

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission to Volunteering Queensland Parliamentary Inquiry

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Summary of Submission:

This submission highlights the Mary Valley Rattler's views on volunteering challenges and opportunities, drawn from our extensive experience as a heritage railway and community organisation. Our recommendations focus on improving accessibility, volunteer retention, and organisational support for volunteer-driven initiatives.

Key Points:

1. Importance of Volunteering at the Mary Valley Rattler:

The Mary Valley Rattler is a not-for-profit heritage railway that relies heavily on its volunteers. These dedicated individuals contribute to:

- Preservation of historical assets, including locomotives and infrastructure.
- Community engagement through educational programs and tourism.
- Economic stimulation of the Mary Valley region by attracting visitors and hosting events.

Our volunteers range from retirees with decades of experience to young people gaining skills for future employment. Volunteering at the Mary Valley Rattler provides personal growth, social connections, and a sense of purpose for individuals.

2. Challenges Facing Volunteer Programs:

a) Accessibility for All Potential Volunteers: Despite efforts to make volunteering inclusive, barriers remain for individuals with disabilities or limited mobility. Physical accessibility at heritage sites can be a challenge, compounded by the financial and logistical hurdles of upgrading historical infrastructure.

b) Volunteer Recruitment and Retention: Recruitment has become increasingly difficult, with many potential volunteers deterred by competing demands on their time or a lack of awareness about opportunities. Retention is another issue, as volunteers may feel undervalued or overwhelmed if support systems are inadequate.

c) Training and Development Needs: Ensuring volunteers are equipped with essential skills—such as safety training for railway operations or first aid and CPR—requires significant resources, and consistent funding is vital to meeting these needs. The Mary Valley Rattler not only provides this training but also serves as a beacon of opportunity for young adults on the autism spectrum or with ADHD. By offering a supportive and inclusive environment, the Rattler empowers these individuals through personalised training, mentorship, and understanding, enabling them to develop critical skills, build confidence, and contribute meaningfully to its operations. For many, this experience has been life-changing, providing a sense of purpose and achievement they may not have found elsewhere. The Mary Valley Rattler exemplifies how community organisations can create lasting, positive impacts by fostering inclusivity, nurturing potential, and supporting both personal and professional growth.

d) Financial Pressures on Volunteer-Driven Organisations: The Mary Valley Rattler faces significant financial challenges related to supporting its volunteer workforce. As a not-for-profit company, we rely on grants and fundraising to sustain operations, but the increasing costs of insurance, compliance, and volunteer support infrastructure strain our capacity. Specific financial burdens include:

- The cost of medical certificates for rail safety work (RSW), which volunteers are required to obtain to meet regulatory standards. These certificates come at a significant cost, and we reimburse our volunteers for these expenses, adding to our financial strain.
- The cost of feeding volunteers, as we provide meals and refreshments during their shifts to sustain their efforts and recognise their contributions. While essential for morale, these costs present ongoing financial challenges.

e) Operational Implications of Volunteer Attrition: For a not-for-profit organisation like the Mary Valley Rattler, considerable time, effort, and financial resources are invested in recruiting, inducting, and training volunteers. This includes providing uniforms, assigning rosters, and allocating specific tasks and duties. When a volunteer is unable to attend their scheduled commitments, it compromises operations, disrupts planned activities, and places additional strain on other volunteers and staff. This not only affects service delivery but can also impact the morale of the team and the organisation's reputation with visitors and stakeholders.

f) Preserving Community Strength: The Vital Role of Volunteer Organisations: If volunteer groups and organisations were to close, the impact on the community would be profound and far-reaching. These groups often provide vital services and opportunities that strengthen social ties, support vulnerable individuals, and preserve cultural and historical heritage. For example, organisations like the Mary Valley Rattler not only sustain local tourism and economic activity but also serve as platforms for training, inclusion, and personal development, particularly for young adults with diverse needs, such as those on the autism spectrum or with ADHD.

Additionally, community organisations play a crucial role in supporting Centrelink recipients who are required to complete 15 hours of community service each week to maintain their payments. For these individuals, volunteer groups provide structured opportunities to fulfill their obligations while gaining valuable skills, experience, and a sense of purpose. If these groups were to collapse, it would leave Centrelink recipients with limited options, creating

significant challenges for both the individuals involved and the broader system tasked with supporting them.

The absence of such organisations would leave gaps in community support systems, depriving individuals of opportunities to gain experience, grow, and connect. It would also diminish the community's ability to preserve its unique history and traditions, impacting future generations. Moreover, the economic effects could be significant, as these organisations often attract visitors, generate local spending, and create indirect employment opportunities.

3. Recommendations:

a) Increased Funding for Accessibility Upgrades: Provide targeted grants to heritage organisations to improve accessibility for individuals with disabilities. This could include funding for ramps, pathways, and adaptive equipment.

b) Support for Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Campaigns: Introduce statewide campaigns to promote volunteering, with specific focus areas like youth engagement and the inclusion of marginalized groups.

c) Access to Training Programs and Resources: Establish centralised training resources for volunteers across sectors, ensuring consistency and reducing the financial burden on individual organisations.

d) Simplified Grant Application Processes: Streamline funding applications for small organisations, reducing administrative barriers and enabling them to focus on community impact.

e) Advocacy for Heritage Volunteering: Recognise the unique contributions of heritage organisations in preserving history and fostering community pride. Support policies that ensure their sustainability.

f) Financial Assistance for Compliance and Volunteer Support Costs: Introduce funding programs or subsidies to cover compliance-related costs, such as medical certificates for rail safety work, and to assist with volunteer support expenses, including uniforms and protective work wear, meals, and refreshments. This would alleviate the financial burden on volunteer-driven organisations.

Personal Stories:

The Mary Valley Rattler is powered by the passion and dedication of its volunteers, whose personal stories highlight the transformative impact of community service. Volunteers like Stan, who began his railway career in 1959, contribute invaluable expertise by clearing tracks, training younger generations, and preserving historical artifacts. Similarly, youth volunteers gain practical skills and confidence through roles in train and track maintenance, station management, and event coordination, fostering personal growth and a keen sense of purpose.

Together, these stories highlight the enduring legacy and community spirit fostered by the Mary Valley Rattler's volunteers. Ethan, an 18-year-old volunteer, exemplifies this impact through his remarkable commitment and passion for heritage preservation. Having contributed over 949 hours, Ethan has evolved from a shy student, with spectrum challenges, to a confident volunteer who enriches the visitor experience with his engaging running commentary, blending local history, locomotive insights, and charming anecdotes. His versatility shines through in various roles, from assisting passengers to maintaining equipment, and he recently passed his Steam Train Guard exam with aspirations to become a driver. Ethan's contributions not only preserve local history but also promote community engagement.

Another example of the support for volunteers as individuals, Joey has overcome a tragic upbringing to become an integral member of the Mary Valley Rattler volunteer team. His resilience and determination shine through in his contributions across all facets of the organisation, from enhancing guest experiences to assisting with station and workshop maintenance. Joey's journey is a testament to the power of community support and personal perseverance, as he channels his past challenges into a meaningful and positive impact. His dedication not only helps preserve the Rattler's operations but also inspires others with his story of strength and transformation.

Conclusion:

The Mary Valley Rattler appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. We urge the committee to consider the unique challenges faced by heritage organisations and to implement measures that foster inclusive, sustainable, and vibrant volunteering communities. We are committed to working with Volunteering Queensland and other stakeholders to ensure the future of volunteerism in our state.

For further information or to discuss this submission, please contact:

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