

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No:	153
Submitted by:	<div></div>
Publication:	Making the submission public but withholding your name
Attachments:	See attachment
Submitter Comments:	

Submission on Volunteering in Queensland

I have been a volunteer with the State Emergency Service (SES) in Townsville for the past 7 years and see the need to address a few inequities in the way the State and Local Government Authority manage and support this valuable resource. Volunteering is the heart and soul of community service in Queensland, offered freely and willingly for those in need. It fosters social cohesion, supports vulnerable populations, delivers emergency response and recovery in a crisis and contributes significantly to the economy. However, despite its value, there is a pressing need for increased funding, better engagement, and more respectful treatment of volunteers to maximize their impact.

The current funding arrangements tend to be closely guarded secrets and this lack transparency provides the LGA (in this case Townsville City Council) the opportunity to under fund operations, facilities and equipment and often at the expense of safety for volunteers.

Over the past 4-5 years the Townsville City Council (TCC) have embarked on an aggressive campaign to shift the funding and support for SES groups away from the TCC and directly to Queensland State Government (QSG). A part of this process has been to starve local SES groups of funding to force QSG to respond. The result has been poor maintenance of our current facilities and outdated equipment.

There are too many examples for this submission but to provide a few – flood boat which is now 20+ years old and in constant disrepair. The last time this vessel was used it ran for 12 minutes before breaking down and to date still has not been repaired despite a desperate need during the most recent emergency in February 2025. TCC will not accept provision of a new vessel from the QSG on the basis of having to maintain it and depreciate it for replacement at the end of its useable life – in the most recent emergency the Northern Rain Event February 2025 to enter and leave our facility it was necessary for volunteers to wade through ankle deep water due to blocked drains and leaking gutters that TCC have refused to rectify – our vehicles are Toyota Landcruiser Troop Carriers and while versatile and robust are not safe for the carriage of passengers. The need to transport equipment uncontained along with side facing seating of passengers is without question a major safety issue and the TCC will do nothing about this. All these issues are safety related and could well be matters better dealt with through workplace health and safety and perhaps should be.

To quote Mark Armstrong Chief Officer Queensland State Emergency Service “the safety of our members and the community remains our highest priority” which seems a little disingenuous given the circumstances described above.

I would also point out that the TCC and QSG raise a substantial amount of revenue through the State Government Emergency Management Fire and Rescue Levy which I

understand is collected by TCC. The distribution of funds I believe is governed by legislation but to the best of my knowledge it goes to Queensland Fire Department and Queensland Rural Fire Service none of this goes to support for local SES units who respond to emergencies. Perhaps it is time to review this and reconsider distribution as the legislation is more than dates to 1990 and 2011.

There are many issues with the TCC treatment of SES and volunteers and I have to say from a personal perspective found TCC responses disrespectful and dismissive.

The cumulative impact on volunteers is a feeling of not being valued or being kept safe and this leads to a low level of member retention and more alarmingly a low level of response to emergency activation.

The Townsville Units undertake a diverse range of activities critical to this and other communities. We work with Queensland Police Service (QPS) for land, river and coastal marine searches for missing people. Provide the community with storm damage and flooding response, chainsaw operations, evacuation / rescue, road crash rescue, aerial surveillance, traffic management and incident management along with other support functions. We also deploy to assist other communities and in recent times sent team members interstate to Victoria and NSW and within Queensland to Cairns, Hallifax, Lucinda, Ingham, Charters Towers, Richmond and Brisbane just to name a few.

My concerns with the current funding, support and treatment of volunteers in Townsville will likely lead to a mass withdrawal of services by volunteers and this has already happened on a minor scale in other parts of Queensland. I'm not sure our community could survive such withdrawal let alone the embarrassment and significant disadvantage to the community. Please do something to address these issues.

The Value of Volunteering

Volunteering offers innumerable benefits to both the community and the volunteers themselves. It:

- **Economic Contribution:** Volunteers contribute billions to the Queensland economy through unpaid work, reducing the strain on public services. The SES deployed 35 staff and 389 Queensland volunteers, as well as 287 interstate SES volunteers for the Northern Rain Event in February 2025 many of whom were deployed to Ingham, Halifax, Lucinda and the Burdekin. The value of this contribution by volunteers, given freely and willingly, is substantial. In Townsville alone in just 15 days we responded to more than 1000 requests for assistance including 2 searches for missing people with more than 4400hrs given by volunteers in the Townsville Area Units. They deserve better support than that being currently offered.

- **Social Cohesion:** It brings people together, creating strong, united communities where individuals feel connected and supported. We serve all cultures and communities on an equal basis without favour and work cooperatively with all other agencies to deliver the best possible outcomes. We also have an ongoing community engagement programme to educate and prepare communities for impending emergencies focusing on development of preparation and self-reliance.
- **Skill Development:** Volunteers gain valuable skills and experiences, enhancing their employability and personal development. Through the delivery of community engagement activities volunteers educate the community making them more resilient and prepared for events.
- **Support to Vulnerable Populations:** Volunteers play a crucial role in providing support to those who are vulnerable or marginalized, ensuring they receive the priority care and assistance they need in a crisis.

Motivation of Volunteers

Understanding the motivation behind volunteering is key to fostering a robust volunteer community. Volunteers are driven by:

- **Altruism:** The desire to make a positive difference in the lives of others.
- **Personal Fulfillment:** The sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that comes from contributing to a meaningful cause.
- **Community Connection:** The opportunity to contribute to their community in diverse ways and feel a part of something larger that delivers benefits.
- **Skill Development:** Gaining new skills and experiences that can be beneficial in personal and professional realms.

The Need to Increase Funding

To sustain and grow the volunteers in this sector, increased funding and support along with a more positive attitude from TCC and QSG is essential. This investment will:

- **Enhance Training and Support:** Provide volunteers with the necessary training, resources, and ongoing support to carry out their roles effectively.
- **Expand Programs:** Enable the expansion of volunteer programs to meet the growing needs of the community and allow them to work safely with fit for purpose equipment.
- **Recognize and Reward Volunteers:** Ensure volunteers are acknowledged and appreciated for their contributions through recognition programs and by simply providing the right equipment to do the job.

Engagement and Respectful Treatment of Volunteers

It is crucial to foster a culture of engagement and respect for volunteers. This can be achieved by:

- **Effective Communication:** Keeping volunteers informed and involved in decision-making processes.
- **Recognition:** Acknowledging the contributions of volunteers as opposed to the manner of current treatment.
- **Supportive Environment:** Providing a supportive and inclusive environment where volunteers feel valued and respected.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Implementing feedback mechanisms to ensure volunteers' voices are heard and their concerns addressed.

Conclusion Volunteering is a vital component of Queensland's community fabric, and its value cannot be overstated. Increasing funding and support from TCC and QSG, enhancing engagement opportunities, and ensuring the respectful treatment of volunteers, we can stabilise and grow this essential sector. We urge the Townsville City Council and Queensland State Government to recognize the importance of volunteering in this emergency sector and take proactive steps to remedy the current disgrace the SES Townsville Units endures.