

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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State Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

My name is Elizabeth Dillon, and I write this submission as an individual who served as a volunteer member in the New South Wales (NSW) State Emergency Service (SES) between 2017 and 2021. I thoroughly enjoyed the training and opportunities to serve the local community, and further afield, when I was deployed to regional NSW to assist with flood events. I volunteered both out in the field and in local Operations Centre and Divisional Command, when activated.

As a result of my time in the NSW SES, I obtained a Certificate 2 in Public Safety (SES) and am currently part-way through post-graduate studies in Disaster and Emergency Management.

Christmas 2021, I relocated from NSW to Kedron, Queensland (QLD) to be closer to family. On 22 January 2022, I submitted my interest to become an SES member, to the SES Brisbane RSO Team. The response received on 24 January 2022 advised that there were only two (2) recruitment intakes each year, and due to a delay with COVID19, the next intake which I could be considered for was mid-2023.

On 26 February 2022, during the Brisbane floods, I contacted the SES Brisbane RSO Team to enquire whether they had a spontaneous volunteer program, or something similar, where I could offer my services, by filling sandbags or answering phones, to reduce the workload for the volunteers in the local Brisbane Groups. I also sent a similar email to the SES Brisbane Admin team. On 1 March 2022 a response was received from the SES Brisbane RSO Team advising there was no spontaneous volunteer program, and that no recruitment processes are conducted during flood events. I was directed to contact Volunteering Qld (Mud Army), Local Government sites or GIVIT. In this same email, I was also advised to re-apply after 1 May 2022.

On 8 June 2022 I received an email from the Brisbane SES General Team, advising that the Rocklea facility had closed, and they were now offering day-time training at the Newmarket facility. Even though I had previously advised I was only available for training at night, I was asked if this was something I was interested in. This paragraph was followed by a note that advised they would not be recruiting until 2023. The email contained a link to a survey that was intended to capture the reasoning behind why I registered to become a volunteer member.

I received a reminder email on 13 September 2022, and was advised if I did not complete the survey by the closing date, I would need to reapply to become a volunteer member. By this stage, I was quite frustrated with the entire process, and that my skills and experience were not being recognised, so I did not re-apply.

November 2023, I relocated to Redcliffe, QLD, and as I was living in a different Local Government Area (LGA), I decided to submit my interest to volunteer again. I re-applied on 25 March 2024 and the following day received a response from the Local Controller advising that Redcliffe Group had completed their recruitment sessions. As an alternative, I was invited to attend a recruitment session scheduled at Deception Bay Group for the following day.

Following completion of all the usual security checks, I was accepted to join the Redcliffe Group, and the first training night would be Wednesday 15 May 2024.

I am a permanent employee of a QLD Government agency and am very familiar with all of the code of conduct and other mandatory training that needs to be completed when starting with an agency. However, irrespective of my previous experience, I was required to complete a 3-month probation, along with the other new recruits.

I provided copies of my qualifications and previous training schedule, and the Group Leader and Local Controllers set out to attain recognition of my prior learning (RPL). As far as I aware, this RPL was not attained during the probationary period.

When I first started with the Redcliffe Group, I was not advised of a start time, and assumed it was 7pm, like it was with my Unit in NSW. The first few weeks I noticed that by the time I arrived, the other recruits had already started their events for the evening. When I queried the start time, I was advised to be at base, ready to start by 6:45pm. As I worked in the city and commuted back to Redcliffe, I advised that the earlier start times would be a challenge. I continued to attend training sessions when health and work commitments allowed, some of which started earlier than 6:45pm. I mentioning to the Local Controller and Group Leader a few times that I found the 6:45pm start time a challenge. The Group Leader stated that the team would continue to support me as I decided whether I was able to fully commit to the SES.

When I enquired as to whether I could apply to join non-probationary training events offered by the Local Unit or further afield, initially I was advised I was not able to apply until I completed probation. On another occasion when I asked, I was advised I could apply for any training course that was available. Then, when I did apply for a couple of courses, I was advised that the spots were available to those who had been in the QLD SES longer than I.

Towards the end of the probationary period, I was asked to attend an interview at 6pm prior to the start of the training night. The leadership team at Redcliffe were aware of my time constraints, and for them to schedule the probationary interview at 6pm, did not show the support that they were meant to be providing.

I chose not to attend the probationary interview and as such, was not able to become a full member of the QLD SES.

I understand that when I joined the Redcliffe Unit, there was a significant amount of change occurring as the SES transitioned from what was Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES), to the Queensland Police Service (QPS). That being said, aside from the email accounts and online training portal accesses, the transition should not have affected the recruitment and RPL process.

I found my second experience with the QLD SES, better than the first, but it was found wanting. Communication at times was limited, and when it was provided, I received mixed information. My previous experience was not recognised, and my qualifications were really just pieces of paper.

There should be a transfer process, where SES volunteers from other states can easily apply for membership and have their qualifications and prior experience recognised. These volunteers who transfer should not be made to complete the same 3-month probation and mandatory training as all the new recruits. Any essential mandatory training should be conducted, and this should be followed by refresher training, so transferred volunteers can get assessed and maintain training currency. This would allow transfer volunteers to be made active sooner, and assist existing members, when requests for assistance (RFAs) are received.

I believe a spontaneous volunteer program is also something that needs to be considered for local areas. Spontaneous volunteers can attend the council depots or SES facilities and assist with filling sandbags, or other tasks that do not require a significant amount of training to complete. Some people who submit their interest to volunteer may not be able to commit to regular training nights

or weekends but have the ability to assist with storm preparation or response on an ad hoc basis. I believe this is one way the QLD SES could increase volunteer numbers.

Volunteering with the NSW SES was something I really enjoyed, and now, after my experience with the QLD SES over the past few years, I do not know if I will ever volunteer with the SES again.