

Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland

Submission No:	82
Submitted by:	Volunteering Queensland
Publication:	Making the submission and your name public
Attachments:	See attachment
Submitter Comments:	



volunteering
queensland

Submission to the Education, Arts and Communities Committee's Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland

April 2025

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Who We Are

Founded in 1983 as the Volunteer Centre of Queensland, we began in Brisbane's CBD with nearly all operations driven by volunteers. In 1997/98, we earned Quality Assurance Certification to provide accredited training in volunteering and volunteer management across the state and became a registered training organisation (RTO). This milestone saw us rebrand as Volunteering Queensland, establishing our role as the peak body representing and advancing volunteering in Queensland.

Today, we support over 400 member Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) and extend our free resources and programs and support to many thousands more through networks and online training. Volunteering Queensland represents 2.8 million volunteers across the state, advocating for their rights and highlighting the positive impact they have on our communities.

We advise VIOs on implementing the National Standards for Volunteering Involvement, deliver workshops, collect data, run campaigns, conduct community development activities, fund community projects and connect spontaneous disaster volunteers for critical events. We collaborate with peak bodies in other states and territories, Volunteering Australia, and the international volunteer community. We work closely with Federal, State, and Local Governments, volunteers, VIOs, and other organisations to foster a thriving volunteering culture across Queensland.

Our core goals are to:

- Inspire more people to volunteer regularly
- Advocate for conditions that enable volunteering to thrive
- Build the capacity of the volunteering ecosystem
- Ensure volunteering is impactful, effective, and rewarding
- Empower individuals to find purpose and connection through volunteering
- Strengthen communities in times of crisis.

The relevance of Volunteering to issues relating to Elder Abuse

While there is a general common understanding of what it is to volunteer, the current definition of volunteering adopted by Volunteering Australia in 2015 is “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain”. This includes formal volunteering, which takes place within organisations in a structured way, and informal volunteering, which includes actions outside the context of a formal organisation¹.

By its nature, informal volunteering can be harder to measure. In part this is because people are themselves less likely to consider such activity as volunteering. Of particular relevance for this Inquiry, much informal or occasional care of neighbours, family friends would come under this category. For definitional purposes, volunteering does not include direct family responsibilities, even though at times some caring and support activities are very similar in nature regardless of whether it is carried out by direct family or a friend.

Volunteering touches on almost every facet of society in Queensland, including sport and recreation, aged care and other social services, environment-related activities, education, health, arts and culture, tourism, faith based, justice and civil society activities, public safety, and disaster recovery.

The work and roles of many volunteers across Queensland links to directly to 1(b) of the Inquiry’s terms of reference relating to the “effectiveness and cohesiveness of responses to elder abuse, including Queensland laws, policies, programs and services, in preventing, safeguarding, identifying and responding to elder abuse”, particularly part (iii) which relates to community awareness, education and engagement initiatives.

It is also directly relevant to term of reference 1(c), namely “opportunities to improve responses to elder abuse in Queensland, within the government, broader community, non-government, and private sectors”.

¹ See Explanatory Notes for Definition, Volunteering Australia, July 2015.
<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Definition-of-Volunteering-27-July-20151.pdf>
(accessed 4th April 2025)

Volunteering is widely recognised in a range of official reports as immensely valuable to society both economically and as a crucial component in strengthening the social fabric and reducing social isolation. A couple of recent examples are the State of Volunteering Report 2024² and the Productivity Commission's 2024 report, Future Foundations for Giving, which found that volunteering – that is the giving of time- can be just as valuable, if not more so, as the giving of money.

The Productivity Commission proposed “that governments explicitly consider how changes to policies and programs affect volunteers”³ (recommendation 7.7) and seek to ensure that the value and effectiveness of volunteer contributions in the relevant area are maximised as part of any policy or program design.

It in this context that Volunteering Queensland asks this Parliamentary committee to ensure the role of volunteers in activities which may help detect, prevent or ameliorate situations that involve elder abuse is fully considered as part of any changes, reforms or programs aimed at addressing elder abuse.

Impacts of volunteering and the assistance volunteers can provide

Volunteering Queensland does not seek to represent ourselves as an expert on all aspects of elder abuse. Rather we aim to ensure that there is full awareness of the role that volunteers play both in a variety of situations where they may be able to assist with recognising and seeking assistance or support in situations where elder abuse may be involved, as well as the reality that many older people are themselves volunteers and need to be included as a cohort of people who should be informed and empowered by actions and changes made to prevent elder abuse.

² State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report. <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/state-of-volunteering-in-queensland/> (accessed 4th April 2025)

³ Productivity Commission 2024, Future Foundations for Giving, Inquiry Report no. 104, Canberra. Page 262

The State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report found that over 52% of Queenslanders aged 65 and over are involved in volunteering, with an average contribution of approximately 19 hours per month.

In their submission to the Queensland Parliament's current Inquiry into volunteering, the Council on the Ageing (COTA) writes that an "example of where a volunteer workforce has been critical for service delivery is in aged care where volunteers were evidenced as essential to the delivery of person centred and quality care."⁴

They state that "*Volunteerism is a huge part of sustaining age-friendly communities*" (their emphasis). An age-friendly community "ensures that older adults can age safely, continue personal growth and development, and contribute to their communities while retaining autonomy and dignity".

Retaining strong community connection does not fully inoculate against elder abuse, but it certainly helps reduce the risk.

Other forms of connection which involve volunteers occur in the general community with people still living at home. Meals on Wheels is a well known, volunteer-reliant support service which provides an important form of connection. According to Meals on Wheels, the average age of their volunteer cohort is 70 years, indicating an ageing workforce. "But with this come great experience, wisdom and compassion for the community, with some active volunteers holding in excess of 50 years of voluntary service."

"Meals on Wheels allows individuals to directly impact the lives of vulnerable individuals and families in their community by delivering essential meals *and welfare checks*."⁵ (our emphasis)

A similar example is the volunteer-reliant service provided by Gympie Medical Transport. Their written submission to the current Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into Volunteering, and particularly their evidence at that Committee's public hearing in Gympie, painted a clear picture of how important the informal, personal support and connection can be to the people they assist.

⁴ Queensland Parliament, Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland. Submission 487, pages 6-7, Council on the Ageing Qld, Feb 2025.

⁵ Queensland Parliament, Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland. Submission 482, pages 2-4, Meals on Wheels, Feb 2025

Their service focuses on getting people in the Gympie area to medical appointments, often involving longer trips to the Sunshine Coast University Hospital at the southern end of the Sunshine Coast. The semi-regular informal contacts which many such volunteers often develop with those they assist – who, like the volunteers themselves, are often but not always elderly people – can play a critical role both in sensing that there may be something wrong going on in that person’s life or just in providing a friendly person outside of a family or institutional setting to talk with and perhaps confide in.⁶

The more flexible and informal nature of volunteering can allow the volunteer to take that bit of extra time to have a chat or take a bit of time helping people find their way around the hospital or into the appointment, as opposed to just dropping them off at the location. This is not intended in any way to reflect negatively on professional paid workers, who have a specific job to do and have to operate within specific rules and roles – indeed many volunteers are current or former workers in service professions themselves. It is simply a reflection on the different, less formal and sometimes unique value that people in a volunteer role can bring to a situation.

Another example was provided in evidence given to this Committee at the public hearing at Pialba on 25th March 2025 from the Hervey Bay Neighbourhood Centre. They detailed the volunteers involved in helping to deliver services such as the Seniors Legal and Support Service (SLASS) and the Aged Care Volunteer Visitors Scheme (ACVVS), as well as community transport and other programs. Volunteers work in conjunction with those with formally qualified paid workers in these situations.

The evidence they provided gave a clear example of the special role volunteers can play as one part of identifying and preventing potential situations of elder abuse:

We do have SLASS program home visits, but we also run the ACVVS program which is the visitors’ scheme for lonely elderly people. SLASS use that quite regularly just to get eyes on a client. If we can get a volunteer going into the home just for visits, we can make sure that they are getting friendship support, but *it is also the best way for us to have eyes on that client to check in and know if anything is*

⁶ Queensland Parliament, Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland. See submission 193 (Feb 2025) and pages 9-12, Hansard of public hearing at Gympie, 25 March 2025 from Gympie Medical Transport Inc.

*not being looked after or there is something going on. They have someone they can talk to who they feel safe to disclose anything to. (our emphasis)*⁷

Conclusion

Both formal and informal volunteering are valuable, and often many people engage in both types of volunteering at various times. None the less, when considering a specific issue and the best ways to support and inform volunteers relevant to that issue, it does mean that different mechanisms may need to be deployed.

In the context of addressing issues relating to elder abuse, volunteers who are active in a formal setting, such as an aged care facility can be done more easily reached and consulted with, compared to those who are engaging with older people in an informal context. Different mechanisms need to be considered and deployed to adequately connect with and support this latter group of people, particularly in providing awareness and education campaigns, resources and supports.

Similarly, volunteers whose core focus is working in an aged care facility operate in a different context to those who provide a service to older people, where their contact relates primarily to providing a specific service but they none the less have the opportunity to engage in a more informal, social and often one-on-one context. Meals on Wheels services is an example of this, where the broader benefits of personal support and alleviation of isolation is more diffuse and harder to measure than the simple figure of how many meals are delivered, but it is well recognised and valued none the less.

In regards to the improving the effectiveness and cohesiveness of responses to elder abuse, and opportunities to improve responses within the broader community and non-government sectors, there is obviously no single solution. However, identifying and supporting people at risk of elder abuse often involves situations where personal connections, trust and accountability are pivotal.

The importance of trusted personal relationships is an area where volunteers can play an invaluable role in certain circumstances. Having someone to turn to for help or even just reassurance can be crucial, and volunteers can play a key role

⁷ Queensland Parliament, Education, Arts and Communities Committee Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland. Hansard, Public Hearing, Pialba, 25 March 2025. Ms T Stephenson, Hervey Bay Neighbourhood Centre. Page 8

as a link or support person, within a wider system of supports. But it is important that volunteers are not expected to or inadvertently be put in a situation where they are required to deal with situations outside their skill set or expertise, let alone areas where they may be placed at legal risk.

The views of those organisations and individuals who are directly involved in or have personal experience with the issue should be taken closely into account when consider those questions, particularly those groups who are more marginalised from mainstream society and/or already disempowered, such as many people with disabilities, people with insecure housing, people in domestic and family violence situations, as well as many First Nations people and people from migrant backgrounds.

Volunteering Queensland suggests that a key value that should permeate the responses, programs and solutions recommended by this committee and adopted by government should include a need to protect and support the vulnerable, while also aiming to empower the individual and those who assist them. This includes changing social attitudes, understandings and culture – a process which is always slow and often non-linear, but still essential as a goal. We need to remove stigma, shame, embarrassment, unwillingness to be a ‘dobber’ and general ignorance about elder abuse in all its forms and the immense harm it can cause.

