



# ***LOCAL GOVERNMENT, SMALL BUSINESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE COMMITTEE***

**Members present:**

Mr SM Dillon MP—Acting Chair  
Mr AJ Baillie MP  
Mr MA Boothman MP  
Mr MPT Healy MP  
Mrs ME Nightingale MP  
Ms JE Pease MP

**Staff present:**

Ms K Guthrie—Acting Committee Secretary

## **PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO VOLUNTEERING IN QUEENSLAND**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**Monday, 14 July 2025**

**Cairns**

## MONDAY, 14 JULY 2025

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**The committee met at 10.32 am.**

**ACTING CHAIR:** Good morning. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. My name is Sean Dillon. I am the member for Gregory and acting chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. With me here today are the deputy chair of the committee and the member for Inala, Margie Nightingale MP; the member for Theodore, Mark Boothman MP; the member for Townsville, Adam Baillie MP; the member for Cairns, Michael Healy MP; and the member for Lytton, Joan Pease MP. I would also like to acknowledge that during the hearing today the member for Barron River, Bree James, may join.

This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages.

**BARTLETT, Ms Leanne, President, Animal Care for Seniors at Home Cairns Inc.**

**ACTING CHAIR:** Good morning. Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Ms Bartlett:** Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today; it is much appreciated. Animal Care for Seniors at Home Cairns Incorporated, commonly known as ACSAH, is a Cairns-based community service established in 2013 to enable older residents to keep their pets at home with them when owners' circumstances are such that they alone cannot provide adequate care for their pets. It is a free service to our older residents and this service relies totally on volunteers.

There are acknowledged benefits of pet ownership. Pets are often the only other beating heart in the house. Pets focus responsibility: they are often a reason to get out of bed of a morning or afternoon. Pets provide comfort, company and happiness.

To fill its objectives, ACSAH needs to engage with seniors. There are some challenges: having awareness of the vulnerability of older persons, gaining their trust and demonstrating responsibility to them; being aware of the psychological value of pets and a consciousness of pet welfare; and acknowledgement by the older person of needing help. A common statement we hear is, 'If I need help, does it mean I cannot cope, I have failed and I am heading to a nursing home?' Part of ACSAH's role is to enable seniors to identify their pet's needs, identify deficits in their ability to provide care for their pets and accept the support that ACSAH provides to give them comfort.

Probably the biggest issue that ACSAH faces is recruitment of volunteers. We value people's time. We match client needs to volunteer availability by engaging in what we call flexible volunteering. This way we derive maximum benefit from our resources. Our zone coordinators match volunteers' availability to needs of seniors and their pets. We do this because a large proportion of our volunteers work and many are shiftworkers. The demographic of our volunteers varies. Many are from professional backgrounds or caring roles: medical, nursing, teaching, child care and aged care. All have a recognition of the benefits of the human-animal bond and pet welfare. Further, we especially value those volunteers who can make longer term commitments to the bond they form with the people they help and the pets they help.

From an organisational perspective, ACSAH is fortunate to be self-funded through the generosity of benefactors and people who make donations to assist our service. The biggest single item of expenditure is the annual requirement to have appropriate insurances to cover volunteers and our activities. At federal, state and local levels there are administrative requirements to be satisfied. Clearly, there are some obligations, such as workplace health and safety, equity, insurances and financials, that must be met. ACSAH is fortunate that we have minimised the burden of ensuring compliance, therefore avoiding bureaucratic overload.

Recruiting volunteers is our biggest challenge. We need sufficient suitable volunteers to meet the demands of our service. Anecdotal evidence suggests young adults are tending to commit to volunteer for a particular project or a cause and for not longer than a few months. Nevertheless, attracting and recruiting volunteers who can commit to the seniors we help is a major issue. However, our volunteer requirements are different to many other organisations that require a commitment to set hours. We are fortunate that our service accommodates and embraces flexibility. To this end, a government sponsored, population-wide program to promote the benefits of volunteering in terms of community wellbeing and giving a sense to the volunteers that they have made a worthwhile contribution to society would be of great benefit to the volunteering community at large. We and other volunteer organisations cannot do this promotion alone. The volunteer community needs the assistance of government to promote volunteering in terms of its worth to society and its value to government budgets.

**ACTING CHAIR:** I might commence with a question that I am very keen to ask as we get around all of the non-Brisbane hearings. We are very happy to hear of issues that are consistent right across the state, wherever we go, but do you feel that there are any particular issues that you face as a volunteering organisation because of where you operate in Far North Queensland? Is there any specific challenge that may be of more local relevance than perhaps some of the other issues we may be experiencing across the state?

**Ms Bartlett:** Perhaps population size. There are quite a number of organisations in Cairns that are looking for volunteers and getting that message out to people. We get inquiries from the south-east corner—for example, are there any services similar to what we provide in that area? People are looking and searching outside of their areas for places that might be able to refer them on to somewhere.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** Thank you for presenting for us today and for the great work that you and your organisation do. It just sounds fantastic. We know how important it is to help people age in place, at home, and it sounds like your organisation does a great job of that. The barriers to recruiting volunteers are there and there are also funding barriers. You mentioned that you receive some generous donations to help you cover costs. Does that cover what you need? Are there shortfalls? How do you see the sustainability of those donations?

**Ms Bartlett:** The generosity of people. We actively do not ask for money. It is a free service, but people feel they want to give, which is lovely, and we can use that to manage the organisation. We have managed to streamline. We are a small organisation. As of yesterday we are helping 76 people across Cairns and we have 60 volunteers doing that. It is still a reasonable amount of people who are going in and out every day. Finance wise, we are finding that the generosity of particularly benefactors is helping us.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** That covers those insurance costs that you mentioned?

**Ms Bartlett:** Yes.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** Thank you for coming in and for doing what you do with your organisation. It is certainly a wonderful idea. You briefly mentioned recognising volunteering as a whole and attracting people by showing the benefits of being a volunteer. Do you want to elaborate on that? I think that is quite a good idea. I am curious to see what your thoughts are on that matter.

**Ms Bartlett:** It is society: everyone is very busy—just taking 30 minutes out of your week to help someone else in the community. We see some wonderful responses in times of real need like disasters, but the types of things that we require are ongoing. I am sorry I cannot give you an answer specifically, but an overall general awareness and promotion by the government—I hope that is what you are looking for—to promote the benefits of volunteering, whether it be a small organisation or a large organisation. I do not know if I have answered your question.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** That is understandable. We live in a very insular society these days. We do not get out and talk to people as much as we should. The mental wellbeing and the mental health for ourselves is certainly a big issue.

**ACTING CHAIR:** In the spirit of being in Cairns, I thought I might go to the member for Cairns.

**Mr HEALY:** Chair, thank you very much. How exciting. I would like to welcome you all to Cairns, by the way. In relation to the last comments, we are a very open society up here and everyone does a lot of interacting. You have 60 volunteers. How old is the organisation?

**Ms Bartlett:** It started in 2013.

**Mr HEALY:** Is that growing? What is the history of the volunteering numbers? You said that your biggest issue is attracting volunteers. We have some organisations that have significant volunteers. As easy as volunteering appears to be, or the challenges, it differs because of what the activities are. I am wondering about the history of your volunteer numbers over the short life of the organisation.

**Ms Bartlett:** The organisation started with one coordinator and grew from there. We now have a committee, as an incorporated association, that manages the business side of the business and we have coordinators across three different zones: the northern beaches, the city and the south of Cairns. We go between Palm Cove and Gordonvale. They are all volunteers. We can only grow the service if we have suitable volunteers. That is the key, because it is quite a specialist kind of role, as you would appreciate. We are going into the homes of vulnerable people. We need to make sure that we are putting the right people in—matching the right people with the older people we are helping—and that the volunteers are getting out of it what each individual is looking for.

**Mr HEALY:** A level of satisfaction so that motivates you—

**Ms Bartlett:** Yes.

**Mr HEALY:** So have the numbers been—

**Ms Bartlett:** They have been slowly growing, but it is at the point now where it is a bit of a catch 22. Getting the message to the people we are trying to help can often be difficult because many of them are isolated. It is the GPs, the nurses, their friends—it is word-of-mouth that the service is available. Then it is getting over that barrier of ‘Do I admit I need some help?’ and then how we introduce a volunteer and manage the relationship that they then have. It is a little specialist type of field. We have some wonderful volunteers who are very dedicated. We have some volunteers who have been with us all the way through and some more recent ones.

**Mr HEALY:** Because it is a special area—

**Ms Bartlett:** It is a bit niche, yes.

**Mr HEALY:**—that makes it quite—

**Ms Bartlett:** It makes it difficult for us—and just being able to manage it with everyone’s lifestyles as well.

**Mr HEALY:** Do you have active promotion of what is available? I know that you want government to do that—we think that is a great idea—but how are you promoting?

**Ms Bartlett:** We have our own website that one of the volunteers has developed and manages. We try to keep it as simple as possible so it is easier for older people to read and access our services. We attend community events—things like the Positive Ageing Expo for seniors week. We volunteer at community activities where we can go out and let people know about our service so there is an awareness in the community. We do that as much as possible and, again, it is the volunteers within the group who do that.

**Mr HEALY:** Which is more time.

**Ms Bartlett:** Yes.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Thank you for joining us today, Leanne. You mentioned that the recruitment process is one of your biggest challenges. Would you mind expanding on how you go about trying to recruit—not only raising awareness about what you do but also engaging with the recruiting and onboarding processes, considering the vulnerable people you mentioned?

**Ms Bartlett:** A lot of our volunteers come from word-of-mouth. They will be friends, family members, neighbours or someone at the gym who knows what they do. They share their experience and people say, ‘That sounds great.’ If they contact us by phone, email or in person, they are directed to one of our coordinators, who will then do an interview with them and assess whether they are suitable for the service. If they are comfortable with what it is we are doing, we then go through a paperwork process to have them approved as members of the incorporated association. From there, the coordinator will identify—we call them ‘clients’, even though we do not charge—an older person to help. They will do the introduction and then they will continue to follow up. The coordinators will monitor and they will feed back to the committee, and the coordinators will communicate with each other to do cross-zone volunteering if there is a need in areas.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Are there any specific requirements when you are going through that onboarding process that your volunteers need to satisfy?

**Ms Bartlett:** Because of the level of responsibility for adults—our insurance policy particularly guides what we are eligible for with regard to insurance cover, so we are conscious of that and reviewing that each time it comes around because that can change. With some of the older members we have, that is another thing we need to be conscious of—older volunteers and where those boundaries are and how we communicate that information.

**Ms PEASE:** Thank you so much for coming in. The work that you do is amazing; I want to acknowledge that. We know how important animals are to people, and being able to let people keep their animals in their home is a beautiful thing. Congratulations.

**Ms Bartlett:** Thank you.

**Ms PEASE:** With regard to onboarding volunteers, do your volunteers have to have yellow cards?

**Ms Bartlett:** For disability services?

**Ms PEASE:** To be able to work in that sector, yes.

**Ms Bartlett:** Not disability, because then are we talking about all older people are disabled?

**Ms PEASE:** No, that is right. I guess what I am looking at is the administrative burden you might have with regard to that. There is a lot that goes on in the background. Do the people who do your admin volunteer to do pet care as well?

**Ms Bartlett:** Yes. We require a statutory declaration from our volunteers to identify if there are any issues in relation to the safety of them working with us. That is a legal document that we hold and it has ramifications if there is anything.

**Ms PEASE:** In terms of grants and applying for funding, are you DGR registered?

**Ms Bartlett:** No.

**Ms PEASE:** You do not apply for that?

**Ms Bartlett:** Really, we do not have a reason to apply at this point in time.

**Ms PEASE:** Congratulations. I think you are doing an amazing job. It is a wonderful program. Please pass on my thanks to all of your volunteers. Congratulations.

**Ms Bartlett:** We are happy to share our model.

**Ms PEASE:** I will be in touch with you. Trust me, I have a community that would love to be able to do what you do.

**Ms Bartlett:** We have shared it regionally, interstate and overseas—as far as Illinois in America.

**Mr HEALY:** So it is getting good exposure.

**Ms PEASE:** Congratulations.

**Ms Bartlett:** Thank you very much. They are amazing people, and the people we help are just so appreciative.

**Ms PEASE:** I bet they are. Their pets are their best friends.

**ACTING CHAIR:** Thank you on behalf of the parliament of Queensland, not only for the work that you and your organisation do but also for taking the time to appear in front of this inquiry.

**SHEPPARD, Ms Annette, President, FNQ Volunteers Inc.**

**ACTING CHAIR:** Good morning. Would you like to make an opening statement before we start our questions?

**Ms Sheppard:** Thank you for having me here. I would like to table this document.

**ACTING CHAIR:** I seek leave to table these two documents. Leave is granted.

**Ms Sheppard:** FNQ Volunteers is a place-based volunteer resource centre established in 1999 in response to community needs. FNQ Volunteers Inc. is a not-for-profit community-based organisation that is largely run by a volunteer workforce who are trained and upskilled to manage the recruitment and placement of volunteers into jobs that are the best fit for the individual and for the organisation they are referred to. FNQ Volunteers directly manages 130-plus volunteers who mainly support older Queenslanders to combat loneliness and isolation as well as assist in the day-to-day management of our organisation. The bulk of our volunteers fit into the older semiretired or retired demographic. This is unsustainable, with people dropping off for various reasons including declining health as they age. Post-COVID volunteer numbers have decreased and have not returned to pre-COVID numbers. This is mainly due to people having less discretionary time to allocate outside of their work and family obligations and because of cost-of-living pressures.

We believe that volunteering offers opportunities for personal growth and skills development and is often a pathway to paid employment. Finding one's niche or uncovering hidden talents makes volunteering an exciting journey. We understand that, whatever the volunteer role, the volunteer needs to feel valued and a part of the organisation. They need to be acknowledged for the work they do and for what they contribute. A simple thank you and certificates of appreciation go a long way towards making people feel that what they are doing really does make a difference. The annual Volunteering Awards acknowledge volunteers who have contributed in various ways to their community and to the organisation they represent.

We are excited to be involved in assisting people of all ages and abilities to become involved in volunteering. We aim for the best fit job for everyone according to their interests and abilities. Success in volunteering is all about finding the right place for each person. We support many organisations and groups that engage with vulnerable people to promote volunteering as a way of meeting people, building confidence and breaking down barriers. Our annual Vexpo—volunteer expo—is a celebration of volunteer-involving organisations and an opportunity to showcase their organisation and to put the spotlight on their activities. It is also a great networking occasion where VIOs—volunteer-involving organisations—get to meet and chat with other organisations and expand their own networks. Much of our work involves supporting other volunteer-involving organisations to build capacity and engage with volunteers in meaningful ways, to increase volunteer participation and to encourage people to embrace volunteering as a lifestyle choice.

Another element of our activities is the support and training of VIOs and volunteers. We hold workshops relating to specific issues around volunteer management and an annual symposium with guest presenters in roundtable conversations relating to volunteer management and engagement, governance et cetera. On a day-to-day basis we are available to respond to inquiries from VIOs and prospective participating volunteers. We are also members of the LDMG and we support the management of emergent volunteers during disaster recovery. We managed care army volunteers during COVID and are actively involved in strategic planning in the disaster management space. With our very limited resources we outreach to the Far North Queensland ROC region and support VIOs as best we can.

We have negligible funding for the above activities—essentially, Commonwealth Volunteer Management Activity project-based funding that is distributed by Volunteering Queensland. This funding is not recurrent and is applied for from a competitive pool. We may or may not be successful. Beyond this financial year we have no guarantee of receiving VMA money. Currently we have received \$50,000 to cover the 2025-26 financial year. This amount barely covers the costs associated with our volunteer resource centre activities and we subsidise this program from the ACVVS—Aged Care Volunteer Visitor Scheme—funding and by sharing rent and other associated overhead costs. The funding for the volunteer resource centre program has reduced to a third of the amount previously received. This is not sustainable into the future, particularly due to the fact that supports delivered to the VIOs are done by volunteers when the actual management roles should be paid positions. We are faced with the inevitable decision to either wind back or discontinue these activities. There is no other organisation in Far North Queensland that is geared to pick up this valuable work.

FNQ Volunteers recently undertook a qualitative action research project, working with VIOs to establish needs within the volunteering sector. I will not go into that because I have given you a copy of the issues paper that we developed from it. You can look at that at your leisure. It makes for good reading.

There is strong evidence that volunteer hub centres such as FNQ Volunteers provide an invaluable service for the volunteer sector. Our recommendation is that consideration be given to establishing and funding a pilot project that explores the concept of regionally located volunteer hub centres as a cost-effective and efficient way of supporting VIOs across Queensland in the recruitment and placement of volunteers, training and support for their activities.

Volunteer insurance is a significant financial impost for VIOs. Our recommendation is that consideration be given to the establishment and funding of a universal insurance fund to remediate the exorbitant insurance premiums paid by VIOs to protect their volunteer workforce. Thank you.

**ACTING CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I am going to open with the same question I had for the previous presenter. This is a very substantial body of work. Are there any issues faced by you as an organisation or by the volunteers you help coordinate in Far North Queensland that you believe are unique to the region and may not be replicated across the state?

**Ms Sheppard:** Our resource centre is part of a network Australia-wide. In Queensland we have a very strong network. The issues we face here are the same across the board in relation to volunteers. The biggest issue all of us face—and I think all of the organisations that are here today will agree—is the diminishing number of people available to volunteer. That has to be addressed. We cannot just bury our heads in the sand and think that people are just going to emerge from the woodwork and volunteer. The pressures of living today and the demands on people's time mean that volunteering is not necessarily the priority it used to be. I think we need to give careful consideration to how we can stimulate interest in volunteering and harness that—recruit people and distribute them into organisations that are the best fit for their interests, their skills and so forth.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** Thank you for your very well considered and comprehensive submission. It is very helpful to us as a committee. Your ideas do have alignment with what we have heard, particularly the recommendation in relation to volunteer hubs. You talk of a regionally based hub. What does 'regionally based' mean in somewhere like Far North Queensland? How far would it cover? Would that be sufficient? Could you elaborate, please?

**Ms Sheppard:** I will go back in history. We began in 1999 as a volunteer resource centre. At that time we were well funded by the Commonwealth government. Our region was Far North Queensland—Torres Strait down to Cardwell and west into the Tablelands, Herberton et cetera. We covered a really wide area. We were able to communicate with those places. We were able from time to time to visit Cooktown, Laura, Cassowary Coast and so forth so we could do that outreach work. Because of some thought bubble in the Department of Social Services—Commonwealth, not yourselves—our funding has diminished significantly over the past probably eight years or so. We now are at roughly a third of our previous funding.

In answer to your question, I would anticipate that the Far North Queensland region would be reinstated. If we were to receive adequate funding—particularly now that we have the internet and all of those sorts of resources, we are able to communicate. We have over 100 volunteers who are involved in the volunteer visitors scheme. Most of our communication is done by text messages, emails and so forth. We come together periodically but, by and large, the management of that volunteer resource is done using IT. After talking with the other members of our network, my preferred option as a former councillor is that we use the ROC regions as the regional areas for the volunteer hub. Others may have different ideas. That may not work for everybody, but it seems to me that the ROCs are demographically specific and the issues within those areas can easily be explored and dealt with.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** You briefly spoke about your insurance costs and how much it is a burden for your organisation. Can you elaborate on how much it does cost—your organisation's insurance?

**Ms Sheppard:** It varies, obviously. It depends on what exactly you are insuring—the numbers of volunteers and so forth. Our insurance cost for our organisation is roughly around \$5,000 a year.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** That is a lot of money.

**Ms Sheppard:** It is impossible for organisations that are not funded to protect their volunteers. That is really critical. The risks for volunteers have to be acknowledged. When they are doing their volunteering work, they need to be able to feel comfortable and confident that if perchance they are unfortunate enough to have an accident or whatever then somehow that will be covered by the insurance the organisation has.

We have a membership of upwards of 140 different volunteer-involving organisations. We will not place volunteers with those organisations unless they have volunteer insurance. That is the No. 1 criteria. We must see those documents and know that it is current before we will place a volunteer with them. The volunteer hubs are really critical in managing those sorts of issues as well.

**Mr HEALY:** Annette, it is good to see you again. You have provided a thorough document so I have only one question. Before I ask it, I want to acknowledge the amount of work you have done in this space and your consistency in this area. Like all volunteers—their work is enormously appreciated—you have been relentless and consistent. I thank you on behalf of a very grateful community.

**Ms Sheppard:** Thank you.

**Mr HEALY:** I like your suggestion about the ROC being a boundary. I think there is merit in that. You say that over the last several years there has been a reduction in funding. How has that been? What areas have been impacted? How has that taken place?

**Ms Sheppard:** It impacts the entire volunteer resource centre.

**Mr HEALY:** Sorry, whereabouts? Where was the reduction—in what areas? Can you identify where the money was reduced?

**Ms Sheppard:** For the volunteer resource centre activities.

**Mr HEALY:** Okay.

**Ms Sheppard:** Which is the recruitment and placement of volunteers. We vet the volunteers. We do police checks. We do lots of things like that. It is also the support of the volunteer-involving organisations. If you read the issues paper I have delivered you will find that those organisations need support in lots of areas, particularly governance areas, which they cannot easily come by. That is part of our role. Our funding has been reduced from something like \$150,000 a year to \$50,000. That is not recurrent. We have no guarantee after the end of this financial year that we are going to get more funding for that project. If we do not get funded in some way, shape or form, we have to discontinue the activity. That means that our membership is not going to have a resource they can depend on. The support of the VIOs is really critical to the support of volunteers, because we need to support them to support their volunteer workforce.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Thank you, Annette and Yvonne, for joining us today. I also want to acknowledge your comprehensive submission. It does make for good reading. I particularly appreciate the flow chart.

**Ms Sheppard:** Read the other submissions I have put in as well. There is another one about emergent volunteers during disasters. That is critical.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Yes. I have an engineering background. I got stuck on your flow chart; I particularly enjoyed that. I noted Volunteering Queensland is called out in that flow chart as well. I wondered if you might expand quickly on the role Volunteering Queensland would have with the regional hubs.

**Ms Sheppard:** A critical role. I am not sure how much I should say here. We had a shaky relationship with Volunteering Queensland for a few years. There has been a change of leadership there. That has meant significant changes in our relationship. Since those changes occurred and a new CEO was installed, we have had regular monthly Teams meetings with Volunteering Queensland. We have had a number of meetings in Brisbane as a network—the volunteer resource centre network. We have been working really closely with them to develop up strategies and to improve volunteering generally but also support the volunteer-involving organisations. We are working very closely with them now.

**Ms PEASE:** You talked about how difficult it is to get volunteers and about trying to work out a way to encourage people to volunteer. Do you have any suggestions around incentivising organisations to give employees a chance to volunteer—a rebate through government or some other way to incentivise people to volunteer?

**Ms Sheppard:** It is not about the money. The incentives for people who volunteer are the good feelings. If people put out their own money, they need to be reimbursed. We provide reimbursement in some instances for our volunteers if they are out of pocket. Volunteering is an altruistic activity and people need to be attracted to the opportunity to volunteer.

At the moment, one of the resources we have for volunteering is mutual obligation. It is an abject failure because volunteering, by its nature, is voluntary. Mutual obligation says, 'You must volunteer to be able to receive your payment.' That does not work. Some of the people we get coming through are great—particularly the older people who are at the end of their working life and finding it



difficult to get jobs and everything. They volunteer willingly under mutual obligation. A lot of people do not. In terms of incentivising volunteering, I think we really need to be very careful. There should be reimbursement for their outlays if they are out of pocket for volunteering, but we need to think creatively about how to attract people into volunteering, recognising that it has changed.

**Ms PEASE:** I guess that is the crux of the question. People are not volunteering.

**Ms Sheppard:** This is true.

**Ms PEASE:** Why, and how do we fix it?

**Ms Sheppard:** If I had the answer to that—

**Ms PEASE:** I know that we are out of time. I apologise for asking that question.

**Ms Sheppard:** We need to work together to develop that, but I can assure you that if you fund volunteer resource hubs et cetera we will find a way and we will do it.

**ACTING CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your detailed presentation and for taking the time to appear in front of us today to help us with our inquiry.

**Ms PEASE:** Thank you to you and all of your volunteers for all of the work you have done—amazing work.

**Van DORSSSEN, Mr Christopher, General Manager, Meals on Wheels Cairns**

**ACTING CHAIR:** Good morning. Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Mr Van Dorssen:** Yes, I would. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. At Meals on Wheels Cairns we support some of the most vulnerable people in our community, delivering not just meals but also connections to safety and care. Our team includes about 90 volunteers who give their time and heart each week to help people stay healthy and independent in their homes. Right now, recruiting and keeping volunteers is getting harder. Many older folks face rising costs or get caught in the red tape. I am here today to share five practical ideas that could help boost volunteer participation not just in Cairns but across Queensland.

Centralised and affordable police checks: volunteers must renew their police checks every three years and for small group like ours the costs and admin pile up quickly. At Meals on Wheels Queensland we use a system called Rosterfy, which is an online system that helps track volunteers and compliance, but we still face inconsistency, duplication and expenses across providers. We recommend a centralised national system that frees up and ensures that registered volunteer organisations are consistent across all states and providers. Integration with platforms like Rosterfy would mean easy management and renewal. This simple change would reduce financial and administrative burdens, making it easier for people to get involved.

Accessible and easy-to-use training: training helps volunteers feel confident and supported, but many struggle to afford or find options that suit older volunteers. A national volunteer training fund could support free or low-cost learning, in partnership with TAFE or online platforms, to offer accreditation, flexibility and training or simple online modules that are easy to access even for less tech-savvy volunteers. Recognition of prior learning would mean experienced volunteers do not have to repeat unnecessary content. By making training accessible and user friendly, we strengthen the safety and quality of volunteer-led services.

Digital tools for managing volunteers: volunteer organisations often lack the tools for management and data tracking for training and staying compliant. A centralised platform, like strengthening the Volunteer Gateway, could help recruit, onboard and retain volunteers; track police checks, training and hours; and share resources and best practice across services. This would ease the burden on small community organisations and allow us to spend more time supporting people rather than pushing paperwork.

Tax relief for volunteers: our volunteers pay out of pocket for things like fuel, uniforms and safety gear with little or no tax benefits. We suggest a volunteer tax offset for those contributions related to numbers of hours worked annually, clearer ATO guidelines for volunteer related expenses and consideration given to volunteer services when accessing eligibility for income support and return to work. Volunteers should be recognised as doing not just charity but also essential unpaid work, especially in regional communities like ours.

Pathways back to the workforce: volunteering is a proven bridge back into paid work. It builds skills, confidence, communication and connections. We would love to see partnership programs and paid internships with career breaks for volunteers; formal recognition for volunteer experience in job applications and training; and a partnership with Workforce Australia, aligning local volunteers with employment goals. This would create more meaningful outcomes for volunteers by helping volunteers find skills among community-minded workers.

Why does this matter? Meals on Wheels Cairns supports clients across Far North Queensland, from Gordonvale to Stratford and surrounding suburbs. Our volunteers contribute thousands of hours each year but they are doing this with rising fuel costs, time commitments and often no financial return. With the right government support, we could remove the roadblocks on volunteer services and strengthen the social fabric of Queensland. Thank you for listening.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** Thank you for your great work. Meals on Wheels is a fantastic organisation. I know that they are the heart of my community as well. It is a very valuable service. Similar to what the chair often asks, I am interested to hear about some of the challenges that might be different between Meals on Wheels operating in a suburban, centralised area like mine compared to a more regional setting.

**Mr Van Dorssen:** Most of Meals on Wheels work is voluntary, from the president right down to the person who delivers the meal. In regional places, they do have general managers and they do have admin staff and we do that here. South-East Queensland does that and some other places as well. In some of the smaller areas—say, Babinda, Innisfail and places like that—it is all done through Cairns

voluntary work. At this stage, the volunteers are not young people anymore and they have been doing it for a long time. We need to look after the older people we have now and try to get newer people to come in to assist. That is where the struggle is at the moment.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** It is a similar story that we hear. Being regionally located, do you feel that the ability to attract volunteers is more challenging due to the lower population density?

**Mr Van Dorssen:** Yes, I agree. That is correct. That would be a good place to start. Also, a lot of our volunteers either have second jobs or look after their families—their grandchildren or older siblings or younger siblings. That is hard for us, too.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** You briefly touched on some type of tax relief for volunteers.

**Mr Van Dorssen:** I think it is something that governments should be able to look at to assist volunteers. It is not like you pay them straight out; they may come in and make a claim. Up here, it rains nearly every second day in the wet season. The volunteers who deliver meals for us might have to buy three or four raincoats, hoodies, pouches or something like that just for the wet season up here. It is things like that. It all adds up. It is a cost. If they are on a tax incentive, they could get something back off their tax if they are still working. If they are not working then there could be some sort of subsidy towards the cost of delivering the meal or using some sort of equipment to assist them.

**Mr HEALY:** Chris, it is great to see the facility progressing along well. It is well overdue. That is well done. Good work to you and your team. You made a great submission. I think centralised police checks makes sense. It is so simple. I think it is complicated for some but it makes sense.

**Mr Van Dorssen:** Meals on Wheels Cairns has volunteers who need police checks because we deliver meals to people in vulnerable places. Someone from a sporting group also needs a police check and a blue card. We do the same. You should not have to fill in the same form if you want to volunteer for us and then volunteer for them.

**Mr HEALY:** Agreed. Let us hope that one of the outcomes of this is that it is centralised, even if it starts on a state basis. Has this discussion been had elsewhere? Is this something that Meals on Wheels have been talking about? Have you been promoting it for a while?

**Mr Van Dorssen:** Yes. We think it is a good idea. For any service, every three years it costs. If you have five or six people you have to have a police check for—the volunteer usually does not pay for it; it is the service or the not-for-profit organisation that pays for it. We have to find the money to pay for that.

**Mr HEALY:** I realise how challenging it is not only in your space but also in a range of others. I think you have made some fantastic suggestions in your submission. We will see how we go there.

**Mr BAILLIE:** I went along with the Townsville based Meals on Wheels organisation not too long ago. I particularly like that in your submission you called out that it is more than just a meal. Quite often we were the only visitor for that day and it made a difference to those clients.

**Mr Van Dorssen:** That is right.

**Mr BAILLIE:** What I found most interesting in Townsville, and tell me if it is the same here—

**Mr HEALY:** It is a lot better here!

**ACTING CHAIR:** It has taken until 11.25 for the parochialism to come in.

**Mr BAILLIE:** We do not have that wet weather that you speak of.

**ACTING CHAIR:** Order. Let us go to the questions.

**Mr Van Dorssen:** I do not know about that. In the past couple of years you have had that wet weather.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Just for a very short period. In Townsville, the transition that was surprising was the number of clients we were visiting who had transitioned from being a Meals on Wheels volunteer to, indeed, being a client themselves.

**Mr Van Dorssen:** That is right.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Do you see similar here?

**Mr Van Dorssen:** Yes.

**Mr BAILLIE:** How are your client numbers going? Is the demand increasing? Are your volunteer numbers keeping up, growing or declining?

**Mr Van Dorssen:** As I say, we probably have about 90 volunteers on a regular basis but a lot of those volunteers work Monday to Friday for us. We struggle at holiday time. Christmas and Easter is when those volunteers have to look after their grandchildren and they cannot come on the run with us so sometimes our staff go out and do those shifts as well. In my opinion, everyone is a volunteer whether or not they get paid. If you need to put your hand up and go and deliver meals, you go and do it.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Is the demand increasing?

**Mr Van Dorssen:** When I started we only had about 370 or 350 clients. We are at a stage now where we are nearly onto 800 people we deliver to.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Over what time period? You started with about 370 clients—

**Mr Van Dorssen:** Yes, that was about 2½ years ago.

**Mr HEALY:** It has doubled in that time.

**ACTING CHAIR:** More than doubled.

**Mr Van Dorssen:** A lot of that comes down to the cost of living and things like that. A lot of our clients ring up and say that it is cheaper to get a meal off us than to go and do the shopping themselves and end up throwing food away at the end of the week. It is a regular meal. It has protein. It is probably one of the best meals in Queensland, in my opinion. It is very good food. It is freshly made every day. There is no wastage at all with what we do.

**Ms PEASE:** Thank you for the great work of Meals on Wheels. We have a great Meals on Wheels in my electorate, too. I volunteer there when I can. One of the issues that you spoke about is the administrative burden on volunteers. We are constantly having to upgrade and do our training modules, which are very time consuming.

**Mr Van Dorssen:** They are.

**Ms PEASE:** I understand that red-tape burden is important given that you are going into people's homes, but it is a big burden and it is also a burden for you as an organisation to ensure that your volunteers are actually conducting and undertaking that. Do you have any suggestions to lighten that load?

**Mr Van Dorssen:** As I said, we use a system called Rosterfy. Queensland Meals on Wheels purchased it for all of the services in Queensland. We get our volunteers to go on there and do their compliance and things like that. It is online.

**Ms PEASE:** It is very time-consuming.

**Mr Van Dorssen:** It is still time-consuming. With our new building that we are going to open up in August we will have a designated area.

**Ms PEASE:** So they can come in and do it.

**Mr Van Dorssen:** So they can come in and they can sit down, have a cup of tea, have some lunch and just stay back afterwards if they need to and just go through and do it. A lot of it used to be on paper, but now a lot of it is online. You still have volunteers who are not tech savvy so we still need to have an admin person with them to go through the process, but they are quite happy to do it because they enjoy volunteering. I think for anyone who volunteers, by the time you finish doing what you are doing or delivering those meals you feel happy for yourself but you feel happy that you have given something back to somebody as well.

**Ms PEASE:** Thank you for your time and thank you for all of the great work that you do.

**ACTING CHAIR:** You identified specific periods of time, such as school holidays. Child care is an issue more broadly felt in regional Queensland than it is elsewhere, but it is a problem everywhere; I am not shirking that. Does it have an impact at other times, where people may have been prepared to volunteer but lack of access to suitable child care limits them? Specifically, would you say that child care generally, other than at those identified times, is an issue or is it really only in those peak holiday times?

**Mr Van Dorssen:** No, I think that is an issue at any time. That probably stops the younger volunteers who want to come and volunteer because they do not have the necessary place where they could put their young child if they wanted to come. We deliver from 10 o'clock until one o'clock or 1.30. That is our time of delivery. If some of the younger or middle-aged volunteers were able to put their children or siblings into a childcare area, we may be able to use those volunteers for that 1½ hours that we deliver.

**ACTING CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your time here this morning.

**AUSTRAI-OMBIGA, Ms Dianne, Secretary, FNQ Diverse Communities Council Inc.**

**GOYAL, Ms Shweta, Treasurer, FNQ Diverse Communities Council Inc.**

**RANKIN, Ms Janine, FNQ Diverse Communities Council Inc.**

**ACTING CHAIR:** Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Ms Austrai-Ombiga:** Good morning, everyone. I have Shweta and Janine here supporting us. We give our apologies on behalf of Kesa, our president and a volunteer in this organisation. She works full-time at Wujal. Therefore, she is not here.

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to present this submission on behalf of Far North Queensland Diverse Communities Council and, for myself, the PNG and Wantoks Association Cairns. Volunteering plays a vital role in maintaining the social, cultural and educational fabric of communities in Far North Queensland, particularly within the multicultural sector. Our submission highlights both the strengths and the challenges that define the current state of volunteering, especially in not-for-profit multicultural associations in our region in Far North Queensland, Cairns in particular.

To begin with, Far North Queensland Diverse Communities Council is a newly formed not-for-profit organisation that seeks to unify the diverse communities of Far North Queensland. Though still in its early stages, the council is gaining recognition and traction among local service providers and multicultural communities. It is fully run by volunteers, as you can see, including the president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer and committee members—one of them is present here—all of whom hold full-time professional roles in the public and private sector. Similarly, the PNG and Wantoks Association Cairns is also completely volunteer-led, comprising 14 dedicated individuals who give their time to support cultural preservation, community events and social integration. Volunteers for these organisations, which are not-for-profit, are elected at each AGM through the standard Office of Fair Trading model rules.

A major concern outlined in our submission is that, while volunteers are deeply valued within our organisations, their efforts are often overlooked by external bodies, particularly government agencies and service providers. For example, local initiatives such as Cairns Multicultural Month require extensive administrative input from volunteer-run organisations, yet little consideration is given to the burden this places on volunteers who already juggle full-time work and personal responsibilities.

One of the most pressing issues is the decline in volunteer participation. As the need for community support increases, particularly with the growing migrant and refugee population in the regions, the willingness and capacity to volunteer is diminishing. This is largely due to burnout, financial pressure and lack of institutional support. Many volunteers are forced to take unpaid leave from their paid employment to attend meetings and participate in training run by paid professionals. This results in lost income and increased stress in the sense of being undervalued. If this trend continues, the consequences will be severe. A shortage of volunteers will lead to organisational fatigue, hinder program delivery and compromise the mental and emotional wellbeing of those who continue to give their time.

On a personal note, I have been volunteering since 2006 in various roles, including president and secretary of the PNG and Wantoks Association and now, in addition, secretary of Far North Queensland Diverse Communities Council. While volunteering has provided me, and I believe my fellow volunteers, invaluable skills, from grant writing to event management, it has also come at personal cost, often requiring the use of our own finances and impacting family life.

In closing, while volunteering is often described as a noble and selfless act, it should not be exploited or taken for granted. To ensure the sustainability of community organisations such as ours we must reframe the way we support, recognise and invest in volunteers. This includes reducing bureaucratic burdens, offering incentives and, most importantly, valuing the work of volunteers as essential to the social wellbeing of Cairns and Far North Queensland. Thank you.

**ACTING CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your very considered opening statement. Member for Inala?

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** Thank you for appearing today. I am keen to hear more about the diverse communities themselves. What constitutes a diverse community, what are their needs and how do you address those needs?

**Ms Goyal:** If we can think about diverse communities, first of all we are considering international students, which is the biggest economy of Australia. No-one thinks about them. If they are looking for a job or any housing or anything, they are left far behind. I came here 20 years ago as an international student so I know how I suffered. Now I can see the situation is the same, pretty much. Nothing has changed in 20 years.

Migrant women are dealing with a lot of domestic violence issues and mental health issues—even men as well. We are not considering them in anything. I have done a lot of domestic violence and mental health courses in the meantime. We do not have a lot of trainers with a multicultural diverse background. I am a single parent. If I am dealing with domestic violence, I want someone from a diverse background who can understand my culture rather than Australian Western people who have a different culture from mine. I want someone with whom I can connect.

I have not seen a lot of multicultural people who are trainers and who can support them in Far North Queensland. There are plenty in Brisbane and Gold Coast. When I was doing that training of DV and mental health, I was presenting in the conferences as well. I said, 'I want to be a trainer as well, because there is a lack of opportunities as a trainer in Far North Queensland.' If you go further north, to Cooktown and deeper, there are none. I am a PhD holder. I am eligible to teach in university but I cannot train people. They said, 'You need to do certificate IV,' which is two years. I said, 'How come I have spent six years doing my PhD to teach in university but I cannot train people?' It means you are studying the whole of your life. Maybe when I get to 80 or 90 years old, then I can become a trainer.

If I have to go in the mental health sector, I have to do mental health training. If I have to go to domestic violence, I have to do that training. There is no point studying and then you are doing this and doing that. I think we need to consider these things as well. If there is a qualification you can include in some short courses, for one or two months—not like two years, where you are spending your whole life doing them. These kinds of things we are lacking in diverse backgrounds.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** You mentioned international students and migrant multicultural groups. Are there any other diverse communities that are considered in your organisation? Do you have First Nations communities?

**Ms Goyal:** Yes, First Nations and refugees as well as asylum seekers, yes.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** My question goes back your point about burnout of volunteers. Could you elaborate on how you deal with that—how you try to lessen their workload or what strategies your organisation has to deal with that situation?

**Ms Austrai-Ombiga:** Truthfully, there are no strategies at the moment. As I said, our management committee is often nominated at AGMs. We find almost year after year we have the same president, treasurer and secretary, and that is indicative of the lack of interest from volunteers. We find our own way. I think one of the good things about being part of a multicultural community here in Cairns is that there are events that we go to. We use that as therapeutic strategies for us, really, instead of sitting in our roles in our organisations feeling stressed and burnt out. We also acknowledge our families, who are very supportive of us. We acknowledge our spouses as well, those of us who are married. They are very supportive of us when we want to take time out as women. Most of these multicultural organisations that we are a part of are made by women. We do things for ourselves like take time out, have coffee, talk about what is bothering us, go out to other events and just be part of it. I do not think any of us have considered professional mental help, but we are all Christians so going to church is also a strategy to help with our burnout.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** You said at the start that you do not actually have strategies, but really you do. It is something where, as organisations, you look after each other. What do you think would be the best methodologies to highlight the importance of volunteering? If you had a group of young people, what would you say to explain why you volunteer and what you get out of it?

**Ms Rankin:** I have been volunteering for 40 years. I find probably it is the most beneficial thing that we can offer to humanity and the public and it gives you so much back. You are giving to the people and you are not expecting anything back, which I think is the most precious thing that we can give to each other. I am actually from Melbourne. I have been up here for 4½ years. I came to Cairns probably in 1972, which was quite a long time ago. I thought, 'One day I will live here.'

I came up to Cairns specifically because I had been volunteering with a spiritual practice that is exercise meditation, which is recognised all around the world. It is called Falun Gong. I have travelled the world sharing this beautiful practice and the benefits to health and wellbeing for communities around the world, especially for a lot of Indigenous people. I became part of this group

because their hearts are in it. They want to be in this group to spread wellbeing and everything amongst our community. What I can offer to different organisations is sharing the practice of meditation exercise that is free to learn. I go to schools and there are so many different areas we can go into. With all of the different groups and problems with health and wellbeing, it is certainly needed. That is about it. There is a lot more, but we only have a short amount of time.

**Ms Goyal:** My son has just turned 13. I have filled out his application for the Young Mayors program in Cairns. He asked me why I wanted to do that. I said that if you are doing volunteering then you are learning a lot. Everyone has a different story. From their stories you are learning inspiration that will motivate you and encourage you. Everyone here is a migrant and they will talk about how they overcome their difficulties so it will help you to grow up. You will need plenty of people, so it is good to build a community and social skills. You will talk and express your emotions. I am a secondary school teacher so I know a lot of students do not know how to express their emotions. That is why depression and stress is going on. If you are meeting with people then of course you need to talk so you will learn how to express yourself. That is also a benefit of volunteering and sharing your knowledge and gaining.

**Mr HEALY:** Dianne, thank you. Shweta, I am glad you came and stayed; that is important. Janine, I have heard that Melbourne is cold so it is nice to have you here. That you are all here representing this entity reflects the fact that we have a growing community. I know we have some Bhutanese and Nepalese. We have wonderful people from all around the world who are contributing to our city. Your actions are the by-product of what is happening with the federal government when we look at immigration. Firstly, it is fantastic that everybody is welcomed.

Dianne, I think it is really important the way that you articulate some of the challenges that are being faced, particularly by cultures that are not used to what is seen as 'Australian'. Shweta, you are right: we are all from somewhere else unless we are First Nations and it does take a little time. I really appreciate your submission. I thought you ticked off on a number of key areas that are uniquely different to others.

How do you interact with other volunteer organisations? Do you have a strategy? Do you involve yourself with some of them? I know you have a lot on your plate. I find when everybody has a common interest, even though there are variations, getting together is important. Your goals and objectives are absolutely admirable but I wonder about your interaction. Dianne, if you talked to Annette, there would be some common areas. Is that a happening thing?

**Ms Austrai-Ombiga:** Yes. With Far North Queensland Diverse Communities Council, one of our aims is to link with organisations like Far North Queensland Volunteers, Meals on Wheels and also multicultural communities in Cairns. We would like to act as a unifying council. At some stage I believe we will be communicating with FNQ Volunteers.

**Mr HEALY:** I appreciate that our job is to listen to you, but I think that is really important. The more there is that collaborative approach, that commonality, that builds for better outcomes.

**Mr BAILLIE:** I congratulate you. I understand the Diverse Communities Council is quite a new organisation. What achievements have you had so far not only in standing up the organisation but also in getting the rubber to the road and helping the community?

**Ms Austrai-Ombiga:** At the moment, like we said, our challenge is to motivate volunteers to join our organisation. We are still in the embryonic stage of consolidating the organisation. We have made a lot of communications and we have had a lot of conversations with other organisations here in Cairns. Our president is a go-getter. Unfortunately, she is not here to tell you all this. Motivation is a little bit on us and we are trying to do things to link with others.

**Mr BAILLIE:** At this stage, is it just the executive that you have?

**Ms Austrai-Ombiga:** Yes. We are also trying to connect with organisations all over Australia such as in Melbourne and New South Wales. There are big organisations in other parts of Australia. They are looking for someone who can run their programs. We are in touch with a multicultural organisation in Melbourne. They want someone to connect with them and to run domestic violence and family violence programs in Far North Queensland, and EECQ as well.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Is it your vision to grow your organisation or keep it quite small as an executive, so to speak, and be the conduit to the other organisations?

**Ms Austrai-Ombiga:** I think at this stage we are hoping to grow a little bit bigger than the executive.

**Ms PEASE:** Congratulations and well done; what a vision. One of the things that we have been talking about is how to make it easier to volunteer. You have created a brand new organisation and you also have your PNG one. How difficult was it for you to create the FNQ Diverse Communities Council Inc. on the administrative side of things? You talked about the Office of Fair Trading. What was that process?

**Ms Austrai-Ombiga:** We all have a lot of experience. Kesa and I arrived in Cairns about the same time. We were both a part of the Pacific communities council, which is now more or less dormant. Kesa was a past president of CARMA, Cairns and Region Multicultural Association. With all that experience, we had a look at the objectives. We wanted to see what we could use as our objectives to build this new organisation. We approached the Office of Fair Trading. Based on our experience, we knew where to go and what forms to fill in and the process of communicating with community members and raising the interest in joining us, applying for an ABN, registering with the Office of Fair Trading, opening our bank account. We started off with monthly meetings. We used our experience from being part of other organisations to start with.

**Ms PEASE:** I read the outline of what you all do. You are not all based in Cairns. How do you communicate and have meetings? Do you use technology?

**Ms Goyal:** Mostly Kesa arrives here every weekend so we try to meet every weekend.

**Ms Austrai-Ombiga:** There was one meeting where we used Teams, which worked for us.

**Ms PEASE:** You talked about one of the organisations that is dormant and then you talked about CARMA. Is CARMA still operating?

**Ms Austrai-Ombiga:** Yes.

**Ms PEASE:** But the Pacific organisation is dormant. What happened with that? Did they run out of volunteers?

**Ms Austrai-Ombiga:** Yes. It was run by volunteers.

**Ms Rankin:** I think Kesa needs a helicopter.

**Ms PEASE:** She is at Lockhart River, isn't she? She is a long way away.

**Ms Rankin:** She takes four hours to get here and four hours back. It is amazing.

**ACTING CHAIR:** I thank you all for appearing before us today. I am sorry the time is limited. We have some other witnesses to hear from. Thank you very much. We really appreciate and value your contribution.



**McDONALD, Ms Margaret, Regional Manager, Spinal Life Australia**

**ACTING CHAIR:** Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Ms McDonald:** Thank you for the opportunity to appear. I am the regional manager of Spinal Life Australia. In that role I cover from Mackay north, so the better half of the state. I have to state the truth. In addition to my paid position, I am also an enthusiastic volunteer. I have been volunteering at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair for the last week. I took some days off my paid job to go and do that, so I am doubly exhausted to how I would normally be. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry. I will be speaking about Spinal Life. We did put in a combined submission between Spinal Life and Sporting Wheelies because we are a combined organisation. I will be speaking about Cairns and I will be speaking specifically about our experience at Spinal Life Australia.

Spinal Life Australia, as the name would suggest, works with people with spinal cord injury. We are an organisation that has been around for 65 years. We were born in Brisbane and we now have offices in Brisbane, Bundaberg, Rockhampton, Townsville, Cairns and Perth. We have over 900 paid staff. In addition to our paid staff we would have approximately 20 volunteers, 10 of whom are in Cairns. We do something very different in Cairns to most of the rest of Spinal Life. Spinal Life in Brisbane does not have what Spinal Life in Cairns has. We have the Healthy Living Centre, which is an integrated rehabilitation centre. We have volunteers who do rehabilitation assistance. We also from time to time have enthusiastic gardeners and we also have admin volunteers. At the moment I have 10 to 12 volunteers on my books who are coming in mostly once a week, but sometimes we are a bit strapped so we will get them in a little bit more regularly than that.

I will speak most about our favourite role, which is the rehab assistance. In that role the volunteers are assisting our therapists, being an extra set of eyes and an extra set of hands to do preparation for people's therapy, provide assistance during the actual session and then clean up afterwards. I am not sure if I mentioned we are a not-for-profit. That is probably an important part to mention. That would happen in our rehabilitation gym but then also in our hydrotherapy pool. It is a safety thing for us and it is also, I guess, an efficiency thing to have the volunteers.

Volunteers come to us from all walks of life. We have been open for five years now. Some people may come to us because they are wanting English language practice. We have had that. That is a little tricky in terms of safety and needing to get very clear instructions, so that is not always a pool-watch situation; that could be a something else situation. People also just want to connect into the community. We have also had people come through who are foreign trained and qualified professionals who then are looking to segue into our situation here in Australia. People who are active retirees is probably a big market for us in terms of volunteering.

I will just tell a quick story about one of our volunteers. One of our volunteers was a Brazilian qualified physiotherapist, so fully qualified. He came to volunteer directly with us because he wanted to work on his language skills, even though they are fantastic, just to have more regular language practice, and then also to familiarise himself with how physiotherapy is done in Australia. That has been a really great pathway for him. He was a volunteer. He is now working as an allied health assistant for us, so he is a paid employee with us. It is the same with another volunteer who came. I would describe her as an active retiree who came as a volunteer and who is now also a paid employee. Not all of our volunteers are looking to become employees, but there definitely has been a pathway for some people.

Because disability support is a really big, growing industry, it is a good place where people can get a taste of this industry, so it is something that people come to do. Volunteering is quite separate from our placements. We also take student placements, which is a very different part of what we do. Volunteering is quite different. We have an internal no-card no-start policy, which means people need to have a blue card, a yellow card and a number of other things to make sure they are okay to be working with vulnerable people. That can be a barrier for some people—not necessarily because they are ineligible but sometimes because the process is difficult if they do not have a computer or if they do not know how to do that, so that can be a minor barrier.

With recruitment and onboarding there is a resource implication for us as an organisation. We really need to be very sure that if we are going through with someone they are going to be a good fit. That early screening of people is really important for us. Many of our volunteers come from FNQ Volunteers, without whom I am not sure how we would be getting volunteers. We have people who come straight to us but FNQ Volunteers are awesome. The other thing is that in our organisation we have a very strong practice of celebrating our volunteers. We do not just do that during National Volunteer Week; we do it quite often. We happen to be co-located with Cairns' best coffee shop, so paying them in coffee is something we do quite often as well.

**ACTING CHAIR:** There is a way to sneak an ad into a parliamentary inquiry if I have ever heard it! The member for Cairns is an expert at this.

**Ms McDonald:** That is probably all I have to say in terms of an opening statement.

**ACTING CHAIR:** Thank you. It is easy to fall into the groove of people believing that regional locations are disadvantaged because they are regional. You outlined in your opening statement a positive around your organisation in terms of what you offer that perhaps might not be offered in some of your other locations in terms of your centre. Are there challenges or opportunities—positive or negative—that you find that are maybe unique to your locality, other than obviously you are operating a centre that other outlets may not be? Are there challenges here? To probably point that a little bit, you outlined things like disability services and the NDIS, which is a growing beast. Has that continued to negatively impact or positively impact—either way—your volunteering aspects?

**Ms McDonald:** The Healthy Living Centre where I work did not exist before NDIS so I cannot specifically address that, but I can say that the disability sector is a really big market of employment. There is huge growth in that area. As I say, people are coming to us as a taste: 'Could I work with people with disability?' It is a good way of getting an experience.

In terms of advantages to regional, we have a relatively high profile. We are all locals who work there and I guess we all have networks, so lots of our recruitment, whether it be for paid positions or for volunteer positions, comes because people know someone who works there. Even though they might come through FNQ Volunteers, generally speaking, with six degrees of separation they will know someone who works there. I guess what we offer is an experience of doing hydrotherapy or doing rehabilitation. We do really cool stuff. That is the other thing: it is not run-of-the-mill volunteering—not that there is any such thing as run-of-the-mill volunteering, sorry—

**ACTING CHAIR:** This is a bad room for that!

**Ms McDonald:** I know, right? I guess what I am saying is: it is a unique opportunity to be in the pool doing hydrotherapy. It is actually a unique thing to be working alongside a very skilled therapist and to be making very real differences in people's lives. It is very compelling.

**ACTING CHAIR:** As the employment opportunity becomes realised for some people—and that is a growing pool, if not for you then across the sector there seems to be a growth factor behind employment in that space—is that dragging volunteers? For the people who are participating in full-time work in that field—once they get the taste they then secure an opportunity to work in employment, part-time or full-time—is there a lack now of volunteers to take their place or are you still self-replacing okay?

**Ms McDonald:** We do have that situation sometimes where we are so successful in helping people get really confident that they then go off and get a job, but that is fantastic. Fortunately, we have been able to keep a slow intake as well. A number of our volunteers are of the age where they like to go off in caravans for really long periods of time as well. Fortunately, they usually come back. It is a thing, God bless them. They do come back. We have a fairly good psychological contract with our volunteers in that they might go away but then they will come back, and we are always happy to have folk come back. We have had a relationship with TAFE for a while around one of their programs to do with English as a second language. I am not sure which of their courses it is, but they were referring folk over to us to get some experience. There are some roles that is not appropriate for, because obviously you need to be able to respond really quickly in an emergency, so we are really careful about making sure we put people in the right role.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** Thank you for your work. It sounds like you are doing a great job. I am interested in the roles the volunteers play and how your volunteer engagement here is something above and beyond what happens in other areas. Why do you think it is that you have volunteers? Is it the lack of a centre? Is it differences in other parts of the state in terms of the need?

**Ms McDonald:** It is to do with us having a facility that very much fits with having volunteers. Other parts of the organisation are not as fortunate to have what we have in Cairns. It is also a personal commitment of mine as a volunteer. It is something that we saw would value-add into what we are able to do. Definitely what we hear back from our volunteers is that it is very much a fulfilling thing that they do. It is fulfilling for them as well. It is very rewarding.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** If you had to measure, in a sense, the impact of the volunteer program on the benefits that it offers all of the people who have spinal injuries, can you quantify that in some way—the value-add that offers to your organisation?

**Ms McDonald:** We would not be able to offer as many appointments as we can offer if we did not have the volunteers. The volunteers mean that my therapists do not need to be setting up equipment before appointments and then clearing up after appointments. Post COVID, we were all

busily wiping everything down. Instead of my highly paid therapist doing that, I can have volunteers doing that. We make sure that we do not have volunteers doing only menial tasks, like the wiping down—there is obviously always a combination of things—but it does just mean that my highly paid therapists do not have to be doing that so we can offer back-to-back appointments. We would not be able to do that if we did not have volunteers.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** You are able to provide a service for more people in need. By having a facility with volunteers, it increases the services you can offer?

**Ms McDonald:** Absolutely. One of the really great things, because we have quite a rich cultural diversity amongst our volunteers, is that we have volunteers who speak the first language of some of our clients. Not all of my therapists do, but some of my volunteers do. They will greet that person. That has been an unintended and unexpected delight for us. It is like, 'Oh, you speak. We didn't know. That is fantastic'. It immediately makes someone feel more comfortable as they go through.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** When it comes to onboarding and getting these volunteers in a position to start volunteering, how long does that normally take for your organisation and how do you keep these individuals incentivised while they are waiting?

**Ms McDonald:** It can take up to a couple of weeks from interview. The process for many of our people is that we will receive an email from FNQ Volunteers, God bless them.

**Mr HEALY:** Another plug, Chair.

**ACTING CHAIR:** Duly noted.

**Ms McDonald:** That is reasonable, though. We would receive an email to say, 'Mary Blogs is interested in volunteering.' We then make the first contact to say, 'Can you send us your resume and then we make time for an interview.' After that, depending on how the interview goes, it is a process of making sure they have their cards. Just like our paid employees, people need to do a series of online modules as well. That helps people understand about spinal cord injury, working with people post trauma and a whole lot of other things—just the basics. It can take up to a couple of weeks. I would say that the way we keep people engaged in that time is just emailing going, 'How are you doing with those online things?' If people do not have a computer to be able to do the online modules at home, they can come in and do them on one of the computers at work.

**Ms PEASE:** Margaret, thank you very much. It is great work that Spinal Life does. One of my constituents, a Rotarian, is a great supporter of Spinal Life and he runs a wheelchair challenge in my electorate once a year. It is a really good exercise to do for people who have those accessibility issues. We do the wheelchair around the town. It is really important work that you do. It sounds like you have quite a successful model with your volunteering. You might have answered this with the previous question around how you onboard your volunteers. Do any volunteers come directly to you?

**Ms McDonald:** Yes.

**Ms PEASE:** You get them directly?

**Ms McDonald:** Yes.

**Ms PEASE:** If they come through Far North Queensland Volunteers, have the blue card and yellow card checks already been done?

**Ms McDonald:** No. There will be a name and contact details, but Far North Queensland Volunteers would have spoken to them about what roles we have. We have roles on their jobs board, so the person will say, 'I'm actually interested in this particular one,' so the person knows what they are applying for.

**Ms PEASE:** Do you get referrals from Volunteering Queensland or any of the other volunteering organisations?

**Ms McDonald:** No. There is a lot of, 'Susan is already volunteering and she has a friend, Sandy.' A lot of that business goes on but there is no other formal volunteering organisation.

**Ms PEASE:** Given that you make use of a lot of volunteers, do you have a volunteer coordinator—someone who manages them, oversees them and gives them the training?

**Ms McDonald:** It is a part of the job of one of my people. She is a paid employee. We did look into whether we could have a volunteer who coordinates the other volunteers. We are not able to do that at this point. That would be a possibility, but we are not able to do that yet. We have to send out rosters each week so that people know. It is also about just generally keeping in touch with people and making sure there is pastoral care. Yes, we have someone who has that as part of their job.

**Ms PEASE:** I can imagine that maintaining a connection with your volunteers is as important as what they do onsite to make sure they will turn up. If you have a particular role—if you are hoping they will be there to set up a room—and they do not turn up, what happens in that instance? Does your staff member have to do it?

**Ms McDonald:** One of us does it. Yes, that is right. It is all doable. Just like paid members of staff, volunteers get sick. We do have some volunteers who are flexible for the last-minute call-up, but lots of volunteers are really busy people as well, so they have their program of what they are doing.

**Ms PEASE:** Congratulations on your great work and thank you for coming today.

**Mr BAILLIE:** I am extremely conscious of time, but I want to clarify a couple of things. FNQ Volunteers pass on warm referrals but that is the extent of their involvement with your organisation? You pick it up and then do the onboarding yourselves; is that correct?

**Ms McDonald:** Correct, yes.

**Mr BAILLIE:** It seems you have quite a good balance between paid staff and volunteers. You mentioned earlier that you pay your volunteers in coffee, but I imagine you would also extend that coffee to your paid workforce to keep them engaged. No, they do not get any coffee?

**Ms McDonald:** They get paid.

**Mr BAILLIE:** So you might have answered it—

**Ms McDonald:** We do get staff rates at the cafes.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Is there any other way you recognise the volunteers and their contribution versus your paid staff? How else do you try to recognise their contribution?

**Ms McDonald:** Twice a year we have a morning tea for them. That works for some and does not work for others. That is something we have been trying to explore because, like I mentioned, people are busy. For some people a morning tea suits; for other people it does not suit. We have a big basket in one of the cupboards that has snacks for volunteers. We try to just make it a good place for them to be. They are also treated very much as part of our staff. We do not see them as separate to us; they are part of the team. They wear uniform shirts like us, so they look like one of us.

**Ms PEASE:** Great.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Fantastic, thank you.

**Mr HEALY:** Keep up the great work. We will not mention the coffee again!

**ACTING CHAIR:** Thank you not only for the work that you and your organisation do but also for taking the time to appear in front of the inquiry and assist us with our deliberations.

We will now hear from people who have registered to appear as a witness at this hearing. You will have five minutes each to make your statement. I remind witnesses of the terms of the reference for the inquiry and that the committee is gathering evidence based on key themes. The committee is not investigating individual complaints about persons or organisations. In this regard, I ask witnesses to be cautious about providing evidence that names and/or adversely reflects on a person or organisation. There has been an apology from Mrs Sue Fairley today.

**DAHL, Mr Prahlad, Private capacity**

**STOKES, Mr Graham, Private capacity**

**ACTING CHAIR:** I invite each of you to make a statement, after which, if there is time, the committee may have some questions.

**Mr Stokes:** Good afternoon. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Graham Stokes. I am cognisant that I am not to mention the organisation, so I will not. In mid-2024 I joined this organisation in Cairns as a volunteer. I had recently retired and wanted to give back to the community, but my experience left me feeling disillusioned and concerned about how volunteers are being treated, specifically at the branch of this organisation in Cairns. It centres around two points. The first is training standards. From the outset, the training was disorganised and ineffective. We were asked to view PowerPoint slides and the instructor simply read out those PowerPoint slides line by line—no interaction, no discussion, no real instruction and no real interest in the new volunteers, it seemed. For exams we were simply told the correct answers. The practical sessions were rushed and treated as a formality. Does that matter? Yes, because, apart from the training risk, the lack of effective training was putting people's lives at risk in potentially hostile environments. New volunteers were not welcomed. There were no introductions; there was no engagement. It was like we were an inconvenience.

The second area is around dismissal and grievance handling. Earlier this year I advised the person in charge and the training officer of a planned absence. The absence was unexpected. Due to my mother-in-law in the UK passing away, I had to go over there and manage the estate as her executor. I gave a clear date of when I would be leaving and a clear date that I would be back. Halfway through my absence I was advised by email that I was being dismissed for non-attendance, which was a bit of a shock to me. I attempted to raise a grievance but discovered that there is no accessible grievance procedure for volunteers. The manuals of this organisation did refer to a process but had dead links, and no policy was ever made available to me, despite repeated requests. I managed to get a grievance meeting, where I was met by the person in charge and his deputy. I made my case and some of the comments I received included: 'Maybe this is not the organisation for you', 'This is how we've always done it', 'You're just here to help', 'If you don't like it you can ... off' and, 'None of your business what the internal processes are.' This is not how you treat volunteers. It was like Dad's Army. It was like a boys club, and I use the term 'boys club' deliberately, because it was very much an old boys club—or that is how it felt to me.

I am not here to seek personal redress. What is done is done and I am okay with that. I am here to ask for systemic change in how volunteers are treated so that others do not go through what I went through. I respectfully call for a proper review of training quality and delivery in volunteer organisations; clear, accessible grievance procedures for all volunteers; and a professional, supportive leadership team in volunteer organisations. I have to say, this is just my experience in one organisation. I am not tarring everyone with the same brush. This is one rogue organisation—perhaps one rogue branch, I do not know.

In closing, volunteers, as you know, give their time freely. They deserve to be welcomed, supported and trained to a proper standard, especially where there is a risk of injury in what they do. This particular organisation plays a vital role in public safety, but the culture I experienced is driving good people away. It must change and, for me, this inquiry is a chance to make that happen. Thank you.

**ACTING CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Mr Dahl?

**Mr Dahl:** I am Prahlad Dahl. I am originally from Bhutan. I lived for 19 years in a refugee camp and resettled to Australia in 2010. Have you ever felt a generational disconnection in volunteering services? I have found that breaking these barriers of disconnection, asking for help from senior volunteers and creating opportunities in collaboration with young people could provide a pathway to move forward. The evidence highlights that people from different age groups volunteer in different ways. The report suggests that to encourage more young people to volunteer we need to create opportunities that truly motivate them.

It was 2012 when I was the president of my community. Three young men—two brothers and their friend—from our community were driving from Townsville to Cairns. They started from Townsville at around 4 pm, attending their doctor's appointment. It was getting dark as they were driving. They were driving at 100 km/h on the Bruce Highway at Tully. A 14-wheeler truck was coming from the opposite direction with its lights on. The car driver, unfortunately, got unbalanced and the car collided

with the truck at night. The car running behind them crashed with it and pushed the car further into the truck. The two brothers died on the spot and the other was airlifted to Townsville Hospital in a coma.

The deceased older brother was living with elderly parents, his wife and three children—14, 12 and 10 years old. The younger brother had a wife and children who were six years and three months old. They arrived in Australia about a year earlier. No family member could communicate in English. The shock of losing sons to elderly parents, husbands to young women and fathers to young and small children in the family was traumatic and disastrous. The community members gathered, but everyone was confused, shocked and in disbelief, and no-one could communicate with the family. We all were in tears listening to and watching the grief and pain of the family. The family was holding their fate responsible for their resettlement and asking God: 'Why us?'

The father of the deceased authorised me to act on their behalf to organise a funeral and cremation. When I approached the police, privacy came in between. On top of it, Tully is not in the jurisdiction of Cairns. After having an extensive conversation with police, I was approved as a contact person. I had no idea about organising a funeral in Australia. A family friend, a lady from PNG, guided me to approach the funeral home. The requirement to seek an appointment with the funeral house was another topic that I had to struggle to make my community and the family understand.

My university assignments were due for submission. I do not remember if I had done anything at home and to my family during that time. I could only remember spending nights, me and my wife, looking at each other with tears, hiding from our sons. They might have known it, but they have never asked us.

Based on the support and suggestion that I received from the funeral house manager—he was recently transferred to Cairns and I felt he was transferred to Cairns for us—I managed to get a discounted funeral cost. I came to understand that the deceased brothers had lost arms, half of the head and legs in the accident. It was because their car collided with the truck and was pushed further by a car from behind at 100 kilometres per hour. The manager from the funeral house supported us by dressing the dead bodies with clothes and bandages to give a complete human shape. The funeral day was fixed on sixth day after death.

There was no-one in my community to consult on how I should manage the funeral service. I contacted my parents, who had settled in the USA. I informed my dad that the wife with the child was becoming unconscious due to a lack of eating and trauma. The children were traumatised. The parents were blaming their fate and regretting their decision to come to Australia. My dad advised me to allocate two people to help each person, to get a wheelchair for the mother with child, to request a standby ambulance and police in the vicinity and to not hesitate to give instructions to anyone as I felt best. He said: no consultation; take decision. He said, most importantly, to let the family members see the dead body and if they wanted to touch it then to let them but to pull back if they wanted to grab the dead body. He said to tell the volunteers helping people to take them to a comfortable place.

I asked my dad why I should allow them to touch the dead body. Dad said that once they see and touch the dead body it will give confirmation to the traumatised mind and help them to settle down and accept the death. I did what my dad said. As we started witnessing the deceased in their coffin, every family member was collapsing on the ground and I had to instruct people, holding my breath and recollecting what my dad said. The mother with child was slowly taken closer to the coffin in a wheelchair. As she saw her husband's dead body and slowly put her hand up and touched his face, she screamed at the top of her voice and attempted to stand up but collapsed and fell unconscious. The volunteers and paramedics attended her. Now, can I ask you how I could have managed the funeral service if I had not contacted my dad?

In the same way, I have a process of building connections between senior and younger volunteers. When we combine the experiences and wisdom of senior volunteers with energetic young people, we create volunteering programs that are meaningful to everyone. This not only strengthens our organisations but also builds bridges between generations, making our communities stronger and more united. But this could not be done voluntarily.

I would like to ask the committee whether they could use their discretionary power to break those bureaucratic barriers that may not qualify my plan for a grant and help me to provide project-based financial assistance and create an opportunity of connecting the generational volunteering service. I believe we could do it if we come together, break barriers, embrace help and create opportunity. It can be achieved by helping people to help themselves and keeping our connection alive. Thank you.

**ACTING CHAIR:** I thank you both very much for sharing your stories. I have been generous with time today; however, the time for today's hearing has concluded so I will not be able to allow further questions. Thank you both and thank you to all of those who have appeared today. Thank you to our Hansard reporters and secretariat staff. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on our committee's webpage in due course. I now declare this public hearing closed.

**The committee adjourned at 12.34 pm.**