

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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## Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission from Spinal Life Australia & Sporting Wheelies

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Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into volunteering in Queensland.

Spinal Life Australia and Sporting Wheelies rely heavily on volunteers for events and programs. We've prepared the following submission highlighting our experiences and challenges.

### Spinal Life Australia

Spinal Life Australia is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to support people with spinal cord damage to live an accessible, equitable and empowered life. We are striving to be a national leader, with offices located across Queensland and Western Australia. We have more than 2,200 clients and members.

Alongside our (>900) paid staff, Spinal Life Australia derives tremendous value from the contributions made by our volunteers. Volunteers undertake a range of duties across our operations and these contributions benefit our clients and members and the broader community.

Volunteer roles at Spinal Life include Rehabilitation Assistant, Administration Officer (Finance), IT and Gardener & Groundskeeper.

At the Spinal Life Healthy Living Centre in Cairns our volunteer Rehabilitation Assistants, provide essential supports to therapists and clients in the rehabilitation hub and the hydrotherapy pool. They work alongside our Allied Health professionals and their duties include preparing equipment and resources for therapy sessions and assisting therapists and clients during sessions.

Volunteers come to Spinal Life with a variety of motivations. Some are looking for hands-on experience, which is aligned with their studies or a new career direction, others are practicing their English language skills, while others are looking to connect into community, help others and to give back after leaving or taking a break from the paid workforce.

In Cairns two long-term volunteers have gone on to become paid employees –

#### **Volunteer DM's story –**

DM is a highly qualified and experienced overseas-trained physiotherapist who is taking steps to have his qualifications recognised in Australia. DM initially came to Spinal Life to improve his English language skills and further develop and maintain currency of his clinical practice skills. DM volunteered for approx. 12 months before successfully being appointed as an Allied Health Assistant. DM is a valued member of our team as he continues to progress towards having his physiotherapy qualifications formally recognised.

#### **Volunteer BM's story –**

BM had retired from a long career in administration but continued to be an active volunteer with Red Cross and the Retired Police Officers Association. BM came to Spinal Life as a volunteer Administration Officer. With her high-level admin skills and warm personality, BM quickly became a much-valued part of the team. As operations expanded, we needed an additional part-time team member and BM applied for and was successful in taking up the position. BM continues to maintain her other volunteer commitments while working part-time for Spinal Life Australia.

We understand that research suggests that the number of people seeking to volunteer may be reducing and that the culture of volunteering is changing. With growth in the health and disability services sectors, volunteering is a great option for developing skills or having a 'taste' of the industry.

Spinal Life Australia has an internal "no card, no start" policy which requires all staff, including volunteers, to undertake a Working with Children check and NDIS Worker Screening. Also, all staff are required to undertake mandatory online training modules.

Our processes may be a barrier to some potential volunteers who may not understand these requirements, who struggle with English language, who don't have access to a computer or have limited computer skills.

Attracting volunteers continues to be an issue. In Cairns, Spinal Life Australia works closely with FNQ Volunteers. FNQ Volunteers promotes our vacant volunteer positions and screens suitable applicants for skills and availability before referring them to Spinal Life for recruitment and potential onboarding.

The services provided by FNQ Volunteers is excellent. We wouldn't have the volunteer program that we have if it wasn't for them.

FNQ Volunteers has a broad reach into the community. People who are looking to volunteer, know to go to FNQ Volunteers. Through FNQ Volunteers we've recruited highly skilled long-term volunteers who hadn't previously heard of Spinal Life. FNQ Volunteers have a good reputation in the community amongst organisations looking for volunteers and people who are looking to volunteer.

We also value the training provided by FNQ Volunteers and appreciate their efforts to recognise volunteers through the annual Volunteer Awards.

Spinal Life Australia would love to attract more volunteers from all walks of life.

Recruiting and onboarding volunteers is a relatively resource intensive process for Spinal Life. It is difficult for our organisation when a newly recruited volunteer doesn't continue with the position. This re-enforces the value of good initial screening processes, including making sure that the applicant is very clear on the role and our expectations.

#### **Recruitment Methods:**

SLA currently utilises:

- FNQ Volunteers – main source of referrals
- Social media campaigns
- Staff networks and word-of-mouth referrals

Key Challenges:

1. Recruiting suitable people when fewer people are volunteering
2. Resource Constraints: Limited internal resources dedicated to recruiting, onboarding and managing volunteers

## Sporting Wheelies

Sporting Wheelies is a leading provider of opportunities for people with disability seeking to get involved in sports, recreation, and rehabilitation therapy. We are committed to helping people with disability navigate the sport and recreation landscape, whether it be people interested in learning more about sport at a beginner level right through to helping more accomplished sports people to connect with development pathways. We continue to work towards health and fitness programs available across Queensland, for people of all ages and have a dedicated gym and parasports clubhouse in Milton, Brisbane.

We currently maintain a base of 48 active volunteers (2024) who support our sport events and programs. Our primary volunteering needs centre around boccia competitions, The Classics (wheelchair basketball state championships – 3-day event), and regional events. Given the specialised nature of parasport and adaptive sports, our volunteers play a crucial role in ensuring events run safely and effectively for all participants.

### Recruitment Methods:

We currently utilise:

- Social media campaigns
- Registration form emails
- Staff networks
- Exercise Physiology student engagement
- Word-of-mouth referrals

### Key Challenges:

1. Regional Barriers: Particularly for events like the Darling Downs Wheelchair Basketball Challenge
  - Significant difficulty securing volunteers in regional areas
  - Limited volunteer pool outside metropolitan areas
  - Challenges with travel to and from regional events
2. Resource Constraints:
  - Single-person volunteer management structure
  - No dedicated funding for volunteer programs
  - Minimal partnerships (currently only with Spinal Life)

- Insufficient volunteer numbers leading to limited break times for volunteers.

3. Retention Issues:

- High turnover among student volunteers (typically one-time participation)
- Core group of long-term volunteers but insufficient numbers
- Need for more engaging retention strategies

**Recommendations:**

1. Government Support:

- Establish dedicated funding for volunteer programs
- Create regional volunteering incentives

2. Infrastructure:

- Develop a centralised volunteer database
- Implement volunteer management systems

3. Partnerships:

- Expand disability organisation partnerships
- Create university partnerships beyond Exercise Physiology
- Develop corporate volunteer programs

4. Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games:

- Use the Games as a catalyst for volunteer development
- Create sustainable volunteer engagement programs

Volunteering is a win:win:win situation, being positive for the volunteer, the organisation and the broader community.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. Sporting Wheelies and Spinal Life Australia welcome the opportunity to discuss these points further and contribute to developing solutions that benefit the entire volunteering sector in Queensland.