

Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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Dear Committee Members,

My wife and I are proud members of Givelda Rural Fire Brigade near Bundaberg. I am also a final-year Ph.D. student completing the sixth year of qualitative research project. My research addresses sustainability issues among the Queensland Rural Fire Service's (RFSQ) volunteer members. I commenced my research in mid-2018 with the support of the then Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) Deputy Commissioner Wassing. My research addresses the lived experience of volunteer firefighters at brigade, community, and RFSQ levels. The principal data for my research was gathered from participant members' recounts, stories, and reflections. Multiple in-depth interviews were used in my data gathering, and analyses incorporated reflective lifeworld phenomenological approaches (Dahlberg et al., 2008). I plan to submit my doctoral thesis this October.

My research focuses primarily on the meaning members derive from their volunteering experiences. Analysis of forty-six hours of recorded interviews provides evidence-based insights into the intricate social structures and complex histories that influence individual decisions to join, stay, or leave the RFSQ. These unique insights can be invaluable in the current QFES reform process, particularly in understanding and addressing volunteer retention issues.

The sustainability of volunteer firefighters is a pressing issue in maintaining adequate RFSQ service levels during a time of escalating bushfire hazards. When I commenced my research in mid-2018, QFES statistics showed that the RFSQ had 37,000 volunteer members. Recent QFES statistics show that member numbers have fallen to 26,500 over the past six years, representing a decline of 29%. Of course, there are many external drivers for leaving the RFSQ. Among these are the aging process, ill-health, changing family circumstances, and the demands of paid employment.

Nonetheless, my research has exposed a range of strong *internal* drivers. These include feelings of non-acknowledgment, limited agentic opportunities, and a distinct lack of self-efficacy. My research provides compelling evidence that dissatisfaction with the lived experience of the volunteer role is a key reason for leaving (or not joining) the RFSQ. These internal elements can be addressed within the newly-structured Queensland Fire Department (QFD). Nonetheless, I am convinced that the proposed Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 is not only contrary to improved recruitment and retention rates among RFSQ volunteers but could also exacerbate existing sustainability issues.

My phenomenological and descriptive analysis of various member experiences exposed three dominant themes. First and foremost, for the volunteers participating in my study, the RFSQ is a broken organisation. My informants describe their disconnect with RFSQ leadership and mistrust of an organisation culture that seems unable to include, respect, or acknowledge them adequately.

Second, my informants feel embattled. The vast organisational power of the RFSQ constantly besieges their self-belief and self-efficacy. In their volunteering roles, they confront widespread incompetency and impermanency among RFSQ paid staff. Female informants confront entrenched gender barriers within their own brigade and throughout the wider RFSQ. Last, there is a longing for recognition among the volunteers participating in my study. Informants crave tangible recognition through their genuine inclusion in the machinations of the RFSQ.

Queensland's rural fire brigades have a strong historical context. Brigades were created by the rural communities of 19th-century Queensland as a place-based means to meet the scourge of bushfires. Nowadays, Queensland's brigades remain as community assets delivering a social service on behalf of the Queensland government. The RFSQ exists to support and administer Queensland's brigades, not to control them outright. And yet, despite this historical community ownership, the proposed Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 will increase the government's control over brigades.

In summary, these Amendments grant the following powers to the forthcoming QFD Commissioner:

- Amendment of Section 81: Regardless that members of a rural fire brigade may elect any member of the brigade to be the Chairperson, Secretary, or Treasurer of the brigade, the Commissioner may dismiss the person from the office and/or disqualify the person from holding any office with a rural fire brigade.
- Under new chapter 6, part 4, Transitional Provisions: A person who was a member of a rural fire brigade immediately before commencement, continues as a member of the rural fire brigade until the Commissioner terminates the appointment of the person as a member of the rural fire brigade.

Brigade members are proud of the work they do to protect their local community. They are fiercely protective of the community ownership of their own brigade. This pride and protectivity are powerful motivations for members to remain in their volunteering roles. It is my belief that through these Amendments, the Queensland government interferes with the community ownership of rural fire brigades at its own peril.

The government's acceptance of these Amendments will send a clear message to RFSQ volunteers that the new QFD holds no promise for them. Moreover, any enactment of the proposed Amendments will further disenfranchise volunteers from the RFSQ. Hence, I do not support these Amendments.

I make this declaration in good conscience and with utmost respect for your station.

J. A. Mason
Volunteer I.D. [REDACTED]