

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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I am currently in the role of First Officer of a Rural Fire Brigade in Queensland. Prior to that, I have been on our brigade's Executive Committee for four consecutive years in the roles of Treasurer and Brigade Officer. Prior to Rural Fire Service Queensland (RFSQ), I was involved as a volunteer of a local sporting club for fourteen consecutive years in executive committee positions and also volunteered on the local state school's P&C and with the local scouting group. My experience as a volunteer in my local Queensland community totals almost 25 years. In recent years with RFSQ I have seen a very obvious decline in volunteer numbers, and new recruit inquiries, which I believe is primarily due to three factors. These are as follows:

1. The introduction of mandatory qualification for, and holding of, the Queensland Government BlueCard rightly or wrongly put a barrier in place for numerous current and future volunteers. From first-hand experience, our brigade lost a long-serving and very highly skilled member due to a decade-ago minor drug offense. Due to this being noted on his Criminal History Check, he has seemingly been designated "unredeemable", even though he has long ago served the prescribed sentence/fine for a relatively minor charge. The hurdles to jump through in his particular case simply became too onerous for the time required to try and return to the volunteering role he had enjoyed for twenty years. Whilst I understand that this is a policy of the Queensland Government, the attainment of a BlueCard seems quite irrelevant to fighting fires - we are always in teams and never operating in a solo capacity - we also interact with children very rarely which would seem to be the point of the BlueCard's status in the first place.
2. In the case of the restructure of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) to move Queensland Fire and Rescue (QFR) and RFSQ to the newly-created Queensland Fire Department (QFD), volunteering upon which RFSQ absolutely relies has been severely hampered. The restructure has been poorly-planned, poorly-executed and major issues with the restructure remain seven months after the rollout of QFD. The added layers of bureaucracy have resulted in lags in communication, lengthy delays in decision-making and responsiveness and additional workload on volunteers already seeking to perform a demanding role. Current and potential volunteers have observed much of this chaos, and decided to either leave, reduce their involvement, or not join at all.
3. In the specific case of volunteering with RFSQ, the lack of timeliness in joining is an absolutely unforgivable debacle. A member of the public can take up to nine-and-a-half months to receive their "Volunteer ID" - with almost every one of our new members in the last twelve months taking at least 4-5 months to receive their Volunteer ID. Until this ID is received, a prospective member can technically have NO INVOLVEMENT in brigade activities, other than to attend a brigade's regular meetings. In previous times, the First Officer of the Brigade was able to exercise a level of judgement on the prospective member's involvement and, where deemed safe, these "members in waiting" could be involved in training and learning tasks. This involvement is CRITICAL in maintaining interest in brigade membership and in learning the roles associated with fire fighting and fire prevention. We have shifted so far into government bureaucracy now that a prospective member is not even allowed to access written training programs to begin studying for their future role/s - I find this absolutely beyond comprehension. The ONLY way to engage and keep volunteers involved is to have them PARTICIPATE from the start - there has to be some level of common sense in providing a practical pathway forward. If not, this single cause will see a complete stagnation of new recruits to volunteering with RFSQ.