



LOCAL GOVERNMENT, SMALL BUSINESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE SUBCOMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr SM Dillon MP— Acting Chair

Mr AJ Baillie MP

Mr MA Boothman MP

Mrs ME Nightingale MP

Mr N Dametto MP

Staff present:

Ms K Guthrie—Acting Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO VOLUNTEERING IN QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 16 July 2025

Townsville

WEDNESDAY, 16 JULY 2025

The subcommittee met at 10.00 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 for this hearing. 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. We are very fortunate to have here today the deputy chair of the committee and the member for Inala, Margie Nightingale MP; Adam Baillie MP, the member for Townsville; and Mark Boothman MP, the member for Theodore. Possibly also joining us is Mr Nick Dametto MP, the member for Hinchinbrook, who has been granted leave to ask questions at this hearing. I also acknowledge in the audience the hardworking MPs for both Thuringowa and Mundingburra, Natalie Marr and Janelle Poole respectively. Thank you very much for joining us this morning.

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 witness may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I do 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 and/or social media pages.

RYDER, Mrs Margie, Secretary, Volunteering North Queensland

TAIFALOS, Ms Maria, Volunteering North Queensland

ACTING CHAIR: Good morning, Margie. Would you like to make an opening statement before we commence any questions?

Mrs Ryder: Yes, thank you, Chair. VNQ proudly advocates inclusion and diversity in the community through training, functions, activities and engagement. We value and are strengthened by our diversities and cultures and support our youth, elderly and Indigenous communities. My name is Margie Ryder. I am currently the secretary for VNQ and it is an absolute privilege to be here today. We would also like to acknowledge all of our VNQ team members and the all of the VIOs who have shown up today.

We would like to acknowledge some groups to paint you a picture of who we are representing today: our current 365-plus volunteer-involving organisations, VIOs; our local Townsville City Council for their continued support of partnering with us to deliver grassroots training— and they were the ones who helped us put a motion up at the recent LGAQ conference in 2023 where 77 local councils supported us unanimously; our peak body, Volunteering Queensland, for acknowledging us and all current volunteer resource centres, VRCs, in the federal and state budget; and LGAQ for including us in their own inquiry, which we have read and which recommended establishing a sustained recruitment base for volunteers while managing the Queensland VRC network to maintain and leverage what currently exists in Queensland.

Volunteering North Queensland, commonly known as VNQ, is a not-for-profit organisation that has been running for 30 years. It is committed to empowering communities through volunteering. We focus on three core services: a volunteer referral service, volunteer training and capacity, and volunteer recognition. Our mission is to strengthen the social fabric of Townsville and surrounding regions by connecting, celebrating and upskilling volunteers and the organisations that support them.

We will not mince our words. It has been a tough four years for VNQ without long-term operational funding. Evidence-based data from the recent State of Volunteering report paints the clear picture that volunteering is declining and has declined over 10 per cent over the last three years. The current funding model provided by federal and state governments has not worked. It is broken. We need to do volunteering differently and there need to be volunteer hubs all over Queensland to combat this issue.

We know that there are fewer people putting up their hands to volunteer, and more services are relying on volunteers to make impacts and achieve outcomes. All levels of government—whether it is immigration, police, child safety, tourism, arts, education, disasters; you name a department—rely on volunteers to support these services and portfolios. We know that the value of volunteering is over \$117 billion. We felt until now that the government did not see the value in investing more into grassroots volunteers, who are the backbone of our city, so, hand on heart, we applaud the new government for putting forward a proposal to have a parliamentary inquiry into supporting volunteer-involving organisations.

The current project-based funding models are not giving government or our community value for money, nor a return on investment, as without operational funding to continue we cannot deliver work that is identified to enable more volunteers or address barriers that have been identified and it is simply a waste of government's money. In April, May and June of this year we ran a program for 12 weeks under a project-based VMA funding arrangement. We met with over 200 VIOs here and surveyed in person 117 people. This evidence-based data tells a scary story. Fifteen per cent are saying they are unlikely to volunteer in the next 12 months and a further 12.28 per cent are unsure if they will.

What we are not funded for is the greatest need, which is the volunteer referral service. We are fortunate to have had dedicated volunteers who have stayed with us in the last four years to keep our doors open. Again painting the picture, when we were fully funded in 2018 we did 1,797 referrals. Ironically, your next speaker, Shane Harris, who was the manager at the time, led this progress. In 2023-24 we referred over 635 people. We ran the reports and, as of yesterday, we are back up to 812, purely because of two dedicated volunteers and the demand. The need for face-to-face referrals is evidenced by the data. We are talking about a 50 per cent decline in referrals due to no operational funding.

In relation to our relationship with Volunteering Queensland, I am going to talk about it now and then we are going to move on. Historically, the relationship between VNQ and Volunteering Queensland, our peak body, was limited, with little collaboration and resource sharing. This lack of coordination significantly impacted the effectiveness of the volunteer ecosystem in Queensland. However, since the appointment of a new CEO and the board in 2024, the partnership has transformed. VNQ now collaborates regularly with Volunteering Queensland. We participate in resource sharing, engage in MOU development and coordinate disaster response efforts. The positive outcomes from this renewed relationship demonstrate the value of a well-funded peak body supporting a place-based organisation. The MOU recently sent to us states that all parties wish to collaborate both generally and on specific activities, policy and advocacy matters to continue to grow awareness of and participation in volunteering across Queensland and leverage local place-based knowledge and networks to increase opportunities, effectiveness and resource sharing.

I will turn now to the role of VRCs in the disaster response. Recent disaster events, including the 2019 Townsville floods and 2024 Cyclone Kirrily, highlighted the critical role that VRCs play in spontaneous volunteer co-ordination. However, without constant operational funding, VRCs lack the capacity to manage spontaneous volunteers effectively. Key issues identified during disaster debrief sessions included lack of uniform systems for spontaneous disaster volunteers, and misalignment between community expectations and formal activities. I also note that we have been working alongside the next speaker, who is from is DRA, for nearly two years to come up with a uniform solution to this, so I am eager to listen to the proposed uniform solution.

Our recommendation 1 to the parliamentary inquiry is to establish a regional hub model with sustainable operational funding. A fully funded and regionally distributed volunteer hub model will ensure that all Queensland communities, including remote and inland services, have access to essential volunteer coordination and support services. Sustainable funding will enable these hubs to provide tailored volunteer recruitment and training programs.

Our recommendation 2 is to develop a performance framework for volunteer hub networks—a standardised performance framework, co-designed by government, Volunteering Queensland and VRCs, which should be measurable and have an impact on volunteer initiatives and ensure accountability. Recommendation 3 is to provide gap funding in the meantime for VNQ's operation. While the parliamentary inquiry is underway, VNQ requires urgent gap funding to sustain operations and prevent the loss of vital infrastructure and intellectual property. Without immediate support of essential services, including volunteer training, placement and disaster response coordination, there is risk.

Recommendation 4 is to implement a uniform spontaneous disaster volunteer management system. Recommendation 5 is to prioritise operational funding for all VRCs in Queensland. They play a critical role in connecting individuals with meaningful volunteer opportunities. Recommendation 6 is to support place-based, face-to-face volunteer engagement models. In an increasingly digital world, many individuals, particularly older Australians and those experiencing social isolation, benefit from in-person volunteer engagement opportunities. A well-supported sector is integral to Queensland's social fabric, disaster resilience and community wellbeing.

By implementing these recommendations the government can ensure that volunteer programs remain sustainable and effective and respond to the evolving needs of the community. Immediate investment into volunteer infrastructure will not only strengthen the sector but also yield long-term social and economic benefits for Queensland.

I would like to go back to the motion that our local council put up and remind the committee that the motion did not just happen. VNQ discussed this in person with over 10 mayors in the region before it was even proposed. These mayors were between Townsville, Charters Towers, Hughenden, Richmond, Julia Creek, Cloncurry, Mount Isa, Burdekin, Hinchinbrook and out to Palm Island. We are different from our sisters and brothers in the south-east. We are regional, rural and remote. It is a big footprint that someone needs to support. The resolution voted on by 77 Queensland local governments was to build a strong volunteer network for Queensland. The resolution also highlighted continued support for VRCs. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much for your very comprehensive opening statement. You did very well and touched on a lot of areas that I am sure members would like to question you on. This week we are on the road in parts of Far North Queensland and North Queensland. One of the things I am keen to unpack is where you may have either a competitive advantage in volunteering or a unique roadblock that may not be part of the common statewide thread. You touched several times in your opening statement on the need for place-based solutions to volunteering issues. I am keen to see if you can elaborate on what are really strong positives for you or issues that might be affecting base-level volunteering, whether it is an aging population or lack of available people. What are some of the specific, granular things that are affecting volunteering or are perhaps giving you a competitive advantage over South-East Queensland?

Mrs Ryder: I think our referral service, first and foremost. That is what we used to do and we did it well. We have the advantage because people can call us and we are in the office Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Our competitive edge is that they can walk into the office, sit down in front of the computer and actually talk to our team.

When we took it on the road, we heard that people do not know where to go. They want to volunteer. People absolutely want to volunteer because it makes them feel good and it is a social outing. They do it because they want to do it, but they want to make sure they are matched with something they love to do. After you work your guts out all your life, when you volunteer you want to make sure you do something that you actually want to do.

We talked about the referral service. It used to be every Tuesday night or once a month you would sign up and you would volunteer. We are hearing that people do not want to do that anymore because they are time-poor and it costs money. We are blessed because we have had two people who have driven in for the last however many years for 15 hours a week to just answer the phones and take those referrals. No offence to Brisbane, but it would be different if they were ringing a central office in Brisbane because Carole might know someone or Denise might say, 'I ran into John up the street and they're looking for someone.'

We have a big advantage and we are very blessed because we have a lot of community events in our town and people volunteer when you walk up to them and say, 'What are you doing this weekend?' It is that personal touch. We can put an ad out saying that we want a volunteer secretary but we will not get anyone. You get volunteers because they want to volunteer; they want to be tapped on the arm and they want to be asked.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for the great work that you and all your volunteers do. It is important work holding our communities together through volunteering so I want to acknowledge that. I want to ask about the idea of a centralised volunteer hub for onboarding procedures, like blue cards, workplace health and safety, and basic training. There has been talk of that as we have made our way across the state. We have heard that in regions in particular there needs to be that place-based understanding of what is needed and who might fit where. I am interested in your thoughts on the benefit of some kind of centralised process and how that might be separate from those processes that need to be place-based.

Mrs Ryder: I will use our own experience of literally what happened. There are so many procedures and policies—you have to sign workplace health and safety, sexual discrimination and all of that—so we were struggling ourselves, but we were very lucky that a volunteer turned up from heaven and she ended up pulling from left, right and centre. We are going to share everything we gathered because it is no use reinventing the wheel, but there could be a central location where each hub coordinator could go for one point of truth. We are lucky we now have Volunteering Queensland, which has that resource, but some of their resources do not suit regional and remote areas, especially out west to Mount Isa, Julia Creek and that area. It is a different onboarding; it should be the same paperwork still, but it is a different way to do onboarding.

With that place-based, you still have to sit beside somebody, like we do. People need policies and procedures because the days of litigation are here but we need to make it easier. The last ones we met with just said, 'It's too hard to do all these policies and procedures. There is one platform here; there is ACNC for incorporations. Where do I go?' I am not sure if I answered that question.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Yes, that is great.

Mr BAILLIE: Margie, thank you for all you do and your advocacy for volunteering, as well as the extremely comprehensive written submission of 50-odd pages. I thank you for that and acknowledge that effort. I am at a bit of an advantage versus my fellow committee members here because we catch up quite regularly and talk about volunteers. One thing that has come up quite a bit as the committee has travelled across the state is the concept of regional hubs. I know we have spoken about it briefly a number of times, but could you share with the rest of the committee the concept of the regional hub and how that has worked, as well as your relationship with other regional hubs and the benefits of that?

Mrs Ryder: I will use the recent disaster. We were on the phone, and if they had a hub in Ingham that had the same resources and uniformity, we could have just shared that. Mount Isa is the same thing. I have spoken to the mayor and deputy mayor out there about a regional hub out there. They would probably place it in their council building to have that one location, that one-stop shop. This is all over Queensland. I got reminded this morning that it is not just north-west: it is south-east; it is everywhere in Queensland.

The idea is to have the hubs with one peak body at the top and everyone is uniform and it reports to the top. That is how it should work. Currently, we have four VRCs that are left in Queensland and we have been very blessed because we have big relationships with them. Brad is in Gold Coast and he has bigger money and bigger resources, and I rang him and said, 'Brad, we haven't got this.' It is probably more relatable because I have that personal one-on-one connection. It is the same thing with the last disaster. I was able to call the CEO of Volunteering Queensland and get that standardised uniformity as well. If it is there set in concrete and the government says, 'These are the hubs. You all have to work together and it feeds up the top, otherwise you don't get funding.'

Each hub would have its own KPIs and same evidence-based data. We use Cairns. Maria and the team did some reports yesterday for me to find out about the 15 per cent decline that is about to happen in the next 12 months. We shared that same data and that is what Jane, our CEO of the peak body, said: 'Let's use the same data.' I have only been involved for 10 years, but that is the first time we have used a uniform database and thank God we did. When the government asks for a report, we are all working off the same hymn sheet.

There is a big advantage to have volunteer hubs that meet and swap stories. We talked yesterday with the Sunshine Coast because they have the same population. They can be our buddy; you need a buddy system because we are not always there. I am not always there so Maria needs a buddy when you are having those challenges: 'What are you doing there?'

Mr DAMETTO: Margie, thank you for coming today and giving us your overview on how things are working when it comes to volunteering in North Queensland and regional Queensland. The member for Townsville asked a similar question to the one I wanted to ask so I am going to go to something a bit off the page around blue cards. We have had a number of people lobby our office with regard to the blue card system and how it is quite restrictive when trying to get into work, but in your case it is in terms of volunteering. The blue card system was brought in as a no-card no-start around rural fire volunteers. They have been quite vocal around that and trying to keep people involved in the organisation. Are there any other organisations where you think the blue cards have restricted the ability to attract volunteers?

Mrs Ryder: It is not only attracting. We went to Palm Island to do some volunteer work and they definitely saw it as a challenge. The main thing is the time entering it: Where do I go? What platform do we use and how do you onboard when you volunteer? It is another task for the volunteers to do. I know within our own organisation it is just keeping ahead of it.

Ms Taifalos: I think it is an issue over most of the organisations that we see. If the volunteers do not have the knowledge to attack the system themselves, they just give up on it. That is what we have seen. We have had so many calls from people saying, 'It's just too hard with blue cards, yellow cards—all of that.' With a lot of these organisations that we work with it is a requirement—and it should be—but it is just so hard for volunteers. If they do not have the knowledge, the time or the money to do it, they are not going to do it.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Margie, thank you for your very comprehensive submission. You were speaking about disaster management and the shortcomings you were seeing in your organisation dealing with other organisations, so to speak. I was in the SES for many years. What do you feel should be done to better streamline and create more effective responses during disasters?

Mrs Ryder: I have spent two years writing this paper. We have worked with SES, DRA and local council and what we are saying is that there should be one platform that people know and trust. Again, no disrespect to Brisbane and the mud army, but people know VNQ. Everyone wants to volunteer after a disaster so they log on. What we are proposing—but we said we should not invent it because it should be uniform—is that after they register you still connect with those volunteers. You have to talk to them, train them, value them.

I will use the ones I know, in terms of Bluewater, Alice River and Rollingstone. After people registered, the message was, 'Thanks for registering for the disaster, but do you want to help this weekend?' They built those relationships so that after a natural disaster came those three just stood up straightaway. They hardly even needed the help of council because they were continually talking to their volunteers. They were communicating, having barbecues and building relationships. I know our member here was involved in those three organisations at the time.

We had big discussions with SES. We should just be the one platform, which Maria helped us put together, and we should own it—not the state, not Brisbane. Again, we have come to that agreement because we are the ones on the ground who should continue to talk to those volunteers. You cannot just volunteer and suddenly become an SES worker. We are talking about building that in July, August and September and they might get trained in that time, but if you do not continue to invite them to barbecues and community events they are not going to turn up and suddenly be an SES worker or a DRA.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time in assisting the committee with its inquiry today and for the work you undertake on behalf of the people of North Queensland.

HARRIS, Mr Shane, Volunteer Experience Manager, UnitingCare Queensland

ACTING CHAIR: Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement before we ask questions?

Mr Harris: Good morning and thank you for this opportunity. I would like to highlight UnitingCare Queensland's success in growing and sustaining volunteer engagement during a season where we have seen a decline in volunteer engagement across the state and the nation. I would also like to propose to you a scalable model that is worth further attention in considering how to strengthen volunteering in Queensland communities.

I am the Volunteer Experience Manager at UnitingCare Queensland. UnitingCare covers a number of brands that you may be more familiar with—Lifeline Queensland; four private hospitals in the south-east corner of Queensland, including St Andrew's War Memorial Hospital, Buderim Hospital, St Stephen's and the Wesley; and BlueCare, both in the community services that we provide and in our residential aged-care facilities. We provide these services throughout Queensland—from the southern Gold Coast right through to the Torres Strait Islands and out to Mount Isa—in all of those local communities. With over 16,000 staff and 9,000 volunteers, we know what it is to engage with a workforce to provide these services within Queensland to meet the needs.

If I could highlight this fact: when I say 9,000 volunteers, just over half of those volunteers are event-based volunteers. This will be important to remember as I move on to some of my other points, because those volunteers volunteer once or twice throughout the year. Just under half of those volunteers, though, are regular volunteers contributing on a regular basis throughout the year. Collectively, those 9,000 volunteers in the last financial year gave 1.2 million hours of time—not just time but also their skills and probably most importantly their passion to serve our local communities and the people we serve within UnitingCare.

While Queensland rates have dropped in volunteering engagement and are still recovering, ours have been increasing throughout that time and continue to do so—both in number and in quality of the experience, I believe. The drivers behind that success are a number of factors. Firstly, there is a deliberate investment into resourcing volunteer management. As a volunteer experience manager, I lead a team of six full-time staff, based in Brisbane and remotely from Townsville, who then support up to 300 leaders of volunteers within our local communities. While that strategic investment into resourcing volunteer engagement has provided dividends for us in volunteer growth and volunteer experience, it also presents some unique challenges for us because we are not present locally on the ground within those communities. Our scale is helpful but also challenging nonetheless.

Making volunteer opportunities known and available has been one of the biggest drivers of the success. We have realised that, in the State of Volunteering reports, one of the biggest untapped groups of volunteers are people who said, 'I didn't know how to' or 'I didn't know where to.' We believe that you simply get more of what you ask for. We have taken that to heart and simply flooded the market with volunteering opportunities, letting people know how they can get involved.

We also have a consistent focus on improving the volunteer experience, which is not just for volunteers; it is also for the leaders of volunteers, who are engaging and working and coordinating with those volunteers, to make their lives easier as well as the volunteers' lives easier. If you only increase the numbers, you only get more of the same problems that exist. If we improve the volunteer experience then attraction and recruitment simply follow as a by-product of that. I believe that is what we have seen with our success.

A barrier to the volunteering that I would like to raise with you, and then propose a scalable model to perhaps address this or look into addressing this, is that there is a significant challenge in the duplication of the administration work that is involved in the expressions of interest, applications and background checks—and rightfully so—to make sure that we safeguard the people we serve. That duplication of process is not an ideal experience for the volunteer, who will say, 'I have just done this for such-and-such an organisation so why do I need to do it again? I just want to volunteer.' It is also a challenge for organisations, no matter how they are structured or how large or small they are, to resource the administration behind those processes in the application, the background checking and the onboarding.

While I do not subscribe to the catchcry that volunteering is dying, I do acknowledge that volunteering is changing. The engagement and the way volunteers want to engage with us is certainly changing. Generation Z is probably the most active in looking to be engaged, but they do not want to engage in the way that we have traditionally engaged. If anything, I would say that the lifelong volunteer is becoming a rare breed. Rather, volunteers are looking to engage in short-term projects;

a little bit here, a little bit there; where I am passionate; as I am moved and as I am not; once or twice a year perhaps. The removal of that duplication of administration frees people up to volunteer in many organisations, meeting the many needs within our communities. For the organisations, it reduces the burden of being able to engage those volunteers who may come only for a week or a couple of months or just once or twice a year without that administrative burden of onboarding.

I am strongly advocating to the committee to have a review into the possible streamlining of processes in this space. I want to recommend having a look at the weVolunteer platform, which is funded by the Victorian government. It is a centralised hub where volunteers can apply and their digital information is shared, with the relevant consents and that sort of thing, with other organisations, removing the need to reapply with an organisation.

I would like to recommend exploring the options to integrate with third-party software solutions and volunteer management systems. As an example—and I am not paid to speak on behalf of Rosterfy by any means—I did hear from Rosterfy that they are able to engage and integrate with background checks in other countries to completely automate that process and remove the administrative burden for everybody's benefit—the volunteers and the organisations.

The last recommendation I would like to make is a scalable model that I believe has the potential to strengthen our Queensland communities. I would like to call out the Aged Care Volunteer Visitors Scheme. The aged-care visitors scheme involves getting volunteers to visit older people who are in need of friendship and companionship. It is funded by the Australian government or given to local organisations through funding rounds. Those local organisations then attract, recruit, check, onboard and train those volunteers, who are then able to be engaged in any aged-care facility with the one application check and onboarding process. For us as an organisation that has residential aged-care services and community services throughout Queensland, there is an extraordinary benefit for us to reduce the administrative burden of vetting, training and approving volunteers who come and operate in our facilities. I believe there is a great advantage for the volunteer who would like to have more variety to meet needs in more than one organisation and as they desire. I believe that it is possible that a similar model could be adapted and even scaled to work across other volunteer sectors and, dare I say, not just volunteer sectors but across whole local communities so that we can all engage with the volunteers who are readily available but do not know how to get started or for whom it is all just too hard.

I close by saying that UnitingCare, with a Queensland-wide presence, would be happy to work with local governments on any trial programs or reviews in setting up such a program within our Queensland communities. Thank you, Chair.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much, Shane. We really appreciate your comprehensive submission, which probably answered a lot of questions but I am sure the committee still has some.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Shane, you spoke about the increased resourcing for volunteer management. Is that paid resourcing? Is it a paid role?

Mr Harris: Within our people and culture team, we have what is described as a HR team that is dedicated to volunteer engagement. We call it the volunteer experience. We support the leaders of volunteers and the volunteers through all HR type matters. In 2020, my role was added as an additional resource to that team to specifically focus on volunteer recruitment.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: You talked about improving the volunteer experience. How have you done that?

Mr Harris: It is twofold. Firstly, we have focused on supporting our leaders of volunteers to make sure there is a streamlined effort for them to request and then also improve their ability to onboard the volunteers. That involves making that process very clear and easy to access because for many of them this is not their area of speciality. It also involves providing tools that we have just built within our own ecosystem through Microsoft to automate some of those processes, sending e-mails and connecting them to relevant application portals to start the process. For the volunteer, we really focused on making sure we communicate that volunteering is not us getting stuff done; it is about providing an opportunity for them to meet their goals, whatever they might be.

Mr BAILLIE: Shane, you mentioned that generation Z require a different level of engagement or a different style of engagement. Could you expand on some of the strategies that you employ that you have found successful?

Mr Harris: We have found engagement of the younger generation particularly easy within our event-based volunteering opportunities. For us, the most significant is the Lifeline Bookfest that is held in South-East Queensland twice a year. We see a number of gen Z volunteers involved in that space. It is our mission, I guess, to try to encourage them to get involved in Lifeline retail as a next step. It involves a higher commitment but we are working in that space to engage them in that next step. We are looking at it as a farming kind of a process as opposed to a, 'Here, can you do this?' Rather than just getting everybody locked in, we look at how we can grow our volunteers into a space where they might engage with the book fest once a year for a few years and then get involved in retail, go off to have a family and maybe come back, hopefully, in their later years because they think, 'I really resonated with the work that I was doing then and I want to get back to that.' It is a long-term gain.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you, Shane, for coming along and giving your views on volunteering in your organisation. We have heard loud and clear that volunteers want ease of volunteering, they want to come and go, and they want less administrative burden when it comes to volunteering. I have an understanding of that space. Can you tell us what makes your volunteers tick? What makes your volunteers show up? Is it the moral obligation or is it something that makes them feel good? I want to get an understanding of your volunteers.

Mr Harris: That is a really great question. We do ask our volunteers at the application process, as an optional question, 'What is motivating you to volunteer?' What really surprises me—and it shouldn't but it does—is that, regardless of people's motivations, the primary motivation is to give back to community. That is at the crux of it all, at the end of the day. Then I look at the secondary motivations, which are usually tailing behind that but are still prominent. Whether it is to meet mutual obligations to Services Australia or to gain experience in the workplace, it is as though those are the secondary motivations; they are not the primary motivations. Yes, they might be fuelled to action, which is how I interpret it. They might be fuelled to action because of those secondary motivations, but the primary motivation is to give back to our community.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Shane, you had a very successful book fair in Brisbane which I attended. The member for Townsville asked about how you engage gen Z. What type of methodology does your organisation use to make the initial contact with young people and how do you get them interested in volunteering? You said that there is an issue with long-term volunteering and that getting people to commit to that is very difficult. How do you get young people interested in taking the first step? What is your secret?

Mr Harris: I come back to the book fest. Honestly, we do not have a secret. We are doing it as tough as anybody else and we are just trying different things. What we do see is that the book fest event is an easy win. It is easy to get somebody to sign up for two shifts at that book fest. The event itself has its own atmosphere. Many events carry their own atmosphere. It is very exciting.

Mr BOOTHMAN: At the fair, do you advertise that people can sign up if they want to volunteer?

Mr Harris: We will go to our pool of people who are interested and build that pool through our social media. We will refer to our marketing team to go to socials and then paid advertising in socials to attract those leads and hook them into a book fest event. The conversion from there is connecting. We are preparing to pilot a program called 'bring a friend' where we can get those volunteers to come over more easily as a friend referral. Rather than signing up to the full application process, they can give volunteering a try by coming along with their friend for a couple of hours. That is a pilot that we are preparing to try this year.

Mr BOOTHMAN: On the pilot to get a friend involved, could you send us some information about how you are doing that? The idea of this inquiry is to share information and find out what is successful and what is not. If we find some things that are successful then we can share them with other organisations. We would greatly appreciate that.

Mr Harris: I would be more than happy to share how we go with that.

ACTING CHAIR: Early in your opening statement you referenced volunteers supporting events. I am somebody who gets very granular with the questions. In your last few minutes in front of us here this morning, could you talk about the events, whether it is volunteering on a fundraiser for a charity, a school fete or that type of thing, versus people who offer support in the health space or during a disaster or emergency response? Is there a noticeable trend in undertaking one form of volunteering over the other? Is there a willingness to be involved in one over the other? Are there particular hurdles in one of those forms of volunteering versus the other? Is there a noticeable difference in any way? That is a very long question and I appreciate that you may need more time

than you have this morning. This inquiry sometimes gets focused on either disaster or emergency response type volunteering, but there is a whole other side to volunteering, such as fundraising for community events, which is critical. Are there differences with what you see, especially with a North Queensland lens on that?

Mr Harris: I do not think I can point out any trends that I am observing in that space. An observation from our data is that the volunteering that is easiest for people is what fits them for the season of life they are in. I think that season has to be interpreted more broadly than just an age demographic, although I think that is a big part of it. As we go through our age brackets, there are seasons of life that naturally occur. It is possible that people at different ages will have different reasons for volunteering. Getting back into the workforce might be as relevant to a person in their early or late 30s, after having children, as it is to an 18-year-old. We definitely see that the younger age groups are more oriented to event-based volunteering and absolutely for people aged 50 years and older it is more our regular, ongoing volunteering opportunities. That is clearly there. I think it is more than just age. I think it is more about the season of life that a person is in and what is relevant to them in that season.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much for taking the time to appear this morning. Thank you to your organisation and your volunteers for the critical role that they play. You took a question on notice regarding the program. If possible, could you provide a response by Monday, 28 July?

Mr Harris: Absolutely. Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee.

BIRCH, Mr Anthony, Head of Operations, Disaster Relief Australia

ACTING CHAIR: Good morning.

Mr Birch: Good morning, Chair and committee. Thank you very much for welcoming me this morning. My name is Anthony Birch. I am the national head of operations for Disaster Relief Australia. Disaster Relief Australia is a veteran-led not-for-profit that unites the skills and experience of veterans and other volunteers to help communities prepare for and recover from disasters. We offer volunteers a unique capability to participate in disaster preparedness and recovery efforts with a similar purpose, mission and structure as joint taskforce operations. With high-risk weather events and disasters on the rise, DRA's services have been called upon more frequently, particularly over the past two years. The benefits of our services have also been broadly recognised as an efficient and cost-effective alternative to the Australian Defence Force.

Care of the Albanese government and the National Emergency Management Agency, in 2023 we received a significant grant to build our infrastructure capabilities and volunteer base under the Volunteer Uplift Program. To support this program DRA initiated a project to understand the experiences and barriers of both current and prospective volunteers to build a pathway for growth. Through our research we identified a range of challenges and opportunities across the entire volunteering life cycle. They included a lack of organisational brand awareness yet a high propensity to participate, limited understanding of the different types of volunteering opportunities, the need for a more tailored and proactive communications and engagement program, and a desire for flexibility in volunteering options given personal and work commitments.

Proactively addressing these has seen us defy the industry trend and achieve 89 per cent growth in volunteers within the past 18 months, now growing to 6,100 volunteers since January 2024. Fifty-five per cent of these volunteers are now aged between 18 and 49 and represent the highest growing segments in DRA. Almost a quarter—24 per cent—of all volunteers are based in Queensland and have made up 20 per cent of the deployed volunteers within the past year. While more flexible deploying options are now offered, the majority of these volunteers still deploy for eight days at a time and take either annual leave or leave without pay or are retired.

As we come to the end of our largest operation to date with the flood recovery in New South Wales, we have deployed almost 700 volunteers over the last eight weeks, with up to 100 volunteers on the ground during each wave. This is quadruple the traditional weekly volume of volunteers that we have deployed and 50 per cent of those volunteers have been first-time deployed, and a significant proportion of those are younger aged segments. It also takes the total number of volunteers deployed since Tropical Cyclone Alfred in March to over 1,000, which is well beyond the annual expectations of our end-state capabilities under the Volunteer Uplift Program, which was designed to deploy 600 per annum. Our current plans see us exceed 7,500 volunteers before June 2026.

In terms of benefits to the volunteers, Disaster Relief Australia provides an avenue to serve others and maintain a sense of wellbeing and purpose, which is especially the case for veterans, who regain a sense of belonging through continued service, repurposing their skills, reintegration into civilian life and the social benefits of working alongside like-minded Australians with similar values. This is also validated through our two-year wellbeing study, which was launched in February 2024, with the report finding DRA's volunteering model supports wellbeing, promotes and improves positive mental health and reduces the risk of illness and self-harm, particularly for veterans. Apart from offering a range of diverse volunteering roles and opportunities, our volunteers can develop skills through access to free general and specialist training courses including first aid, chainsaw operations, rural fencing and drone imagery and analysis. With 10 disaster relief and recovery teams across the country based in each state and territory, volunteers are also engaged in local and regional projects, community preparedness activities and training events throughout the year.

In terms of benefits to local communities, DRA provides practical, hands-on support through its team of volunteers who come ready to roll up their sleeves and help where it is needed. Many have skills ranging from medical and combat experience to flying drones, which can all be applied in disaster recovery. These motivations, skills and experiences allow DRA to provide rapid, efficient and effective recovery response to those affected by disaster while fostering a sense of community spirit. In the aftermath of disaster we assist people on some of the worst days of their life by providing essential clean-up and support to help pick up the pieces. Because our skilled volunteers freely give their time, the investment in the community is amplified by at least 150 per cent, including the priceless gift of hope in helping rebuild lives. Through our preparedness capability we also work with communities to identify risks, develop disaster management strategies and build their capability to face future challenges. For every \$1 invested in preparedness, the Insurance Council of Australia recognises an estimated \$9.60 return.

In terms of benefits to Queensland, DRA has the means to deploy volunteers to communities in need at the request of local or state government agencies, integrating with local government disaster recovery centres. We also have arrangements and relationships with other non-government aid organisations and the ability to operate independently or as part of an integrated taskforce which can include the Red Cross, Rotary and Lions clubs or other volunteer organisations. We continue to develop as an increasingly critical resource for the Australian government to further support states and territories and, in turn, Australian communities during the relief and recovery periods following disasters. DRA has proven itself as a proactive, efficient and cost-effective alternative to the Australian Defence Force in the delivery of disaster recovery services and is increasingly being called upon in this space.

We offer various volunteering opportunities across local and national operations to support a range of interests, needs and abilities and we have 26 different volunteering roles, including on the ground with our strike teams, along with back-of-house roles including logistics, safety, training, wellbeing, mobilisation and field content. We are working to enhance veteran training and employment pathways including a peer support network and greater engagement with First Nations veterans. This includes development of the disaster focused First Nations collaborative network. Chair and committee, that concludes my presentation. Thank you for your time this morning.

ACTING CHAIR: I am keen to ask you a question about leave. It is a question I asked the mayor of Cooktown on Monday. You raise leave as integral to your volunteers. I guess it is true of all volunteering—unless you are retired—that leave is required. Are you aware of any examples of really proactive leave arrangements that either local or state government agencies or departments, as well as the private sector, undertake to incentivise volunteering, and/or any issues that arise that make it an impediment for your volunteers to undertake that activity through leave either with or without pay? Many people in remote and regional Queensland work for a government agency. Especially in really remote areas the local government is the key employer. Are you aware of anything that is a shining light or a roadblock around leave?

Mr Birch: Absolutely. Those in the federal Public Service, for example, can take I believe it is up to two weeks of paid volunteering leave. I am not entirely sure what the Queensland government rules are. We have a problem, for example, with the Australian Federal Police. We are not a recognised volunteering organisation with them so our volunteers who are federal coppers cannot come and volunteer for us as paid leave. We have fantastic relationships with some of our corporate sponsors. The National Australia Bank, for example, will provide up to two weeks leave for their employees to come and volunteer for us annually. It is really horses for courses.

ACTING CHAIR: That is a special category of leave over and above their annual leave entitlement?

Mr Birch: Correct, yes.

ACTING CHAIR: That is the exact answer I was looking for. Thank you.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I note in your submission that your volunteers are not covered by insurance. I know that insurance is a significant issue for most volunteer organisations. Can you describe how insurance costs impact your organisation and what is the situation in terms of volunteers being covered?

Mr Birch: I might have to revisit that submission because our volunteers are most definitely covered by insurance. We have a national insurance policy which covers all of them during our field operations.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: In terms of the funding for that insurance, that comes from federal government funding?

Mr Birch: Correct, yes.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you for appearing today. We appreciate it. I would like to ask for a couple of clarifications and then I have a question. Would one have to be a veteran to volunteer with DRA?

Mr Birch: No, absolutely not. In terms of numbers, veterans, veterans' family and former first responders—about 60 per cent of our volunteers fall into one of those categories. The other 40 per cent are normal civilians who join us from any walk of life.

Mr BAILLIE: You said it was 89 per cent growth over the last 16 months?

Mr Birch: Eighteen months, correct.

Mr BAILLIE: And 58 per cent of your volunteers are between 18 and 49?

Mr Birch: That was 55 per cent and that was of the recent deployments, correct.

Mr BAILLIE: With the growth, did you do something different?

Mr Birch: Yes. We received a significant grant which meant we could be much more deliberate with our marketing campaign. We have also been able to grow our capabilities. Our training that we can offer for our volunteers is now a nationally recognised program. Our volunteers who join us get nationally recognised skills, which is obviously really important and allows them to potentially upskill for employment if that is what they are after.

Mr BAILLIE: Getting a bit more specific, with those efforts to engage volunteers under 49 years of age in particular, what did you find most successful as far as strategies and marketing?

Mr Birch: Being really active on social media. We use volunteer experiences. We gather the experiences that they have during our operations, then we use those experiences as videos and testimonials. That seemed to engage really well with that younger cohort. That is probably one of the key ones. Also it is about providing a range of opportunities. Not everybody wants to swing off the end of a chainsaw. People are happy to contribute as part of a public affairs team or being on the phones and ringing people and making sure the help they have asked for is what they need—that type of thing.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you for coming along today and presenting to the committee. My question is a bit more localised, namely, the 2025 February floods in the Hinchinbrook electorate. What was DRA's involvement in the clean-up and response there? There is no criticism at all. I did not see too many of your shirts up there.

Mr Birch: We did not have a role.

Mr DAMETTO: I am trying to get a better understanding. Do you integrate with, say, the SES or with local government? How does that work?

Mr Birch: The way we work is through an at-cost model. We said to the local government agencies, through the local disaster management network, 'We are prepared to come and assist, this will be the cost and you can either bring us in or not.' In this case they elected not to. We do not deploy at the same time as the SES. They obviously deploy during the response phase and we are normally there for the longer term, for the recovery for the community. That is where we come in. In this case, obviously, the community was pretty resilient because they did not request that ongoing recovery.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you very much for that, Andrew. I wanted to get a better understanding of how your organisation plugs in.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I want to thank your organisation. I have worked with you guys many times down on the Gold Coast. People such as Greeny do an absolutely massive job down there. They are certainly welcomed for all of their efforts. You spoke about all of the different community groups such as the Lions, Rotary and, obviously, the rural fire brigade. In my region, quite a few individuals are part of the rural fire brigade and also volunteer in your organisation. They have a dual skill set. You spoke about the different organisations and potentially getting volunteers from those organisations as well as teaming up with them. You have had a big increase in numbers whilst working with all of the other organisations. For example, we see you as pretty much the most professional organisation because you have the skill sets. How do you keep your members engaged so that they do not move to other organisations? How do you keep them inside your organisation?

Mr Birch: That is a fantastic question. The key reason is that we are really veteran focused. A lot of the veterans who join us come to us with those leadership and communication skills and all of the skills that allow them to potentially lead some of the other groups. If we get 20 Lions members come along to help, we can pair them with smaller groups of our volunteers—maybe two of ours to 10 of theirs. That provides a real force multiplier in terms of delivery effect. We use the leadership skills.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You have a lot of natural leaders in your organisation.

Mr Birch: Absolutely, and we use those natural leadership skills that have come from serving the country, whether it is in the Army, Navy or Air Force or in the police or the fire brigade. They have been trained in leadership, communication and those skills. That allows us to pair with other volunteer groups. It is a real force multiplier. It is something that we are really proud of.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: You mentioned that some communities do not take up the offer of DRA assistance. Would that be because they are resilient or is it that they cannot afford it? What would your cost be?

Mr Birch: It could be either. Normally, we are funded under the disaster funding relief arrangements so the federal government will provide the state with funding through the QRA. The QRA will then fund local governments. It is up to the local governments as to what they choose to spend their money on. If we use Tropical Cyclone Alfred as an example, each of the LGAs in South-East Queensland were given \$1 million under disaster relief and recovery arrangements. We were \$50,000 a week for 25 volunteers.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: That is quite a significant cost when you are looking at how that \$1 million might need to be spent on infrastructure recovery et cetera.

Mr Birch: Potentially, but if you compare it to corporate rates where you might pay \$2,000 a day for a consultant, we are \$2,000 a week. Just to provide some clarity, those costs are around travel. We are a national organisation so we need to travel to get there. It is equipment maintenance. It is feeding and accommodating. It is at cost. We do not make any profit. We are not for profit. That is how the model works.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you, Andrew, for your time today. We really appreciate it and the work of DRA in this space.

LUKE, Miss Julie, Media Officer and Volunteer, Sailability Townsville Inc.

ACTING CHAIR: Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement before we commence with questions?

Miss Luke: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Julie Luke. I am a volunteer and the media officer for Sailability Townsville. Ours is a non-profit, entirely volunteer-run organisation providing accessibility and sailing experiences for people with disabilities. Sailability's mission is simple but powerful: freedom on the water regardless of ability. Each week we welcome participants of all ages and backgrounds, including LGBTQIA+ individuals, to come aboard and sail, many for the first time in their lives. We serve and have volunteers living with physical, intellectual, sensory and psychosocial disabilities and create a safe, inclusive space where ability is not a barrier to participation. It is easy to underestimate the courage it takes to try something new when your world is shaped by barriers—physical, social and emotional—yet time and time again we witness that courage firsthand with both our participants and our volunteers.

As a regional branch of a national and international network, our team in Townsville is small—very small in comparison to everyone else here—but deeply committed. We rely on a core group of volunteers, skippers, deck crew, pontoon support, admin and media to make every sailing day possible. Every hour given is unpaid, but the rewards are deeply human. What we have seen through Sailability is that volunteering does not just change the lives of those we serve; it transforms the volunteers themselves. To grow and meet the rising community demand we need more volunteers, and the barriers to attracting, retaining and supporting them are significant, especially in regional Queensland. Today, I speak on behalf of Sailability, a voice for our disabled, navigating this shifting landscape.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: It is a fantastic organisation. Thank you for being here today. I am keen to understand some of the financial costs that your organisation has. What would be the biggest financial costs and how do you fund it?

Miss Luke: I am not 100 per cent certain of the right terminology. We have a lot of stuff but we need more cash. We have a fleet of yachts, we have a service boat and we have a shed, but we need more cash to pay for, say, fuel for the service boat, rent for the boatshed and things that crop up like new life jackets and little incidentals. We have things but we need more cash. How do we obtain that? If we are not successful in grant applications, it would be fundraising. The fundraising that we have done thus far has been through raffles with the Cowboys Leagues Club. We had a community raffle where different organisations and businesses in the community gave us some things. We did a raffle at Cotters Market. That has been it thus far.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: With all of the equipment, your insurance costs must be fairly significant.

Miss Luke: Yes. You were talking before about volunteers insurance as well. All of those things add up. I do not think we operate profitably in any way. I guess that is when the bigger umbrella of Sailability Queensland would step in and help us in some way.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you for joining us today, Julie. It is great to catch up again. I have been at one of your events. There was a great community feel. In addition to people trying sailing for the first time, there were people who had lost physical ability but were quite experienced at sailing. You could see the joy on their faces as they directed their 'helper' on how to sail the boat correctly. It was something to see. At the end of your opening statement you mentioned some of the barriers that volunteers face. Some of Sailability's clients would probably classify as vulnerable people. Can you expand on some of the barriers that your volunteers face and how you try to get around those?

Miss Luke: In the lead-up to coming here to see you guys, I spoke to several of the volunteers and several of our participants about that exact question. A lot of the barriers are around fear. To volunteer, to cross that bridge and to make that decision when you have been looked at not so well in society and approach an organisation, whether it is ours or anyone else's, involves a lot of fear. To cross that bridge is really difficult. I think the main barrier is that fear factor. Then there are the physical barriers, if you have physical limitations. I rang Kylie's office and said, 'Will I be standing?' because if I am standing then I will fall off my perch. I need to be sitting. There is the mental barrier if you have been disabled for a very long time or if you have neurological issues or if you have had a stroke or you have dementia—any of those things. There is always that question: 'How will I be perceived?' Everyone wants to volunteer and everyone wants to feel like a part of something. When you have an organisation, you might think, 'There are other disabled people there so maybe it will be okay.' You step very lightly and try to test the waters.

Mr BAILLIE: You mentioned fear. Are you talking about the clients or the volunteers who are assisting?

Miss Luke: Both. All of the above. For me, I am a participant. When I first went, my daughter told me not to go sailing again because another hit to my head would be it, but it is there and it is for people with disabilities so surely I could go and have a look. There have been volunteers who have come and been so overwhelmed that they have self-combusted and cried because it is scary, but then they come back the next week, even earlier, and are there from the crack of dawn until the end. It takes time to feel, 'It's okay. I'm safe,' and to give that comfort to everyone who does come. It does not matter if you are disabled or not: if you are a volunteer it is about being in a safe place and it is okay. You are allowed to be you, whatever that means. I think that is important.

Mr BAILLIE: Just to clarify, the barriers you mentioned are more personal barriers rather than barriers to do with an onboarding process or something like that?

Miss Luke: No, there are those barriers as well. I was speaking to someone this morning at breakfast about the whole blue card thing. She wanted to volunteer at tuckshop and there is the blue card. This is before Sailability. It was a whole process. The person in charge of the tuckshop knew what the whole process was, but for her and what was in her life at that time—her husband was having issues with dementia and a stroke—that then became a barrier, as in the steps that are involved, and it seemed insurmountable. I guess for anyone who does not have these issues it might not seem like a big thing, but when you are living with disabilities, no matter what, or you are caring for someone with a disability then those little things that might not seem like a lot actually are.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you for coming and giving us an insight into what Sailability does. I imagine that it could be a little easier for your organisation to get volunteers as you are out on the water, which is a beautiful thing. I am a boatie myself and I did concur with what you said earlier about the cost of fuel. I feel like a volunteer sometimes and no-one gives me fuel money most of the time. I want to ask about your referrals. How are people getting in contact with your organisation? Is it through NDIS providers? Are they people who have done the experience before or worked with the organisation? Where are your referrals coming from?

Miss Luke: I came on board as a participant but then I went to an AGM. I am pretty good with social media—even though I am not a young'un, I like that kind of thing—so I decided to put my hand up for that. It has developed quite nicely through social media—getting that engagement with people, making them excited about coming to visit us and getting comments like, 'I want to be a part of that. I want to be there. How do I get into that? How can I join in? What can I do?' That has created a buzz; it has created that want. People see that weekly and almost daily—whether it be a story, a reel or a post. It is keeping your finger on the pulse of what is going on and what is trending. It is making them feel, 'These people really do care.' It is being part of the community at large: 'You're following me. I'm following you. What are you up to?' I know what you are doing every day. It is knowing what everyone is doing and what is happening in everyone's life.

Mr DAMETTO: So social media is a huge tool.

Miss Luke: Absolutely. Like I said, we are minuscule in comparison to the thousands I hear from those here today. We have 10 volunteers but we are growing. Everyone who has come to us and onto the dock is through Facebook and Instagram. That is how it has been and it is cool; it is great.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you.

Mr BOOTHMAN: How do you keep your volunteers engaged? How do you keep them wanting to come back and volunteer? What processes do you put in place? Retention is obviously the key to everything.

Miss Luke: We only have a small group. There are only a certain number of us who can go on the service boat, there are only a certain number who can skipper and there is only one of us who does the social media. I guess it is keeping that core group so you develop that community feeling and that personal feeling. If anyone comes in new, it is definitely, 'Come into the group.' There is none of that cliquishness; it is embracing them and making them a part of it. This week we are doing disco dinghies with disco themed sailing, so I say, 'I'm giving you the task of moves, so when I'm coming around with the camera, can you make some moves?' and someone is asked to bring their speaker. It is keeping people involved and keeping them a part of something because everyone wants to feel a part of something. If someone is taking that step to be a part of something, they want to remain a part of something and feel that connection.

Mr BOOTHMAN: It increases their mental wellbeing.

Miss Luke: It really does because it does not just help our participants; it helps us as well, as volunteers. When you are living with a disability, you can close yourself off quite well. Having that community then makes things a bit safer and you feel like you are a part of something.

ACTING CHAIR: There being no further questions, thank you for your time here this morning and for the valuable work you do in our community with your volunteers.

Miss Luke: Thanks for having me.

WING, Ms Colleen, LearnIT Program Coordinator, Queensland Youth Services

ACTING CHAIR: Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement before we proceed with questions?

Ms Wing: Thank you for having us. Our team leader, Murray Holm, was going to attend today but asked me at the last minute to attend, so if I fumble I apologise. I am from Queensland Youth Services, which is a not-for-profit organisation that delivers a suite of government funded programs that support vulnerable and at-risk youth in Townsville. Some of those services are: homelessness support, the Young Parents Program, Reconnect, Skilling Queenslanders for Work and the LearnIT program, which I am the coordinator for. Each initiative is funded through distinct government streams, enabling tailored responses to a diverse community need.

I will talk a bit about the LearnIT program. The LearnIT program is a learner driver mentor program which is funded by Transport and Main Roads. The LearnIT program empowers young people to gain their P licence through volunteer drivers. The LearnIT program currently has 68 registered volunteers, with 20 active volunteers weekly who supply around 7,000 hours of volunteer time to the program. Volunteers play a vital role in lesson delivery, mentoring and program engagement, directly contributing to the program's success and outcomes. They are the heart of the program. We have three paid staff in the program. Without the volunteers, we are not on the road. It is the volunteers who do the real work.

Despite strong engagement, volunteer availability remains a key challenge. When volunteers are absent, our ability to meet our key criteria and indicators is compromised. As the other speakers have stated, volunteer numbers are declining. To address this, we actively pursue strategies to overcome this. Some of those are: improving volunteer retention and scheduling; having flexible scheduling, shift options and digital rostering systems; and regular communication. We talk to every one of our volunteers on a daily basis. Some of them do not want to come in and talk to us—they just want to quickly jump in a car and go away and come back and email feedback—but we make sure we engage with them either through email or face-to-face.

In terms of training and development, we have: micro training; certificates; skill recognition and incentives; milestone awards; appreciation events; and small perks. Small perks do not come often because we do not have funding for it, so essentially they get a smile and a thank you every day.

To build and reserve a pool of trained volunteers, we have recruitment campaigns. We are always out in the field. We go to drag meets. We go to all council events. We go to racetrack meets because they are drivers and they like to get in a car and do the driving. Anywhere there is a community event where there will be a crowd of people, we are there. We have: cross-training; multiple training and onboarding guides; on-call and scheduling systems; enhanced reporting mechanisms; real-time tracking of what our volunteers are doing; data dashboards; weekly service trends and fluctuation analysis; and reporting of case studies, testimonials and barriers to documentation.

To sustain our volunteer-driven model, a lot is needed. Like the other participants have mentioned, a one-stop shop would be fabulous—to have our volunteers go into Volunteering NQ, complete all of their paperwork and do the blue card and police checks—so that when they come to us they are already set up. In that way, they know what they want to do, they come in and we have an onboarding as we normally do, an induction and our training. We find that when the volunteers come to us and we give them all our paperwork to fill out, they say, 'I've already done that. I've just done that at Volunteering NQ,' and they do not want to do it again. That is a massive barrier.

You mentioned the blue cards before. That is also a massive barrier, particularly in our First Nations people. We find that we are not getting a lot of people who can volunteer because of the blue card system, so that is a real drawback. As I said, if we had the one-stop shop for Volunteering NQ to be working five days a week and having a shopfront that is accessible to people to be able to go into—they manage the pool of volunteers, they send out the referrals. It works well now but it is not enough.

In terms of economic return, if we had paid our volunteers over the past year for their volunteer hours it would be \$310,000. It is a massive return. It is small because we are a very small not-for-profit, but that is the return. Despite our commitment and our demonstrated impact, we do not have the available funds to support volunteers. Our funding basically provides cars, training for the office staff, the infrastructure of that and our databases. We do not have enough funding to support the volunteers in getting them more training and incentives. If we could incentivise businesses to support

volunteering within the community, that would be a great option as well. Maybe there could be a payroll tax reduction if staff were able to go and volunteer in the community; that could be one of the incentives.

In terms of promoting corporate and social responsibility through recognised partnerships with not-for-profits, a lot already have those sorts of things set up—like the council or Ergon—but we go to them on a regular basis and say, 'What is your social responsibility now for your volunteering? What is your program? What are you doing? How many volunteers have you got in the council now?' and we do not get any feedback. We do not get any back from the other big corporations either. Maybe different methods of incentivising those businesses to get people out in the community would be helpful.

ACTING CHAIR: I appreciate the time you put into your opening statement. We will go to questions.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for your great work. It sounds like you have some amazing programs here. I would suggest that the recouping in cost is not just in unpaid wages of volunteers but also in the economic and social benefit that comes through saving young people from a lot of the barriers they have to be able to engage. I think the savings to government would be significantly more than that amount, and I credit you with that.

Ms Wing: It is huge.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: How many volunteers do you have across your organisation? Do you have a paid role for someone who coordinates those volunteers? How are they coordinated?

Ms Wing: We do not have a paid role for that. As part of the LearnIT program we have the role to coordinate the program, and incorporated in that is bringing on mentors, but we do not have a volunteer coordinator.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Do the volunteers work across the other programs as well?

Ms Wing: No, they just work in the LearnIT program. We do have one other volunteer within the organisation who works in the Young Parents Program. She has been doing that for, I believe, about 10 years ad hoc. What makes the roles appealing to her is that flexibility to come and go when she likes. We may not see her for six months and then all of a sudden she is in there and doing some work.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you.

Mr BAILLIE: The member for Inala was going down the same path I was with how you manage your volunteers and the resources. I think you mentioned the 68-odd registered volunteers, 20 quite active. You have some online roster system. Is that managed by the Drivelt or LearnIT system?

Ms Wing: Our rostering system is more a booking system for the young people to book lessons and in that they have all the drivers, so all the volunteers. The mentors do not get to be involved in that because it becomes too confusing for them. It is confusing for us sometimes. We have ownership of that. We could allow them to see that and make changes, but it is easier for us to manage the program if they do not have access to it. They get a schedule the night before, at 5 pm, of what their day will look like the next day.

Mr BAILLIE: That LearnIT program is one resource, if you like—one full-time employee, with a ratio of up 20 volunteers?

Ms Wing: The LearnIT program has three paid employees. We have a team leader, a coordinator and an admin. We just received extra funding, a variation to our funding agreement, to include CALD into the program and that is a slow burn. That was to bring on participants from other cultures and then get volunteers from other cultures, but that is up until the end of 2026 and that is a very slow burn, given the difficulty in getting volunteers from other cultures.

Mr BAILLIE: And leveraging the volunteers, I guess. As a paid-to-volunteer ratio, you are looking at six to one active volunteers to paid employees?

Ms Wing: We have about 30 active volunteers. Over the whole of the organisation we have 30 paid employees. That is here and in Mount Isa.

Mr BAILLIE: The volunteers just work in the LearnIT program?

Ms Wing: They just work in the LearnIT program, yes.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you for coming along today in place of Murray. I want to acknowledge the hard work that you both do. I have been a big supporter of the LearnIT program since its inception and its involvement with the Drivelt program and what they are trying to do with the motorsport Townsville

precinct. Obviously the idea of this inquiry is to try to find better ways for government to interact with volunteer organisations to make volunteering easier, attract more volunteers and make sure volunteering has a long future. What are your thoughts on what is needed from government for better support, whether it is financial support or less regulatory burden on organisations when it comes to meeting government obligations, like blue cards, insurance and those types of things?

Ms Wing: I think the blue card system really needs an overhaul. It is complicated. We do it with the volunteers when they come in because it is too complicated. We have to look at also the age of our volunteers. Most are over 55. When we get into the 60s and 70s, a lot of them do not use technology and with the blue card system you have to have technology because they will send you a text message or they will send you an email. They do not have their email on their mobile phone and so then they have to go home to get that email pass code so we can put it in the system. It is a long and convoluted system.

Mr DAMETTO: It is clunky.

Ms Wing: Very clunky and difficult. That one is tricky. What was the other part of your question?

Mr DAMETTO: Any support that government could be giving to ease the regulatory burden or the requirements from government.

Ms Wing: I think if we had the one-stop shop like these guys back here, Volunteer NQ, taking on the onus of all that intake. If they had more financial support in doing that and then they refer out to us, all the paperwork is done and then that takes away the burden on each individual organisation that does not have funding and time to support that. Or the government could give dedicated funding to every NGO for volunteer coordination. That way they are going to be solely focused on having volunteers within their organisation.

Mr DAMETTO: What I am taking from that is that it would be easier to give it to Volunteer NQ and they coordinate and give you a ready-made volunteer, ready to go.

Ms Wing: Just give us some money. That is what you are there for, guys. It is so difficult because they do the hard work, but there is not enough there to support us.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you, Ms Wing, and thank you, Chair, for your indulgence.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Your organisation has been around for a long time: since 1978.

Ms Wing: Forty-six years.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You target young people and you help them out with life skills and homelessness. There are so many support agencies you work with, dealing with these issues. As somebody who looks after young people, what are your thoughts on how we get young people interested? We hear all the time, 'What happens when my generation or the generation older than me starts falling off the perch? How are we going to replace these people?'

Ms Wing: That is the problem. The majority of our mentors are over 55. I would be looking at a system in particular for the unemployed—that they do volunteering as part of their mutual obligations, that they volunteer within not-for-profit organisations. We already have mutual obligations for over-55s, that you do not have to work if you volunteer. We do that with some of ours. We target all of those social services and organisations and go in there and say, 'Where are your people? You have a glut of people over 55. We want them.' They will be really passionate for a week or two and then it dies off and we might get one for the year. I think we should be targeting those people.

Mr BOOTHMAN: How do we get them enthusiastic? You work with young people and you have a good understanding—

Ms Wing: It is a hard task.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I know it is a hard task, but we have to be creative.

Ms Wing: Again I think if we have things like the Vexpo that we held earlier in the year, which is a really successful event, if that is fully funded to go into schools, universities and other training institutions such as TAFE, and then have a volunteering component as part of their learning practice, that correlates with what they are studying. I know they already do placements.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Just to make you aware, there are three heads continuously nodding like crazy behind you.

Ms Wing: I hope I answered that for you.

ACTING CHAIR: There is broad support for you from the gallery.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Given that we know the younger generations in particular are choosing or needing to volunteer in different ways than those of us who are used to giving regular time over decades, what is the flexibility of your organisation to allow for that ad hoc kind of volunteering? You mentioned that one of the volunteers you have can come and go. I know that is a barrier for a lot of organisations. How do you manage that?

Ms Wing: It is. Our program is set up so that we run 362 days of the year. We do not work Christmas Day and we do not operate Easter. The volunteers can work anywhere between seven in the morning and 10 at night. Our cars are available. People who are already working a full-time job who want to give back to the community can come in and work at night. They can say, 'Hey, I'm free at seven o'clock on a Tuesday night.' 'Great, you're in!' We just have a big board and we say, 'Have a look at that and see where there are gaps. Whatever space you want, it's yours. You own that space.' Then we will book them. We put them in the system and book them. They have availability to say, 'I want a particular time.' We never schedule them. We never say, 'We have a slot here from nine till five on a Monday. Can you fill that?' We just do not do that. We say, 'This is where there is scope for you to have time. You go away, have a think about it and come to me with what you want to do,' and then we work with that.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Is there a minimum amount of time that you require of your volunteers or could they just do one lesson and that is it?

Ms Wing: They can do one lesson. We do have to have a minimum time because of the hours the young people have to do for learning to drive. However, if they wanted to volunteer doing anything else in the office—sometimes they say, 'I'm bored. I want to come in. Can I have a look at your handbooks? Can I go through and see if we need to update them?' We say, 'Sure. How much time do you want to give?' 'I've only got an hour tomorrow.' 'Fine, come and have a look.' They can do whatever they want. We do not put any structure around that—other than the hour when they are in the car, because that does stop them, yes. If they are locked into something then they feel pressure and then they think, 'This is work. I'm not doing this for work; I'm doing it for enjoyment and giving back.'

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you for your time and the very valuable work that your organisation undertakes. On behalf of the community, thank you very much.

We will now hear from people who have registered to appear as a witness at this hearing. Each witness will have approximately five minutes for each statement. I remind witnesses of the terms of 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 of providing evidence that names and/or adversely reflects on a person or organisation. We will do this in groups of three.

ATTAM, Mr Nick, Private capacity

JOSEPH, Right Reverend Dr Keith, Anglican Church

MACLEAN, Ms Alison, Business Manager, St Andrews Meals on Wheels

ACTING CHAIR: We will commence with you, Alison.

Ms Maclean: Thank you so much for the opportunity and good morning, Chair and members of the committee. I am Alison Maclean, the business manager for St Andrews Meals on Wheels. As you know, Meals on Wheels is a countrywide organisation. We are an independent organisation affiliated with Queensland Meals on Wheels, which began in Ipswich in 1956, started by the late Rhoda Cameron, cooking meals in her kitchen and taking them out in a thermos and a pudding basin—no funding, no government subsidies and probably no food safety regulations either. Fast-forward to 2024, Queensland Meals on Wheels delivered 2.4 million meals and welfare checks, powered by 6,326 volunteers who contributed a conservative value of \$50 million to this state.

Bringing that into a local context, Townsville Meals on Wheels started in 1964. We celebrated our 60-year anniversary last year. The Reverend Ken and Mrs Sheila Stephens prepared and delivered a few meals from their kitchen to people in need for the princely sum of two shillings per meal. Now we have a volunteer base of something like 156 volunteers. We do have paid staff—about 12. Today we delivered 390 meals. It is ever increasing; it is not decreasing. We are very fortunate and blessed that our volunteer numbers remain reasonably steady. That is not reflected statewide. The northern Aged Care Planning Region for Meals on Wheels saw a 27 per cent decrease in volunteers since 2020. I personally do not think that is surprising, given the impact of COVID and the fact that the average age of our cohort is 70. We would love to see that trend changing.

The benefits of volunteer activity are obvious to the recipients, but what a lot of people do not get is the benefits to the volunteers themselves. A social impact report commissioned by Meals on Wheels Australia, that included volunteers across Queensland, shows that volunteers had a 10 per cent higher wellbeing than a sample of comparable Australians and significantly higher scores relating to their sense of belonging. One of our volunteers wrote a very heartfelt letter for a presentation saying how much it had impacted in a positive way their mental wellbeing just having a purpose to get up and go out every day. We have lots of volunteers who come with their carers and go out, which also is extremely good for them and their social interactions with people.

How do we reverse this trend of decline? This has been said several times already, but some kind of universal volunteer passport where people can bypass having to repeat the constant online forms and generalised training. That would be super helpful and incentivise younger people. There has to be a way that government can assist with this in some kind of school programs. It is a barrier for us. We would love to interact with schools. Blue cards are not a requirement for us—our volunteers will have to do police checks—but that then means they cannot take schoolchildren on runs unless they come with a parent or teacher, and that is obviously not very effective. Until you encourage young people to experience it firsthand, they will not understand how great it is and how much it will do for them, never mind what they are doing for the community and that sense of belonging.

Encouraging retention of volunteers has also been brought up by several people. There could be some kind of financial incentive. Perhaps some kind of reduction in registration for vehicles for our volunteers would be very helpful. Also, with supporting partnerships with the private sector, there could be some kind of incentive there. We no longer see the big companies allowing their employees to have a morning off once a month to come and volunteer. That used to happen but no longer. There could be some kind of statewide program to really celebrate and recognise volunteers, especially those who have long-term commitments and have put a lot of their time into volunteering. The social work of volunteers is very important. As an organisation we recognise that often, sadly, our volunteers are the only social contact that sector of the community has, which is very important. Thank you very much for your time this morning.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much. Bishop Joseph?

Bishop Joseph: Thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning. The diocese of North Queensland in the Anglican Church has been around for 150 years and covers the area from Sarina and Mackay in the south through to the Torres Strait Islands and the PNG border in the north and out to Mount Isa in the west. There are 50 parishes across that area. One-third of those are in Indigenous communities in the Torres Strait Islands and the Cape York Peninsula. Of those, we have 20 paid clergy and five paid staff, 60 volunteer clergy, 250 voluntary lay ministers and a further 1,000 volunteers in the community. Most of the stuff flies under the radar in the community. This is mainly

in the rural towns: for example, op shops, catering for funerals and our work in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in terms of pastoral care, spiritual support and also, in some cases, helping to stabilise those communities.

We also have a significant role in supporting seasonal workers on the Atherton Tablelands, in the Burdekin and further south around Bowen and Innisfail. That support for seasonal workers is important volunteer work that supports our agricultural sector. We also provide support for families mainly through music programs and other work with younger mothers. However, the average age of my volunteers is about 70 years. They are mainly retirees. We also have four schools, two aged-care homes and Anglicare North Queensland, but they are increasingly less reliant on volunteers so I will not refer further to those entities.

Some of the challenges we have are outside of your control—time constraints on younger people who are working, for example. We do have significant burdens in two areas. One is insurance. The financial burden of providing insurance for volunteers is steadily increasing, far greater than the rate of inflation. Another is regulatory burdens. You have referred to blue cards and the associated training for those. There are work health and safety requirements. From the federal side, there are ACNC requirements. For those who are volunteer directors, obviously there are ASIC and ATO requirements.

The way we have been dealing with this is to try to centralise the administration. My executive officer does a whole lot of work on blue cards, for reasons that have been mentioned by other speakers, particularly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, where the ability to negotiate and even to access the internet is severely limited. We have to centralise the admin, but we are trying to do that whilst keeping the volunteer work local. One of things we do have is that network through the parishes of volunteerism right at the grassroots in rural and remote communities. Our aim is to keep the actual work local, but then we have to maintain a central office. That does require costs for visiting those volunteers in remote areas. We pay a fair amount in travel costs. For example, the average leg of travel in the Torres Strait is \$500 per flight. For me or my executive officer to visit the Torres Strait to work with volunteers costs something like \$5,000 for travel alone for a return trip from Townsville, by the time you have visited various parts. The burden is increasing costs, the regulatory burden and the need to centralise the regulatory burden while trying to enable and empower volunteers locally, particularly in remote areas.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Of all the needs and issues that there are, if you had to pick one thing that government could do to assist in terms of volunteers what would it be?

Bishop Joseph: Reduce the regulatory burdens.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much for your contribution.

Mr Attam: Good morning, members and fellow community organisations. The volunteer organisations in Townsville are the heartbeat of our community. My name is Nick Attam and I wear multiple hats. I am both a person from the Indian community in North Queensland and an editor of the *Indian Sun*, a publication dedicated to sharing the stories, achievements and issues of multicultural communities across North Queensland and Australia. I am deeply involved in community organisations like India Fest and multiple community organisations in Townsville.

India Fest has been operational for the past 11 years. It is run 100 per cent by volunteers and none of the volunteers get paid. We are always trying to keep this community going. The biggest struggle I would say is finding the next generation of volunteers. We were struggling for funding this year. We had help from the members for Mundingburra, Townsville and Thuringowa. The Premier himself appreciates the efforts that the India Fest community gives back to the Townsville community. He said that Townsville is like this because of the Indian community. I am very proud of that.

To go back to why I am here, a lot of the community organisations are here and I want to learn from them how they can be part of India Fest. The biggest barrier for the community here is that they are not aware of community volunteering benefits. I am trying to highlight the advantages and the benefits of volunteering not just to the Indian community but also to the multicultural community, because when people migrate to this town they do not understand the benefits of volunteering. For uni students and schoolkids, we can help them, educate them and train them in what we do. That is the only way I can get this community going.

Every year at the AGM I bring people together, but there will be only 10 people. They are the only people who have been working for the past 11 years. We try to bring the younger generation in and try to educate them as to the benefits for them. Every year we talk about how we can train them,

how we manage the funds, how we talk to members of parliament or the media. There is no structure or formal information available for our organisation from the government around what they can do for us as a broader audience.

The reason I started the *Indian Sun* in Queensland was to educate the community here, tell positive stories from Townsville and across the region to a wider audience and tell them the benefits of bringing everyone together. In that way, we can educate the new migrants as well as the people who live here. The benefits of migrants, especially from India, is that they are skilled migrants. The community can get more benefit out of them. They are happy to volunteer but they do not know how. I use my media communication. At the same time, it is not a closed community. It has to be wider. They do not have to help Indians; they can go out and help in aged care or other areas. Information and motivation need to be given to them.

I did not put anything structural together but this is what I feel. I want to thank Margie for helping us last year. It really helped us because India Fest is a community organisation but it is about emotion and culture. People will come there. You would not imagine how many people come. There are 25,000 people who come for the event. It is 100 per cent run by volunteers and none of them get paid. When I spoke to Margie last year, I said, 'I need something to get feedback from the community.' She helped me with the structure of the feedback questions. She came for two hours to help us to get feedback. I used that for the grants this year. I used it to talk to the Premier, to say that 98 per cent of the people said they are very happy with the event. That is what the Townsville community is all about.

Thank you, everyone, for listening to me. If you have any questions then I am happy to answer them.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Attam, for your presentation this morning. I thank your group for coming forward.

CURD, Ms Debra, Private capacity

RAI, Mr Brian, Private capacity

ACTING CHAIR: Welcome. Brian, would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Rai: Thank you very much for inviting me. I am a representative of the Heart Foundation. We do walking as part of the Heart Foundation. Three years ago I moved to Townsville and decided I needed to do some volunteering. As some people have been saying, I did try to volunteer in different circumstances but it was just too difficult for me with the paperwork. The working with children check was great but everything else just took too long.

I decided to try the Heart Foundation. They were looking for volunteers. They could not find anyone in Townsville. I eventually put my hand up. I was very nervous about starting the group because I had not done that before. I had walked before in Victoria with the Heart Foundation. I went to Castletown Shopping Centre. It is all indoors. It is an all-weather track. Management were tremendous. They invited us in and showed us where all the defibrillators are because there are a lot of older people walking with us. On the first day, we had three walkers: the management, the personal trainer and me. Nobody else turned up. I thought, 'What am I doing here?' Eventually we moved on. The ABC heard about us. Michael Clarke from the ABC did an interview with me, which brought in quite a few with walkers. To cut a long story short, we now have 63 walkers.

The Heart Foundation asked me to ask a question that Shane has already gone through: how difficult is it to find volunteers? We were looking for people to open a walking group at Willows Shopping Centre but they could not find anybody. The thing about walking is that it helps mostly the older people but we cater for anyone. We have people walking with us from 50 upwards who might have had a slight disability. You can walk with a walker. It is a flat surface. It is indoors. It is safe. It is weatherproof. The only time we do not walk is when we get storms and the car park floods downstairs so we cannot walk. They have to leave the car park open upstairs for the people coming in to do shopping.

The Heart Foundation is finding it very difficult because of what you have to go through to become a walker. As Shane and all the others who are looking for volunteers have said, it is very difficult. I think the source of volunteering is senior citizens.

The reason I started all of this is that I wanted to fill up my time. I have retired and my wife still works; she has a driving school in Townsville. I do the walking group on Monday. I play golf on Tuesday with the Vets, and there is a gentleman here from the Vets. I won yesterday, by the way. On Wednesday I play golf. On Thursday I do the walking group. I leave Friday for doctors appointments and whatever I have to do.

There is another question I am going to answer that you asked Shane—that is, what is the benefit of volunteering—and everyone else here will be interested in that. I am one of the walk organisers. The Heart Foundation does all of the planning for the walk. All we do is make sure new walkers are welcomed, promote the group walks and encourage people to join. We report any hazards and safety concerns to the relevant body—for example, the council—but we walk indoors so that does not affect us. We do have outdoor walkers and that is for them. The benefits are improved health and wellbeing. Regular walking improves physical fitness and supports mental health. That is one of the main reasons I do it.

There is a sense of purpose. I am helping others stay active and connected and it brings a deep sense of fulfilment to me. There is a lot more, including social connection. We meet new people and connect with a diverse group of community members, and that is where I have a problem. I am the only dark-skinned person in our group. I am trying to get Indigenous and Torres Strait people or anyone like that to join but I do not know how. I have tried. I would like to have more of different people. It is for everybody, let me put it that way.

In terms of practical support, with the volunteers there is no experience needed. The Heart Foundation provides full training, resources and ongoing support. It is flexible, so you choose your walk times and frequency that suits your lifestyle. In terms of recognition, all volunteers and all walkers are regularly acknowledged and celebrated for their contributions. If you walk 25 walks, you get a letter from the Heart Foundation saying you have walked 25 walks, or if you have walked 50 walks, and you get a voucher which you can use to buy something from the Heart Foundation. We do a small collection. It is a free walking group, because it scares people off if you say that you have to pay to walk or ask them to donate. It is a free walking group, but those who can afford to donate to the Heart Foundation. I am a recipient of a triple bypass and a valve replaced 10 years ago, and I have kept fit all the time.

The reason I do this is the sense of satisfaction I get out of it. When anyone walks for the first time, I walk with them just to see what their capabilities are. Some walk slow, some walk with walkers, some come with carers. We work out what they need and how much attention they need. I have started with walkers who were tripping and could not walk, who walked toe first and then heel, and I would walk with them. After two or three months, they are walking perfectly.

There are people who have had mental health problems or have lost their husbands and they have been sitting at home. It could be your mothers, your fathers, your grandfathers. They sit at home and do not know what to do—they are at a loss—and they come to the walking group and once they start they want to be there every Monday and every Thursday. They come regularly. If they cannot come, they send me a text. I am the rooster looking after the chickens—that is what it looks like—but some of them are older than I am. The satisfaction out of that is unbelievable. I get there every morning, and they are all there early. We are supposed to start at 7.30—and Adam has walked with us already—and they are there at seven in the morning. It is a great thing.

The Heart Foundation is finding it difficult to get volunteer organisers. If you would like to see, these are the prints of the Heart Foundation. It is a walking group at Castletown on Mondays and Thursdays at 7.30 where you enjoy a friendly and self-paced walk for up to 45 minutes. You can walk once around the shopping centre. I have noticed that people walk once when they first come there because they find it difficult, and they then walk four times after being there a month. I am the walking organiser and it is around Castletown Shopping Centre. The Castletown management have been fantastic. They have given us free coffee cards. If there is a birthday, we give out free coffee cards, or if we have one of our personalities walking—like Adam Baillie, who walked with us—everybody gets a free coffee card.

There is nothing much more. They asked me to come and represent them, but Shane has said everything that I wanted to, and he said it better than I could because I am a novice.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you, Brian. Thank you for the work that you do on behalf of the community.

Ms Curd: Thanks for the opportunity to speak today. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners. I am here so that my voice might be heard. I am here today to bring up a different issue about volunteering. It is about the rights of volunteers and the amount of abuse that some of them get from certain organisations who do it all the time and who do it to a lot of volunteers.

I have been volunteering since 2019, after the fires. My first two years in volunteering were so traumatic that it has scarred me emotionally and completely. During that time, I have been accused of all of these accusations that are false. There is no recourse and there is no accountability for the organisation where you are volunteering. They can do and say anything about you and you have nowhere to go because you are not paid. I searched everywhere, and I do mean everywhere. I emailed everywhere, including the Human Rights Commission; they were the only people who acknowledged my complaint. There is no protection for volunteers.

In my particular case, because I was volunteering with wildlife, I was using all of my own money to look after these fabulous little creatures and all of my own time. You just get all this other stuff that goes on within these organisations because they are not held accountable for their behaviours. It is kind of fine until you join a committee. Then, once you join a committee, if they do not particularly like you, they can say anything about you and there is no recourse. You cannot complain to them because they are the people who are accusing you of all of these things. You can get fully written letters of apology and it means nothing because they just keep doing it because they are not held accountable.

I looked everywhere for a department that could help me overcome this massive emotional and financial problem that was created by me volunteering my time. I just want to help animals—I just want to help—but I had all of this happen, and there was so much that happened. There needs to be protection for volunteers. You need to be able to turn to someone who is not in that particular group and say, 'Please help me,' because there is nobody. So many volunteers take their own life—I almost took my own life over this—because there is nowhere for you to turn, because you do not get paid.

I wrote to everybody to try to stop the abuse. This abuse happens in so many organisations and it is systemic. If they do not like you and they do not want you there, they will accuse you of something. Most people will leave, and I should have left. I did not. I fought because I really loved caring for animals but I should have left straightaway, because there is no protection for volunteers in Australia when you volunteer your time and you volunteer your heart. There is just nothing there to protect us. That is all I have to say. Thank you for giving me a voice because I tried really hard to find somewhere to voice this but there is nowhere.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Curd. If it is of any small comfort, you are not the first witness who has asked for an approach to grievance, which is the fancy word for what you are asking. The committee has heard evidence from others who are looking for some sort of improved grievance process—whether it is internally within volunteer organisations or externally. You are reinforcing a point. I appreciate the sensitivity that that has obviously brought to you today and I appreciate the manner in which you have raised that, so thank you very much for your time.

FREESTUN, Ms Margaret, Private capacity

MALONEY, Mr Greg, Private capacity

TURNOUR, Mr Andrew, Representative, Townsville Lot Owners Group

ACTING CHAIR: Welcome. Mr Maloney, you sat down first so I will ask you to make the first statement.

Mr Maloney: Thank you for the opportunity to present some information to the committee. I will try to give you an abridged version of what I prepared so I do not take up too much time. I have been a volunteer with the Townsville State Emergency Service for over seven years. In that time, I have participated in a wide range of emergency deployments across Victoria, New South Wales, Southern Queensland, Western Queensland and Northern Queensland. While I speak as an individual, my experiences and perspectives also reflect those of the Townsville and Thuringowa SES members and, I suspect, other groups in our area as well. It is important to note that I hold no official standing with SES for this particular presentation.

In summary, there are a few core issues that I want to clearly impart to the committee. SES volunteers are a significant community and economic resource that we could not afford to replace with paid labour. We rely heavily on a dedicated group of volunteers with a common purpose—to serve our community in times of emergency and need. The SES provides substantial support to the Queensland Police Service for search operations and plays a vital role in community education and storm preparedness. If it is one of your loved ones—your partner, your family member or whoever—who is lost, you want every resource out there looking for them.

The tasks SES volunteers undertake require extensive training. It is not a question of walking in the door and starting it; you have to undertake quite substantial training, and undertaking those tasks involves significant risks and challenges. These risks are truly exacerbated when equipment is not fit for purpose, out of date or inadequately maintained, and that results in safety issues. For Townsville and Thuringowa, we occupy a truly substandard building. We effectively get no funding and limited support. These factors lead to a sense of not being valued, high member turnover rates and low responses for activations and emergencies. That is a really bad thing for us. Climate change is driving more weather related emergencies, with the likelihood of more frequent and more severe events in the future. My question is: can we afford to continue in this manner? My answer is, obviously, no.

I mentioned a little bit about training. Members are required to undertake quite significant training—and you are a former SES member and you understand what that means—as well as prove their competency and capability for the roles they fulfil. Volunteering is not just about turning up; this is about a true commitment to being a part of an emergency response group.

In terms of recruitment and retention, we are losing probably on average 20 per cent of our members every year. Sometimes it goes up to about 30 per cent, but it depends on how the year flows and what happens. We need to retain the core of our trained and capable members—that is vitally important—to deliver an appropriate response to our community. While the Queensland State Emergency Service takes great pride in its commitment to safety, there is a stark contrast in reality between this commitment and our actual operations, and I am going to give you one example of that.

For the Townsville and Thuringowa group, we have three primary response vehicles. Their ages are 15 years, 15 years and 13 years respectively, and they are no longer suitable for their intended roles. In Southern Queensland, these specific vehicle models are no longer permitted to carry more than two passengers, with no passengers in the rear, only in the front seats, which makes them entirely pretty much unusable for us. However, here, our volunteers are expected to accept the risk due to the lack of funding and the alternatives that are available. In my mind, that is a clear breach of their legal duty of care to our members, and that is a big concern. Such inadequacy has contributed to fatalities involving both a volunteer and a member of the public in recent times. Those incidents raise serious questions about the standard of care for volunteers and highlight that legal duty of care that the Queensland State Emergency Service and local government authority have. It is a real worry.

I want to talk a little about funding. We recognise and acknowledge that these are challenging financial times and there is not a bucket of money to do everything. Considering volunteers provide their services willingly and freely to serve their community, there is a distinct disconnect when it comes to providing a safe and supported environment. I do not think we ask for much, but we do ask for things that I think are the basic requirements. In many ways, this is at the heart of our loss of members. It is a sense of not being valued or cared for. I think that is a great concern.

I will read part of a statement I took from the Queensland State Emergency Service website. It says—

Each unit is supported by their local government, who typically provide facilities, vehicles, ongoing equipment and fleet maintenance and additional support relevant to the local unit.

It goes on about some other things that the state provides. That statement is true, but what it omits to tell you is that that only happens if there is an agreement between the local government authority and the state. In our case that does not exist, so all six groups in Townsville suffer this same problem. I have to say to you: is that okay for volunteers? I do not think it is. In the past five years, all six groups in Townsville have been the victims of a political and economic debate between the state government and the local government authority over who should fund local SES operations. Over time, this has starved us of funding, provided only urgent maintenance and denied any new asset allocations or replacements. I could go on about that but I am not going to because I know you have limited time.

The Queensland state government also provides some funding to local government authorities to support their SES operations. The data I have is a little old but it is still relevant. In the year 2023-24, in our case, Queensland state government provided funding for the Townsville region SES to the Townsville City Council of \$84,026. For part year 2024-25—I do not have what part of the year it is but I suggest it is half—so far they have funded \$29,816. That is to support six groups in the area and approximately 200 volunteers. I am sure you will agree that it is totally inadequate. This is where the debate and argument sits between the state and the local government authority.

The emergency service fire and rescue levy legislation dates back to 1990 and 2011. I will be the first to say that I do not fully understand it. Currently, it provides exclusive funding for the Queensland and rural fire departments. The levy is collected by the local government through local government rates, it is repatriated to the Queensland state and then it is dispensed, obviously, off to that particular organisation. Frankly, it is time that we sat down and reviewed this. The legislation seems outdated. We should reconsider the amount of the levy and the distribution of funds to more appropriately support the full spectrum of emergency response. We need a simple solution that may result in a solution to a statewide issue, because it is not just Townsville that has this problem; a lot of others do, although not all of them. Not all SES operations are the same. Some of them are well and truly cared for by their LGAs, but in our case we are not. Here endeth the lesson.

Ms Freestun: My name is Margie Freestun. Today I want to give you a positive uplift from my volunteering. Up until a couple of weeks ago, I had clocked up 30½ years with the rural fires and 26 years were actually on the truck. We have not only done rural fires. We started the brigade on Hervey Range on 5 November 1994. We did not have a clue what we were doing. We had nothing except enthusiasm, and that enthusiasm continues today. Our brigade has varied in numbers, depending on circumstances, but my husband and I have now decided that we retire. We are doing that.

I have always been a volunteer. Through the journey I have done deployments. We started as 19- and 20-year-olds in the Cyclone Tracy recovery. We were young, we had no children and it did not really matter if we picked up any diseases, which we were likely to. I only just found the permits to go in and out of Darwin and in and out of the territory the other day, because we are now packing up to sell our property and move on. That volunteering continued. I have done Cyclone Tracy and cyclones Larry, Yasi and Debbie, the Ingham floods of 2011 or something, the Townsville floods and pretty much anything else until I decided that I was going to pull the old aged card, which rural fires did not recognise.

What did I get out of it? I got more out of it than I put into it. You do not look for accolades. If you get a 'thank you', it is a bonus. However, I could sit—I am going to get teary here—in the mud and the grass with a five-year-old who came up because he wanted to talk to the lady fireman. I got out of cleaning up the rubbish and things like that. That was during Cyclone Debbie. He sat on my knee, putting on my uniform, my hat, my gloves and whatever he could put on. He told me how the big wind made him wet the bed. It was Easter time. I always have a little bit of bribery for the men because I am always the only woman with all the men—I do not know if that is a blessing or not, but anyway. I had his mother's permission as she was sitting behind me. He was telling me all about it. We discussed the possibilities of what could have caused the wind, not ever telling a lie. Twelve months later we were down there on holidays and I went and saw him. I had been able to put his mother in contact with help for him.

Again during Cyclone Debbie, I do not know what it is about me, but as soon as I step out of the truck the tears come so I have developed that role. I saw this humungous man, who was covered in tattoos and had a ponytail. He came out and he said, 'I want this and this and this done.' When I

got out he just dissolved into tears. We had our little teary moment for a couple of seconds and then we got on with it.

That is what I get out of it. It is the fact that I can see the smile and the hope that we bring to those people. When you go back and you see Innisfail, for example, with the rebuilding and the people we have helped, that is positive thing. I take my group out to the brigade. I was the first secretary, I was an officer and things like that. You work through it.

Today, volunteering is very expensive for an individual. My husband and I estimated in the early stages of our brigade we put in a maximum of about \$10,000 out of our own pockets as well as \$60,000-odd to \$70,000 in machinery to break the work. We do not ask for anything. If you are volunteering then you are giving your time and you should not be expecting too much, but volunteering needs to look at helping their volunteers make it more fun. We have always ended everything with what we call a post-mortem, which is a barbeque usually at our place with a few drinks, and we talk about it. It does not matter if we have been to a road accident, to a fire or to a deployment; we congregate outside of the brigade. We come to our house and we just sit on the lawn and discuss it. Socialising is extremely important.

Through the brigade we have our code of conduct and things like that. I am not sure but I would say that they are probably the best days of my life, that we could do that. I would highly recommend it. It is not perfect. You get to a scene and you are going, 'Shit, I don't need this today.' Then you are like, 'Okay, put your big-girl pants on and get moving, guys' and you do it. I am not asking for anything. I am just saying that it actually is a positive thing. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Freestun. We have heard from a lot of people and we will continue to throughout this inquiry. We hear about a lot of the technical challenges and some of the positives. For the way you have just spoken about the reasons to be involved and some of the challenges that come your way in terms of the conversations that you have had and what it has meant to you to be able to fill that role, I say thank you. I thank you not only for what you have contributed to the inquiry in your few moments today but also for what you have contributed over your years and years of volunteering, which goes all the way back.

Ms Freestun: It is not ending because I still volunteer.

ACTING CHAIR: You have not finished. Thank you very much for your contribution. I now call on Mr Andrew Turnour.

Mr Turnour: That was well said. We understand the purpose of the inquiry. We understand, from our readings, that Queensland volunteer numbers have dropped 10 per cent, or some 300,000 volunteers, in the past three years, which equates to around \$8.4 billion of lost volunteer contributions to this community. Does anyone on the inquiry panel live in a community titles scheme or strata building?

ACTING CHAIR: This is an opportunity, Mr Turnour, for you to provide evidence, not to question the panel. I remind you of the terms of reference for this committee, which are specifically around volunteering.

Mr Turnour: We believe that Queensland's biggest volunteer group is the 150,000 community titles scheme committee members who operate the \$245 billion strata economy of Queensland. It is Queensland's second biggest economy. This group has been held to toxic ransom by the archaic Body Corporate and Community Management Act 1997 and a dud, uncaring body corporate commission.

ACTING CHAIR: Mr Turnour, I am going to stop my clock. You are very close to stepping outside, if you have not already, the terms of reference. You made a link to volunteering. I am going to ask you to be very specific. This committee's inquiry is into the issues around roadblocks to volunteering, highlighting the work of volunteers and those things. I am going to allow you to continue but I will ask you to be very specific to the issues around volunteering that are relevant to the matters for which you are sitting in front of us today.

Mr Turnour: For volunteers, the legislation is not fit for our purpose because it is not user-friendly and it is intimidating. This is the legislation that all of us volunteers must work under. The word 'volunteer' is not used once in the legislation. In 652 pages of legislation, volunteers are not acknowledged so we are kind of abandoned a little bit. The legislation dictates how one million Queenslanders must live. We find the legislation is not friendly to volunteers let alone supportive of volunteers.

Basically, we are asking if it is possible for this group to consider a new body corporate commission with a strata-consumers-first attitude to improve our living standards and the performance of Queensland's second biggest economy. In Queensland, one in five homes is a strata home and there are one million residents. We need your help to make legislation that supports volunteers who run that economy. At present, we feel quite abandoned.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for your service to the communities over the years. Margaret, thank you for your heartwarming testimony. How have you been able to share your enthusiasm for volunteering? Have you seen that that has helped to attract other volunteers?

Ms Freestun: Yes. I made a rule that whatever I did I would be positive about it. Even if I was cranky, I just said, 'We'll deal with that later.' I do a lot of mentoring within the rural fires. In my later years I was in education and things like that, so I was a VCE. I had a little teddy that I dressed in a rural fire uniform. He was my teddy bear I took to schools, on the island mostly. If he agreed with everything they said then he just sat there nice and quietly. If he did not agree then he would put his hand up. Of course, teddies do not move so he never put his hand up. The kids were really excited that they were always right with the education.

I found myself unexpectedly in the role of getting—I hesitate to say the word 'suicide' but some people would get down and they did not want to go to our team; they just wanted to talk to mum. They can be people who are older than me. I never tell anyone what to do. I ask them if they are able to do it or if they feel like they would want to try it. You try to work it so that you can put the answer into their head but it is an option. I do not know. I did it with my kids. I am always right in my eyes with my kids, but they to make their choices and you have to guide them.

Apart from all of that, I still do it now. I take phone calls all hours of the night. If five minutes of my life can make someone else's okay, it is good and I can lose that five minutes, half an hour, 2½ hours or whatever it takes. It does not matter what it is. If someone comes to me and asks me if I can show them something, that is what I do. Pretty much I was raised like that. If we ever said 'no' to someone who asked us for help when we could have helped them, that was really bad in my mum's eyes. Unless it put our life at risk, from this big we were taught to share our knowledge, our help, our abilities and everything like that.

I love stepping outside of my comfort zone. I love the fact that most of the time I survive it, which is quite unusual sometimes. I am not even going to tell you what I have done. I have gone back and looked at things, especially at my years in the territory when I was a 19-year-old bride living two states away from home and I had to survive. I do not know how I did that. Anyway, I am here today to talk about this.

ACTING CHAIR: I think that is a wonderful point at which to end your testimony. Thank you very much. Member for Townsville, thank you very much for hosting us in your wonderful city.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you, Chair. I would like to place on record my thanks to the whole committee for travelling to Townsville to hear from our community. I also thank our community for turning out in force and showing what a strong community we have and how much volunteering means to us. I thank you all.

ACTING CHAIR: That concludes this hearing. Thank you to everyone who has participated today. Thank you to our Hansard reporters. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I do remind the one organisation that took a question on notice that their response, if possible, is required by Monday, 28 July 2025. I declare this public hearing closed.

The subcommittee adjourned at 12.33 pm.