include supporting Victoria Police with flood rescues, land and marine searches, missing person incidents and other complex emergencies where VICSES volunteers provide specialist skills, equipment and local knowledge.

Justin Navas, VICSES Operations Manager said "Our VICSES volunteers regularly support other emergency services during real-life incidents, including flood-water rescues and search and rescue operations, so being able to train alongside our agency partners is really valuable."

The exercise at Lake Eppalock provided volunteers with practical experience in a simulated emergency environment, while strengthening the relationships, communication and coordination needed to work effectively together during real life incidents. ■

The exercise featured two realistic scenarios designed to test the skills and coordination required during complex search and rescue incidents.



Chief presents South Barwon Rescue with Challenge Awards

By Gerry Sheridan, Operations Manager, VHO

The VICSES South Barwon Unit recently had the pleasure of hosting VICSES' Chief Officer Operations, Alistair Drayton at their training night.

The Chief surprised members by giving awards recognising the unit's recent trip to Dubbo, New South Wales (NSW) where they competed in the NSW National Rescue Challenge.

Congratulations to Adrian, Blake, Caroline, Josh, Lisa and Tyler who all won awards as part of the challenge. An honourable mention also goes to Tim and Rory who contributed to the team's preparation

efforts before the challenge and many more back at the unit who supported.

Following the awards presentation, the Chief stayed on to observe the training scenario which had been setup where both the unit and the Highton CFA worked together to ensure the successful extrication of patients a multiple vehicle collision.

"Training was of the highest standard and it was so fantastic to see our partner agencies on site all training together enabling a better outcome for our communities in times of need", said Alistair.

VICSES' very own State Challenge will be held in February 2027, and we look forward to seeing many teams enter. ■



Emergency on the runway

By Lisa Worcester, Operations Officer Emergency Management, Eastern Region



On 12 June, a multi-agency emergency exercise at Latrobe Regional Airport brought together more than 70 personnel from across Gippsland to test how agencies would respond to a serious aircraft incident.

The exercise, known as RotorFail II, involved members from the VICSES Morwell and Gippsland Regional Units, and West Gippsland Unit Support Team. They worked alongside Ambulance Victoria, the Combined Gippsland Essential Industries Group, Country Fire Authority, Fire Rescue Victoria, Latrobe City Council, Latrobe Regional Airport, Regional Airport Consulting and Victoria Police.

Designed as a full-field simulation, the exercise required all agencies to treat the scenario as a real emergency. Crews responded to a staged collision between a helicopter and a twin-engine aircraft on the airport's runway.

Both aircraft were considered damaged, with multiple injuries reported. The number of people on board was initially unknown.

To enhance realism, a lit hay bale was used to simulate a fire at the crash site. This created visible smoke without the dangers of a live fuel fire.

The main aim was to test the airport's emergency procedures and how well agencies could work together. Exercises like this help ensure emergency services can respond quickly and effectively during real incidents, where clear communication is critical.

Participants practised key skills such as scene management, casualty care, rescue coordination, and communication between teams. The day also allowed observers to identify strengths and areas for improvement.

RotorFail II forms part of a series of exercises required by the Civil Aviation Safety Authority to test and strengthen airport emergency response plans.

The exercise successfully met its objectives, confirming the value of the current emergency procedures while identifying clear opportunities to further strengthen response efforts. ■

Participants practised key skills such as scene management, casualty care, rescue coordination, and communication between teams.



VICSES at a glance



Who we are

Control agency for:



Flood



Storm



Earthquake



Tsunami



Landslide



154

Units

17

Permanently
staffed offices

105

Road rescue
providers

Our people in 2025-26



5,098

Volunteers*

Female 33.7%

Male 66%

Other 0.3%

Volunteer leadership (Controllers and Deputy Controllers)

Female 32%

Male 68%

*Active and non-active

338

Staff

Female 46.2%

Male 53.5%

Other 0.3%

Staff leadership (Has at least one direct report)

Female 41%

Male 59%



Our agency in 2025-26



319,221

Volunteer hours



32,934

Incidents



Flood

10,517 hours 2,026 incidents



Storm

116,571 hours 21,038 incidents



Road crash rescue

16,168 hours 2,554 incidents



Tsunami, landslide and earthquake

463 hours 90 incidents



Assist agency

53,792 hours 4,087 incidents



Community engagement

112,769 hours 2,073 incidents



Other

8,941 hours 1,066 incidents



2025-26 marks our busiest year on record for road crash rescue and assist agency.