

# Community Fire Unit Program – Empowering Communities and Building Resilient Neighbourhoods

**JOHN SULLIVAN**

Fire and Rescue NSW

Corresponding Author Email: [john.d.sullivan@fire.nsw.org.au](mailto:john.d.sullivan@fire.nsw.org.au)

## **Abstract**

*The Community Fire Unit Program consists of 7300 members over 650 units. Direct contact and interaction are key components of the success of these units. This paper will draw from lessons learned from the ACT and Victorian fires, and how they have prompted us to further enforce the 'prepare, act, survive' message. The main aim of the program is to provide access to assistance, promote community empowerment.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Community Fire Unit (CFU) Program is a program that started in 1994, after the terrible fires in Sydney in that same year. As a result of increased government funding and participation from the community in 2009/2010, the program rapidly expanded. Before 2009, there were only about 150 CFUs. Today there are 650 in NSW. The program is co-ordinated by Fire and Rescue NSW.

The CFU Program aims to empower local communities to look after themselves. They are not fire fighters; it is purely for protection against ember attack. The main focus since 2010 has been promoting the messages outlined in the Bush Fire Survival Plan, which aim to improve protection of the community. This means educating communities to leave early if their houses are not defensible, and not to rush home from work if there is a fire near their homes. About 80% of houses lost from bushfires are lost through ember attack, not direct flame attack, so if at home and it is an adequate structure that occupants are willing and able to defend

from ember attack, they should not rush off during a bushfire when it is too late and unsafe to do so.

A CFU is a collection of about 20 - 30 residences located in a small pocket or street. Approximately 12 - 20 people are trained and educated by Fire and Rescue NSW on a continuing basis. They do not participate in any bushfire fighting; they are trained to look after their own properties and that of their neighbours.

CFUs are only assigned to residential areas located in or near the flame zone, as there is no point having a CFU in an area such as Balmain, where there is not a lot of bushland. The higher risk rating an area has assigned to it, the greater the need for establishment of a CFU.

We also try and build better community resilience by establishing networks of CFUs. An example is that of a CFU established in an area located on a ridge top, with only one road in and one road out; a potentially disastrous situation in the case of a major fire. In this example there is now a network of eight CFUs in

the area, providing a community of approximately 200 people with adequate facilities and training for putting out spot fires. Every couple of months, the community undergoes regular additional training. This does not just involve the basic training such as rolling out of hoses, but going through the Bush Fire Survival Plan and smoke alarm maintenance. There is a real sense of community in that street now.

The main focus of the CFU program is not the equipment, which is merely the carrot to get people involved. The main focus is the Bush Fire Survival Plan, with the first priority the protection of lives and then assets. The program provides training on preparation and maintenance to enhance the survival chances of those houses where the occupants have made the decision to leave early. We educate community members on cleaning out

gutters and how to make every house a little more survivable.

Introducing other programs like the RFS Assist Infirm Disabled and Elderly Residents (AIDER) program where team leaders are encouraged to help vulnerable people in their communities, by contacting the RFS to register with the program. We also provide training on smoke alarm maintenance and a range of other things that aren't specific to bushfire. CFUs are a great way for community members to meet each other, particularly in cases where there have been changes in the community.

#### **BIOGRAPHY**

John has been a professional and volunteer fire fighter for 27 years.