

Video Transcript: Mics & Sirens Season 2 – Episode 7

[Female Narrator] You're listening to Mics & Sirens, the official podcast of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in Western Australia. DFES acknowledges the traditional owners on the land of which this podcast is created, the Whadjuk people.

[Sirens sound while news footage of fires play]

[Michael Tovine, Fire and Emergency New Zealand] The world's changing and how do we as an organisation change with the world and I guess attract volunteers and keep them? We call it whanaungatanga, and it's one of our key values within our organisation – it translates as 'we are better together'. We've got some really clever people doing some really awesome things. This project will give us kind of an avenue to maybe tap into some of their skills and experience and, you know, make them feel valued. This is essentially a network, a process that's for volunteers designed by volunteers.

[Female Narrator] If disaster strikes in Western Australia, there are around 26,000 volunteers to call on to protect the people in this State. They are the heart of emergency services. People with different skills, knowledge and expertise, who give up their own time to help keep communities safe. Typically, if you're a volunteer firefighter, you're called upon to fight fires. If you're a Marine Rescue volunteer, your job is on the water. And so on. But what if you have skills that can be used for special projects or initiatives? Our guest in this episode is Michael Tovine from New Zealand. He's a volunteer firefighter and employed by Fire and Emergency New Zealand to enhance the volunteer experience. One of the ways he's helped achieve that is through the Volunteer Voice Network: a portal that contains each volunteers' superpowers to be used for special missions.

[Di Darmody, Interviewer] Hello Michael.

[Michael] Hey, how are you?

[Di] Thanks very much for being with us today, Michael. Before we talk about this project, I'd love to start with how you became involved in fire and emergency work. I think it was back in 2007 that you started volunteering. Could you tell us what led to that decision?

[Michael] Yeah, so I moved into a flat behind the Mungaturoto Volunteer Fire Station and I guess a few people I knew were volunteering there, and I started hanging out with them, I guess in a social capacity. That was where I really enjoyed that, and one day the chief said, pretty much, "if you wanna keep coming and hanging out here for a beer, you're going to have to sign up." So I signed up and yes, here we are still 18 years later.

[Di] And what's kept you involved for the last 18 years?

[Michael] Probably the people, I think. There were some real good mates there and, yeah, it's still a bit emotional for me 'cause I've got a few mates who I met through firefighting who aren't with us anymore. So, I guess yeah, definitely the people have kept me here and, you know, making - doing things well with and for people within the organisation and for the communities we serve. So, yeah, I guess it's probably not the standard answer of why I joined, but there's probably quite a common answer of why people stay volunteering.

[Di] Now you're the Senior Advisor of Volunteer Resilience at Fire and Emergency New Zealand. Would you be able to give us an insight into how the organisation is staffed? What's the general breakdown of career firefighters and volunteers?

[Michael] Yes, we've got around 14,000 people within Fire and Emergency I think and around 80% of those are our volunteers. And then the remaining 20% or so they make up our career firefighting staff and our support staff when working out of NHQ and region headquarters.

[Di] Historically then what have been the challenges of having such a large proportion of your organisation work as volunteers?

[Michael] Probably not really a challenge but it gives us a lot of opportunities to I guess, you know, work around how we can do things better for them, like we've got a volunteerism strategy, and how can we make things easier for volunteers. I think a big one for us I guess if we're talking about a challenge is communication or communicating with them. Predominantly, we use email, but not all our firefighters access their Fire and Emergency email, so just working on ways that we can, you know, evolve and be better. I think, yes, it's more of how we can look at opportunities we have to move forward.

Volunteering is a different thing in New Zealand than it was, you know, ten, 20 years ago, you know, just sort of the world's changing, and how do we as an organisation change with the world, and I guess attract volunteers and keep them?

[Di] What's changed over the last decade in terms of volunteering?

[Michael] I think time commitments, you know, life's got a lot busy, there's a lot of options in the world now. I just, if I reflect on when I grew up you kind of, as a kid you played rugby and all the girls played netball and, you know, Dad was the firefighter so I think the world's changed and, you know, both parents are working, you know, there's a lot of financial pressure on the cost of living in New Zealand and, yeah, volunteering isn't as easy as it used to be. So, yes, it's trying to find ways around that 'cause it's not really gonna change. How do we change to suit that world now?

[Di] Yes, people are more time poor, and so organisations like yours and like ours need to find different ways to engage with people to encourage them to spend their time, I guess, doing this work. So, the way you've gone about that, or one of the ways you've gone about that is through something called the Volunteer Voice Project. Can you tell us about that?

[Michael] Yeah, so that's just about how we get the - I guess, the voice of those people, of those volunteers. You know, we've done it in an ad hoc way in the past and probably even currently as we kind of reach out to people who we know through, I guess, region or district forums or avenues as people at NHQ - national headquarters - will call up someone here and say, "oh, do you have a volunteer who might be able to give us some input into XYZ?" and, you know, we go down that way. At the moment, we also have the United Fire Brigades Association. So, they're an association that provides advocacy for our volunteers. So, we reach out to them a lot to give us people on working groups. But, you know, there's no real process for our teams at NHQ to access volunteers. So, that's probably where the project was born, is trying to give a consistent way for our teams to, I guess, access the voice of the

volunteer 'cause we're good at telling our teams within NHQ, "hey, you guys need to get a volunteer perspective," but we haven't really nailed the how to make it easier for them.

[Di] And what have you learnt about the experiences of volunteers and their work with Fire and Emergency New Zealand through talking to them?

[Michael] I think the big one for me is just the skills and experience they have externally to firefighting or in their volunteer brigades and, you know, we've got some really clever people doing some really awesome things in their day jobs and I think this project will give us kind of an avenue to maybe tap into some of their skills and experience and, you know, make them feel valued as part of the organisation but also, you know, getting some real valuable advice or input into projects from people who are part of the team really.

[Di] Have any surprises cropped up?

[Michael] No, not really. Like I've been around for 18 years volunteering in this organisation, and I don't think anything has surprised me that I didn't know since I started in this role, but I'm sure there's something coming up, probably. I guess if one thing had surprised me in the current climate is around health and safety and how some employers now are starting to look at what volunteers have been doing outside of work 'cause, you know, it becomes a risk if you're fatigued turning up to work. That's a risk they have to manage so that's probably the closest thing to a surprise for me in the last 12 months.

[Di] So around 12,000 voices, that's a lot to capture, obviously. What have been the challenges in doing that in a meaningful way?

[Michael] Yeah, I think, yeah, that's a great question and probably the biggest challenge is the number of them, and the fact that predominantly we'll send emails to, you know, try and get information to them or information from them and, you know, they've all got their own lives and checking their fire and emergency emails isn't a priority for them. So, yeah, that's probably the biggest challenge.

I think the next one is just the capacity of our people. Like we've got some really awesome people doing some awesome work but there's just a lot and sometimes we can miss the feedback loop, which is probably one of the most important things when we're communicating not just with volunteers, but anyone. You know, if we give their advice or feedback and then kind of don't let them know what we did with it, yeah, they kind of feel a bit undervalued or, you know, next time we'll go and talk to them like, "oh, what's the point? We haven't heard back from you." So that's probably an area that we can improve and get a quick one as I think we do do a few things for our volunteers that they don't really know about. So, you know, how do we communicate that to them so, you know, they can see that their feedback has made a difference?

[Di] If emails aren't working, have you come up with a better way or something you'd like to do in the future that you think might capture people's attention more and give you the information you're looking for?

[Michael] Yeah, I think probably giving them the opportunity through various means of communication and not just relying on email so that's, you know, whether it's a text or, you know, if we had an app or something like that. Yeah, I think that's probably gonna be the key

to the future is how we have, how our volunteers can access stuff through a variety of different methods and not just relying on one because, you know, everyone is different. We've got, like if I think about my own volunteer brigade that I'm a part of, you know, we've got guys who really don't like using their phone. They're a bit more old school which, you know, they've got a lot of good skills in other areas but, you know, tapping into the app is one of them and then, you know, on the flip side of that we've got some people who are the guns of technology so, you know, it's just how do you meet the needs of both of them? So. I think that's gonna be the key is how do we offer more than one way of engagement?

[Male Narrator] If you're listening to this episode, you're probably already familiar with the Emergency WA app. But did you know the tool that helps you prepare with confidence, now has a new feature where you can make a plan for storm, flood and cyclones, not just bushfire? The app will prompt you to put your plan into action when you're confronted with an emergency. Download Emergency WA from the App Store or Google Play, and create your emergency plan today.

[Di] What's the plan then with this particular project over the next few years?

[Michael] Yeah, so we just launched, actually got really good timing. We launched on Monday, so the project went live so the first stage of the project is our volunteers opting in so it's fully voluntary.

[Di] Handy.

[Michael] So they'll opt in. There's 15 different areas of interest they can opt into. I don't have them all off the top of my head but for example you can opt into PP and uniform, fleet, equipment, safety, health and wellbeing. There's one around culture and diversity.

So they'll opt into that, give us their skills and experience in that, so that might be whether they've had experience outside of FENZ or within FENZ. You know, 'cause there's a place for everyone. You've got, for fleet for example, you might be a diesel mechanic or a truck driver and had significant experience in that industry, or you may just have an interest in fleet. So, our teams at NHQ have the ability to look at those people, and get the right ones for what they need. So in the technical stuff, you might want the ones from the industry, but if we're looking at lock layouts and that kind of stuff then maybe we can ask everyone what they think. So that's happened this week. Pretty cool, we've already had two or three days in and we've had, I think around 50 or 60 people opt in already which is really exciting for us.

Then September, we'll move to teams at NHQ. So they'll sign up with a project, and then we'll give them the data they need to access the volunteers that are suitable for their projects. So, that's what's happening in the next little while, and then we just want to build on that for the next two or three years. We've got probably two, three, maybe four projects that are already indicated they'll use the Volunteer Voice Network straight away. So, yeah, that's really exciting for us as a team.

[Di] So the initial stages that have begun in August are really about capturing people's experiences, and then matching them with projects or with existing things that are happening within Fire and Emergency New Zealand. Is that right?

[Michael] Yeah, yeah. So I guess to get to this point, we've spent a long time working in the background, and that involved a lot of volunteers. So, initially, when we kind of set up a working group, an advisory group that consisted of staff at NHQ, staff who were employed in our regions and districts and volunteers to understand what the challenges were, and like, you know, the main one was communication, then we had feedback loops and that kind of stuff. They kind of framed up what we needed, which was a place where our volunteers could sign up for stuff they like. And then yeah, from that we went to a fully volunteer advisory group and they kind of helped us design, I guess, the process we have now. So that's probably a really exciting thing is we went to volunteers and asked them what was gonna work. So this is essentially a network, a process that's for volunteers designed by volunteers.

[Di] And what are your hopes for the program, Michael?

[Michael] I think just that, you know, when decisions are made within the organisation or within projects that volunteers have been part of the journey, I guess, and, you know. And once that filters down, I think that will help with the "them and us," that kind of raruraru, which in Māori means challenge. Yeah, there's often a bit of that. And I think if we can have more, you know, visibility that volunteers have been part of the process moving forward, I think that's gonna help. It's going to help volunteers feel valued, and then for the organisation, you know, you can make some really good decisions if the people who are at the coalface are part of the decision-making process.

[Di] What would you hope would happen in terms of collaboration, I guess, between, you know, paid emergency service staff and volunteers moving forward through this project?

[Michael] I think just, you know, that, I guess, we call it whanaungatanga, and that's one of our key values within the organisation is, I guess, translates as 'we're better together', and so, you know, which is collaboration and that's one of our four values within the organisation. So, you know, that's just, I guess, it's not really a hope, it's just kind of what we do, and I think we do a good job now and it's just about, you know, evolving where we're at. It's not really saying that we're rubbish at it or we suck at it, but, you know, we can always get better. That's probably what this project's doing is taking something we're already doing, putting it into a process that is consistent across the country and easier to use for our volunteers and our employed staff.

[Di] And how do you think it will impact, say, new volunteers?

[Michael] I think it's just another cool thing for them to see, like, "oh, I can opt into this when I've got time," and be part of some bigger decisions that are made within the organisation and not just stay in my own volunteer brigade.

[Di] Here in Western Australia we have some 26,000 volunteers from different emergency service groups. Do you have any insight into what we might be able to learn from the Volunteer Voice project?

[Michael] Oh, probably just, you know, involving volunteers. If you can involve volunteers in decision-making in just any part of the process, I think it just makes you a better team 'cause if people are feeling involved, they feel valued and, you know, yeah, everyone's happy. 26,000, that's a lot. It's a lot of people.

[Di] It is a lot. We have a lot of people, a big State here to cover. In this series, Mics & Sirens, we speak to fire and emergency services experts from all around the world, and they all bring their vast depth of knowledge and a wide range of experiences.' But all of our guests are like you, Michael, in that they're connected to personal drive to improve how we respond to and manage emergencies. So we like to ask some personal questions about the incidents you've been a part of. Is there an incident, Michael, that stands out in your mind even today that you'd be able to tell us about?

[Michael] Oh, there's probably plenty that I probably don't want to talk about but stay in my mind as most, I guess, firefighters all have the same stories. But I guess one that sticks out is when I was firefighting at Marsden Point, which was oil refinery in New Zealand. I was at work when the pipeline burst, which was a really significant event. The pipe that took all the fuel pretty much from Marsden Point to Auckland Airport burst. So, you know, yeah, that was a big day and a few long nights after that. But, yeah, that was a massive incident that probably sticks into my mind.

[Di] On the flip side, how do you handle those difficult moments? Have you found a way to process them?

[Michael] Yep, I think that's one thing that Fire and Emergency New Zealand needs to take a lot of credit for, is how they, you know, look after us. And Andy Chappelle he was the National Manager of Wellbeing. He and his team did such an awesome job. I guess, making it OK for us to not be OK. So, yeah, there's plenty of people like Andy in the organisation, and I guess that's how I've learnt to deal with it. You know, I learnt that at the start of my career I wasn't dealing with it. But, yeah, now I know to just keep working out and keep fit and, you know, when I still - if I start not feeling good, I know there's people I can talk to, whether it be colleagues or peers or going and getting some professional help. But, yeah, I think hats off to Fire and Emergency for the work they've done in that space for volunteers and career staff.

[Di] That's so important, isn't it?

[Michael] Yeah, yeah.

[Di] Is there something about the work you do in emergency services that keeps you up at night or is often at the forefront of your mind?

[Michael] Ah, probably a bit cliché but just making sure everyone's safe. You know, safe and not always happy, but just that they're safe and, you know, they feel valued when they come, they have a bit of fun, and, yeah, it's probably, you know, just going home is pretty important.

[Di] It certainly is. Michael, what technological development do you think will have the greatest impact on the future of firefighting or emergency services?

[Michael] Ah, probably AI and how we're gonna use that, you know, interlink it with stuff like drones and, you know, stuff that isn't. I guess stuff that we can use to reduce the risk, like I just said, the most important thing is sending people home. So, you know, if there's ways we can use technology to reduce the risk to our people, it might not be as fun for us but, yeah, I think that's probably the key space that technology's gonna play for us.

[Di] And what's the most rewarding part of your job?

[Michael] Ah, just the people you meet and, yeah, I think it's - I've got some really good friends out of this industry and, yeah, I don't think you can beat it for that side of what we do.

[Di] I've loved hearing you use some Māori words during our conversation. Are there any you'd like to finish with?

[Michael] Yeah, so there's a whakatauki, which I like, and if you go to the Northland Fire District and their office is in Whangarei, there's a piece of swamp Kauri on the wall and it says, I think, He aha te mea nui o te ao, which translates to 'what is the most important thing in the world?' And then underneath that it says He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata which translates to 'it is people, it is people, it is people.' So, the most important thing for us is our people and, yeah, I think that's probably the best thing that I can end on.

[Di] It certainly is. It's been a delight to speak to you today. Michael Tovine, thank you so much for being on Mics & Sirens.

[Michael] No worries. Thank you.

[Male Narrator] Are you looking for fast, accurate and official information that helps you to make informed decisions to stay safe during an emergency? The Department of Fire and Emergency Services Emergency WA app lets you set up watch zones for places important to you. So, if an emergency happens in your watch zone, you'll receive alerts and warnings. The best part? It's sent direct to your mobile device. Download DFES' Emergency WA app from the App Store or Google Play today.

[Female Narrator] That was Michael Tovine on the untapped power of volunteer firefighters. You've been listening to Mics & Sirens, the official podcast of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in Western Australia. Be sure to follow and share the podcast so others can benefit from these insights. Join us next week as we close the season with Allison. Donovan, WA's first female Level 3 Incident Controller, on supporting women to lead in emergency services.