

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Now in my mid 60s I have been involved in volunteering since I was a little girl. It was an expected part of life in my family as part of service amongst our local community, predominantly through our church but also within my school and various activities my parents supported. For me, this has simply continued. Over those years I've been a volunteer in a wide range of capacities and have also managed volunteers. These management positions include governance and leadership positions at local, state and national levels. Literally hundreds of hours have been willingly given. Additionally I have managed volunteer programmes as part of my professional paid work. As time has passed I've become very aware of a declining interest in volunteering throughout society - this is backed up by formal research and reporting. People are "too busy", although with what is somewhat mysterious. I'm a competitive sportsperson, I work full time, I spend time with friends and run a house but I've made time to volunteer. What I don't do is spend time on social media, which has increasingly come to dominate conversations and absorb public consciousness. I'm likely to be unpopular by suggesting that this is often what absorbs people's time. What I also observe - and social media contributes to this - is an absorption with self rather than an interest in community and contributing to its wellbeing. At the same time as a volunteer and volunteer manager I further see an increasingly difficult legislative context around the ability to volunteer. With volunteers essentially now treated as paid staff the management requirements are onerous and often overwhelming. Organisations need to know what they're doing to get it right, with often severe consequences if they get it wrong. At a personal level I have spent days writing health and safety plans, policies and procedures covering everything required in a paid organisational context. These requirements extend to the most basic of volunteering operations including one in Cairns through which volunteers support older people without financial means to manage their pets at home by, for example, walking dogs, grooming cats and generally keeping owner and pet together. With the best of careful intentions and boundary-setting, our legislative duty of care as volunteer managers for volunteers is becoming outrageous. Our volunteers "just want to help by walking dogs", but are now required to complete all kinds of paperwork to sign up. It is far more complex in situations where a committee of volunteers is managing paid staff in operations spread from offices to field work in remote locations, the staff themselves sometimes managing volunteers. While resources to help with these requirements are available, the burden of responsibility to meet the requirements remains and by my estimate has more than tripled in recent years. I, too, am starting to withdraw. As a volunteer I have had the privilege of some wonderful - and appalling - experiences. Volunteers deserve proper attention and management but are often discounted and under-rated because "if they don't like it, they can just leave". This minimises the extensive contribution many people make in their own time for a plethora of reasons and can cause significant harm. If we want more volunteers, managing them needs to be recognised as skilled work. As a volunteer I have had some wonderful and debilitating experiences.