

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No: 24
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Publication: Making the submission public but withholding your name
Attachments: No attachment

Submitter Comments:

I joined the Queensland State Emergency Service at Eastern Depot, Morningside in mid 2021. My intention was to give back to the community after a lifetime of hard work and volunteering with other community organisations. My background was in heavy engineering, construction, project management, people management, safety and the environment in multiple states and several countries. I had held many positions of statutory responsibility for safety. I understood about systems and procedures, risk assessment and many other things relevant to becoming a volunteer with the SES. I completed my training with the SES in December 2021 without any issue arising. I attended the Eastern Depot in Morningside for regular training on the night of Monday 28 March 2022. I was asked to assist with re-stocking shelves so went out to the shed. As I walked out to the shed, I was asked instead to go with a team of people to attend to a fallen tree resulting from a storm at Kangaroo Point. During the cutting up of a fallen part of a tree with a chainsaw by another member of the SES, the forked tree trunk rotated. The part that had been recumbent on the ground furthest away from me rose into the air as it rotated. As it fell to the ground about 8 metres from where it had been lying, it struck my stomach and legs so hard that I was thrown backwards through the air, momentarily unconscious, landing a distance of about 2 metres away from where I had been standing. This was observed by the homeowner and his father.

Consequentially to the incident, apart from the immediate pain and recovery from bodily tissue trauma, I suffered from a serious nerve issue that appeared potentially disabling or quality-of-life threatening. This appears to have been caused by whiplash as my head, wearing a heavy fibreglass SES-issue helmet, was thrown suddenly back and then forward as I was propelled airborne by the impact. The nerve condition continued for months and was extremely distressing. I put in a claim for Workers Compensation which was initially denied. The SES through QFES told Work Cover that I had not reported my leg injuries at the time of the incident on 28 March 2022. This was patently not true as the reporter had access to the report I had made on the night of my injury. Despite my efforts to have the person withdraw and correct their mistaken advice to Work Cover, to my knowledge this was never done. I had discussions with various senior SES people and suggested that an apology in relation to my injury was in order. No apology has ever been forthcoming, either for the false statement, or about the root cause of my injury. A proper risk assessment was never done before the tree was cut with a chainsaw in that the chainsaw operator never consulted with other members of the SES party at the site in Kangaroo Point. This person failed to identify the risk of the tree rotating and his method of cutting up the tree did not minimise risks to either him or to other persons. The injury and consequential nerve issues plus my stress in dealing with unsympathetic SES and QFES staff who were in denial mode, plus having to fight an inappropriate decision to reject my Workers Compensation claim which took until late 2023 to resolve in my favour, have resulted in me being unable to countenance returning to volunteering duties with the SES, in what has for me been a completely unsupportive environment. There was no proactive support by the SES to assist me at any time. I have found my treatment by the SES, QFES and Work Cover appalling. Even thinking about the SES or passing an SES depot gives me the "shudders" and I have to try to turn my mind to other things. I would like to have this resolved, but I am unable to resolve this without active support by the SES. I will not go back to volunteering duties with the SES unless it is resolved. As far as I can tell, the SES does not treat its volunteers in an appropriate, humane and sympathetic way, like any other organisation might do with its employed and valued workforce. This says to me that the SES and its senior staff do not value their volunteers. It is no

surprise to me therefore that there is such high turnover for the majority of SES volunteers. The long-serving volunteers may therefore be part of the problem too, witness the long-serving volunteer who did not include anyone else in a critical risk assessment and who has said nothing at the time or later of regret about what happened on the night of 28 March 2022.