

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission to the inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

February 2025

Image above: Tracy has been volunteering with Australian Red Cross for over 10 years. She has a full-time job. When the 2019/2020 bushfires spread across Queensland and New South Wales, she donned the Australian Red Cross uniform on weekends, nights, and took time off work to lend a hand.

About us

Established in 1914 and by [Royal Charter](#) in 1941, Australian Red Cross is auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. We have a unique humanitarian mandate to respond to disasters and emergencies. This partnership means governments can benefit from a trusted, credible, independent and non-political partner with local to global networks, who will work to implement humanitarian goals in a way that maintains the trust of government and Australian society.

Australian Red Cross is one of 191 Red Cross or Red Crescent National Societies that, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) – the world's largest and most experienced humanitarian network.

The Movement is guided at all times and in all places by seven [Fundamental Principles](#): Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. These principles sum up our ethics and the way we work, and they are at the core of our mission to prevent and alleviate suffering.

We remain neutral, and don't take sides, including in politics; enabling us to maintain the trust of all and to provide assistance in locations others are unable to go. Volunteering is in our DNA, and thousands of volunteers and members support us every day, helping solve social issues in their own communities. All our work is inspired and framed by the principle of Humanity: we seek always to act where there is humanitarian need.

Core areas of expertise for Australian Red Cross include Emergency Services, Migration, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Programs, Community Activities and Programs. Highlights from our [2023–2024 Annual Report](#):



18,300+
members and volunteers acting
for humanity



213,000+
Australians supported during 70
emergency activations

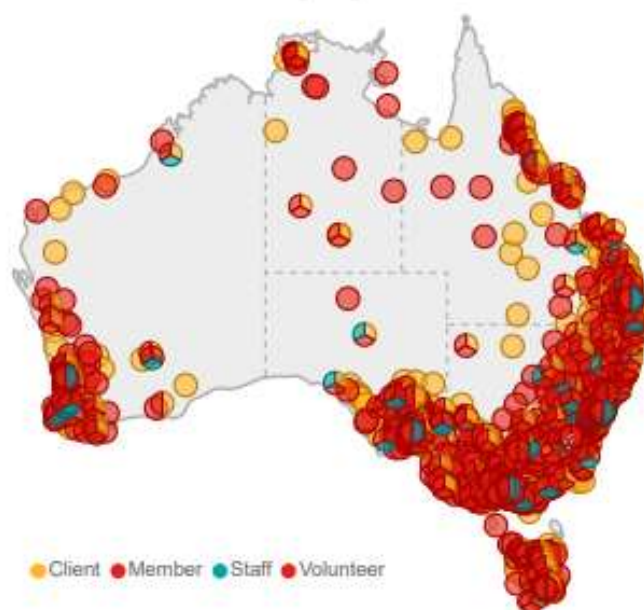


5.8 million+
people accessed information
from disaster preparedness
campaigns



23,600+
people from 129 countries
supported through migration
programs

Location of Red Cross people and clients



Purpose

Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to respond to the [Volunteering in Queensland Inquiry](#). We have focused our response on those areas where we have extensive expertise and that align with the unique humanitarian mandate of Australian Red Cross. Thus, the following sections address the Terms of Reference 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Summary of recommendations

Australian Red Cross recommends that the Queensland Government:

Recommendation 1

Invest in Queensland's volunteering sector, including Australian Red Cross, to cover the significant costs of recruiting, screening, training, and maintaining a workforce that can deploy across the state when and where they are needed.

Recommendation 2

Ensure contracts and partnerships with volunteer-led organisations fund the full costs of delivering services and cover multiple years to provide certainty for service delivery and sustainability of impact.

Recommendation 3

Work towards national standardised requirements and centralised records to streamline compliance and onboarding processes for volunteers and organisations.

Recommendation 4

Promote a culture of volunteerism through education and incentives.

Foreword

Every day, all over the world, people give their time and energy to help others without the expectation of pay. Voluntary Service is one of the Fundamental Principles of the worldwide Red Cross Red Crescent Movement (the Movement). Globally, we have more than 16 million volunteers doing humanitarian work, consistent with our auxiliary role to public authorities.

Our expertise and knowledge as a volunteer-led organisation can strengthen the volunteering ecosystem in Queensland and across Australia. We prioritise locally-led approaches that put communities at the heart of what we do.

Already in 2025, Australian Red Cross emergency services volunteers have deployed to North Queensland to manage evacuation centres in Ingham, support recovery hubs across North Queensland and conduct outreach to check on people who have just returned to their flooded homes. As the most disaster-prone state in the country, over time, our volunteers help build community capacity and strengthen community resilience across Queensland.

We know people in Queensland want to volunteer to help. We are proud of their contribution to building social capital. The monetary value of social capital in reducing negative mental health and life satisfaction effects after disasters is substantial, and even higher in remote regions ([Australian Red Cross and Deakin University, 2024](#)). Volunteering also provides a pathway to job creation ([Department of Education and Workplace Relations](#)).

However, as *The State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024* report makes clear, the sector is struggling to maintain our current volunteering cohorts. Increased cost-of-living pressures, competing demands on time, inflexible arrangements to volunteer and a lack of understanding about opportunities all complicate the volunteering experience.

We note the relevance of other reports and consultative processes relevant to the Inquiry's terms of reference, including:

- Volunteering Queensland's *The State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024* report
- Office of the Inspector-General of Emergency Management 2023–2024 Severe Weather Season Review (*2023–24 IGEM Report*)
- Submissions made to Parliament for the Queensland disaster and emergency management reform bills, including by Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) and Volunteering Queensland.
- [New South Wales'](#) review of its emergency services volunteering sector, which aligned with elements of our submission (volunteer recruitment strategy, addressing financial costs of volunteering and recognition and portability of training and qualifications).

Collin Sivalingum

State Director – Queensland

1. Investment

Recommendation 1

Invest in Queensland's volunteering sector, including Australian Red Cross, to cover the significant costs of recruiting, screening, training, and maintaining a workforce that can deploy across the state when and where they are needed.

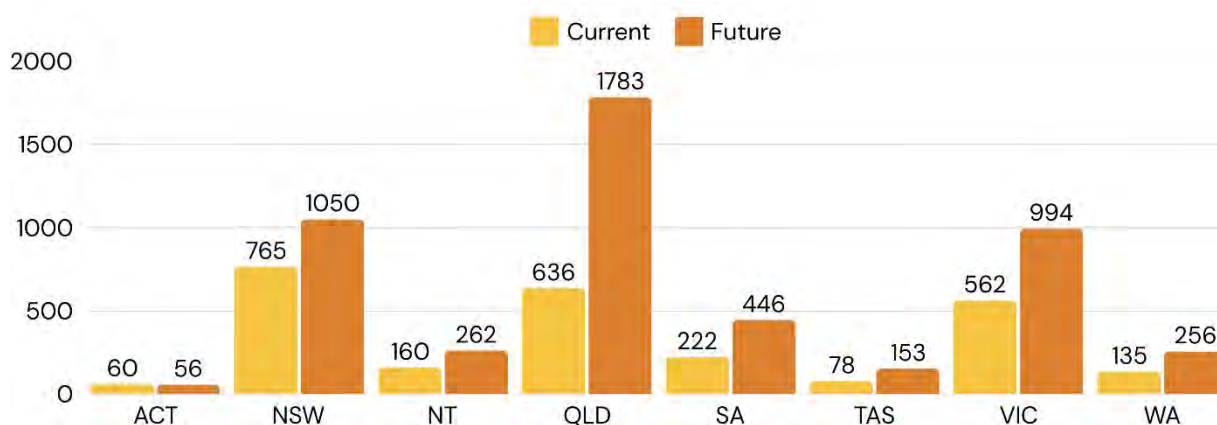
Recommendation 2

Ensure contracts and partnerships with volunteer-led organisations fund the full costs of delivering services and cover multiple years to provide certainty for service delivery and sustainability of impact.

- 1.1 As set out in the [Paying what it takes report](#) (Social Ventures Australia & Centre for Social Impact, 2022), funders in Australia have been reluctant to fully fund overhead costs of not-for-profit organisations. This leaves a sector with weak basic infrastructure, which is needed to run programs, help clients and deliver meaningful outcomes.
- 1.2 Governments and private funders need to invest in the true costs of delivering sustainable and impactful social services, which is often delivered by volunteer-led organisations.
- 1.3 Organisations, including Australian Red Cross, make significant investments to recruit, train, and retain volunteers. Our volunteers need to be prepared to provide services to communities in challenging circumstances, particularly in emergency services, collective trauma responses, supporting evacuation flights from overseas crises, and other programs.
- 1.4 At Australian Red Cross, we have different types of volunteers. Nationally, we draw on a pool of 16,000 volunteers to provide services across all programs. However, from this pool, 2,500 volunteers are trained to perform emergency services functions.
- 1.5 Our emergency services volunteers undergo comprehensive training in AIIMS (Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System), Disaster Management, Community Recovery, Psychological First Aid and Cultural Awareness. Further training is provided to those in specialist roles.
- 1.6 These volunteers participate in pre-briefing sessions ahead of disaster season and in state, territory and national simulations, working effectively alongside all levels of government, the Australian Defence Force and other emergency services organisations.
- 1.7 We specialise in providing trauma-informed support to vulnerable people, including people with disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds,

young people and children, the elderly, and First Nations people. All of our volunteers are security screened and have appropriate working with vulnerable people/children checks.

- 1.8 During onboarding process, our volunteers learn how to use our rostering, reporting and other IT systems and software. Australian Red Cross provides a range of support services to look after the welfare of our volunteers.
- 1.9 Demands on our volunteer workforces to stand up for disasters are increasing, particularly in Queensland, the most disaster-prone state in the country. The [2023-24 IGM Report](#) highlighted that, from 1 October 2023 to 30 April 2024, 12 disaster events occurred, including 11 within a four-month period. Of the 77 local government areas and one town authority in Queensland (Weipa), 66 were activated for Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.
- 1.10 The Report demonstrates how Australian Red Cross' volunteers provide psychosocial support at evacuation centres and recovery hubs. Australian Red Cross provided psychological first aid at every community consultation forum for the drafting of the IGM report, helping Queenslanders as they relived traumatic experiences.
- 1.11 Between disasters, our emergency services volunteers work within their communities to build individual, household and community readiness through our comprehensive [resilience and preparedness programs](#).
- 1.12 We have aggregated existing Australian Red Cross deployment data with historical event and activation data from the National Emergency Management Agency to estimate potential growth rates and the associated number of volunteers needed to continue to respond to emergencies nationwide.



Graph 1 - Current (2025) and predicted (over the next four years) of volunteers based on need.

- 1.13 Some volunteer-based agencies in the emergency services space receive ongoing funding to maintain and stand up their services. This includes initiatives to increase membership, provide ongoing engagement of volunteers, enhance and deliver services. Other non-profit organisations and the social services sector – including Australian Red Cross – stand up during disasters when asked without such funding.

- 1.14 For Australian Red Cross, current disaster funding arrangements do not recognise the costs incurred to maintain a base capability which governments rely on in crisis.
- 1.15 *Australian Red Cross does not receive government funding to recruit, screen, train and support our volunteers.***
- 1.16 Payment for activating this capability is generally made on a reimbursement basis and for the duration of activation alone, without recognition of the full costs of service delivery. Outside of an activation period, we incur costs of onboarding, training and maintaining a significant pool of deployment-ready volunteers.
- 1.17 The National Strategy for Volunteering 2023–2033 noted the “unsustainable reliance on an unpaid workforce to deliver essential services and programs in the community”.
- 1.18 We know the reported rate of formal volunteering has been steadily declining ([National Strategy for Volunteering 2023–2033](#)). In 2024, Volunteering Queensland noted that “with many people often needing to work multiple jobs and irregular or longer hours, those who do have spare time, such as grandparents, friends, acquaintances and neighbours are increasingly being called upon to help and take on caring duties and/or local neighbourhood work” ([State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Advocacy Plan](#)).
- 1.19 Despite these pressures, Australian Red Cross continues to attract volunteers in Queensland and across the country. Last year, more than 3,500 new volunteers joined Australian Red Cross nationally.
- 1.20 Government can leverage our ability to attract a steady supply of volunteers, but we need assistance to train, maintain and deploy these volunteers when Queensland needs them most.
- 1.21 Queensland’s [Communities 2032 Action Plan 2022–2025](#) recognised that, in order to promote stability in the community and social services sector and help build workforce capability, longer-term contracts (5 year) would be provided where possible. We would recommend the same approach applies to the volunteering sector, to reflect the ongoing need for volunteers-led community workforces.
- 1.22 There are broader economic benefits to investing in volunteering. Through volunteering experiences, people can improve and demonstrate employable skills, which helps create pathways to employment ([Department of Employment and Workplace Relations](#)).

Australian Red Cross' specific funding needs

- 1.23 Australian Red Cross – through our donors and partners – covers all costs associated with the recruitment, training and maintaining of our emergency services workforce of 2,500 people. We do this without government support.
- 1.24 But as disasters are increasing in severity and impact, and we are being called upon more frequently – we need to double the number of emergency services volunteers over the next four years to keep pace with the community needs.
- 1.25 We are calling on government support to grow our community workforce to 5,000 over the next four years, enabling them to deliver:
- Assessments of people's recovery needs
 - Psychological first aid and one-to-one support for people impacted by disasters
 - Customised disaster management training and support for councils.

Rapid needs assessments

- 1.26 While state and territory governments carry out physical impact assessments to understand damage and guide investment decisions, there is no consistent, equivalent assessment of the human-social impacts of disasters, including on those who experience vulnerability.
- 1.27 Australian Red Cross is the only organisation that has an evidence-based process that has been tested in the field and can be scaled for national delivery through our network of trusted volunteers.
- 1.28 This process would provide governments with real-time aggregated data about the human-social impacts of the disaster on the community, and individual and household strengths and needs. This data is essential to informing recovery efforts and responsible spending decisions including packages funded through the disaster recovery funding arrangements.
- 1.29 Data is collected alongside delivery of psychological first aid and one-to-one support, enabling a 'tell us once' approach.
- 1.30 Our process has been tested and refined with governments in Queensland (2022, 2023), Northern Territory (2022), Western Australia (2021), New South Wales (2022), and with local governments in Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania (2019–23).
- 1.31 With government support, we can roll this capability out for every medium and large-scale disaster event in Queensland and nationally.

Psychological first aid and one-to-one support

- 1.32 Psychological first aid – delivered at the time of the event or in the weeks that follow – aims to reduce initial distress, meet immediate mental health needs, promote coping and encourage adjustment.
- 1.33 We provide one-to-one support to people with complex needs, helping people who experience vulnerability access support in a culturally and psychologically safe way. We connect people to essential services and ensure timely, personalised assistance that reduces trauma, addresses immediate need and guides recovery efforts.
- 1.34 Australian Red Cross has a strong track record of deploying emergency services volunteers across the state. Figure 1 demonstrates how Australian Red Cross responded in Queensland, during six activations in late 2023–2024.
- 1.35 With government support, we can support events of any size nationally, including collective trauma events (public tragedies, acts of violence, public memorials).

Australian Red Cross activations across Queensland: Cyclones, storms and bushfires

State, District and Local authorities activated Australian Red Cross six times for severe weather events. Australian Red Cross helped every time, providing trained volunteers who delivered psychological first aid to affected Queenslanders.

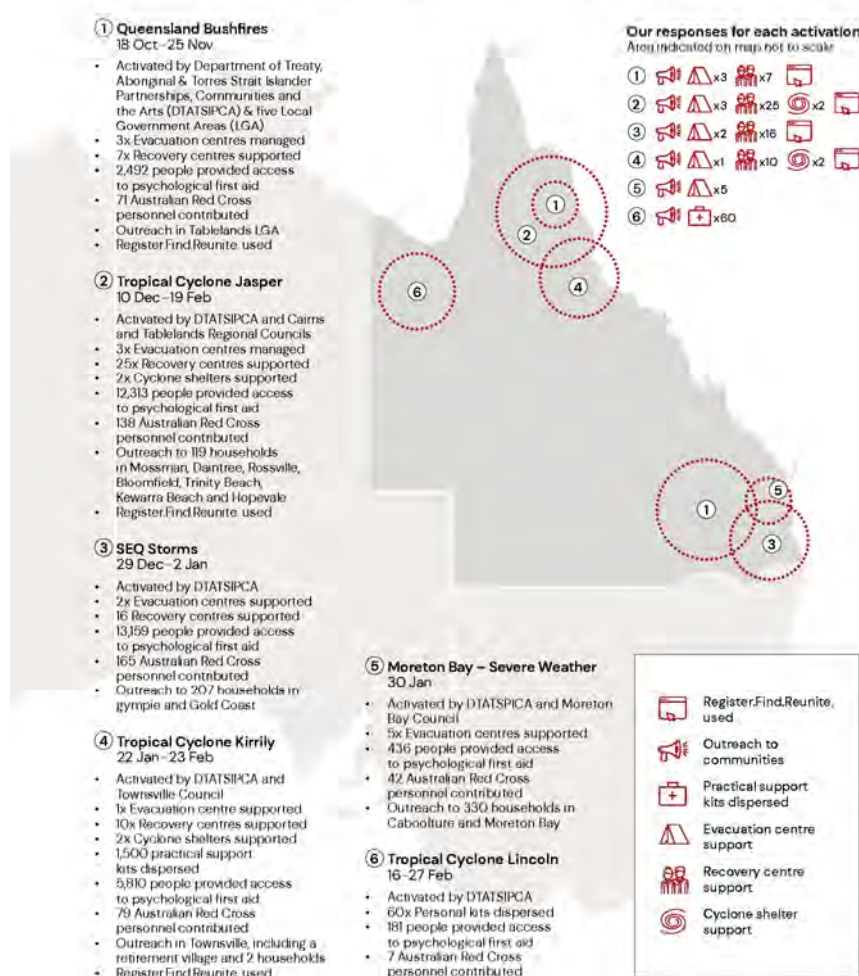


Figure 1: Australian Red Cross' volunteer-led activations in Queensland (Oct 2023 – Feb 2024)
([Response in Action: Disaster and Collective Trauma Events](#) Report)

Council capability

- 1.36 Submissions to the [Inquiry into Government Sustainability](#) along with evidence presented through the [Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding](#) revealed that local governments on the frontline of disasters frequently lack the resources and expertise needed to meet community needs and expectations.
- 1.37 With Government support, we can provide **specialist support** to develop response, preparedness and recovery plans in areas of greatest risk and need as identified in consultation with Australian Local Government Association and Local Government Association of Queensland.
- 1.38 Australian Red Cross emergency management tools and training products are evidence-based, align with Australian, state and territory emergency management frameworks, and draw from domestic and international best practice. This includes lessons learned from 191 Red Cross Societies across the world and specialist hubs including the Red Cross Climate Centre, Psychosocial Centre and Global Preparedness Centre.
- 1.39 Training would include evacuation centre management, psychological first aid, recovery planning and collective trauma response.
- 1.40 Our training ensures that the needs of people with disability, people from culturally and diverse backgrounds, First Nations people, young people and children, the elderly and people with complex needs are considered throughout all phases of the disaster lifecycle.

"The Ipswich City Council Mayor and other members of the Ipswich City LRRG expressed their thanks and how impressed they were about the ongoing readiness and recovery training being provided by Australian Red Cross in support of the Ipswich community."

2. Compliance

Recommendation 3

Work towards national standardised requirements (for similar roles) and centralised records to streamline compliance processes for volunteers and organisations.

- 2.1 The protection and safety of people is always our top priority. All our volunteers are security screened and have working with vulnerable people/children checks.
- 2.2 The broader compliance environment, however, is costly and often cumbersome. Systems quickly go out of date or require maintenance including to meet the security and privacy expectations of governments and the community. As volunteers onboard with different organisations, they become frustrated with varied requirements for similar roles.
- 2.3 National standardised requirements (i.e. blue card, police check and other skills-based training) for skilled volunteering roles and centralising records could expedite volunteer recruitment and mobilisation, and reduce duplication across the volunteering sector. It would help improve the volunteering experience and create greater word-of-mouth support to increase volunteering numbers.
- 2.4 Developing a national volunteering passport and delivering a central platform of tools and resources are both featured in the 2024–2027 Action Plan for the National Strategy for Volunteering 2023–2033.
- 2.5 The scope of developing national standardised requirements and centralising records would extend beyond Queensland and have national relevance as well as for other States and Territories. Encouraging national application and interoperability with other Australian jurisdictions would support cross-border activations of our volunteers. As Australia's most disaster-prone state, Queensland may stand to benefit from a nationalised approach.
- 2.6 Our internal consultation with Queensland-based volunteers in leadership roles in 2025 found near universal frustration with variable and fragmented onboarding requirements between different organisations. Particularly in rural and regional areas in Queensland, people often volunteer for more than one organisation, including Australian Red Cross, Rotary, Meals on Wheels and the Salvation Army for example.
- 2.7 Our volunteers reported that standardising compliance requirements across organisations, and offering a centralised system to house compliance checks would enhance the experience and result in more volunteers completing organisational onboarding processes.

3. Creating a social culture of volunteerism

Recommendation 4

Promote coordination and a culture of volunteerism through education and incentives.

Raise community awareness of volunteering opportunities

- 3.1 We believe there would be value in a coordinated effort to raise the profile of volunteerism. This could include a targeted media campaign that highlights volunteering opportunities and experiences, particularly for young people. We support initiatives that celebrate volunteers such as the Queensland Volunteering Award.
- 3.2 A campaign could seek to reach a diverse range of people, to ensure volunteering roles are reflective of the communities they serve.
- 3.3 In general, government infrastructure that engages volunteers should be as inclusive as possible. This might include translation of guidance documents (or targeted funding opportunities to enable organisations to translate their materials), support for providing requisite identification documents or increasing use of digital applications (so people who do not have access to private transport can still participate).

Incentivise

- 3.4 Whilst their motivations to volunteer were largely internal, Australian Red Cross volunteers suggested they valued external recognition of their efforts.
- 3.5 We have had success with our [Youth in Emergencies](#) program in South Australia. This program credits volunteering hours with Australian Red Cross towards Duke of Edinburgh Awards requirements, which young people can leverage to gain employment opportunities.
- 3.6 Programs like these that enable volunteers to credit hours towards other recognised qualifications help maximise the value of time, which we know is in high demand.

Maintain [community service leave](#)

- 3.7 Our consultation process affirmed that volunteers value the ability to access community service leave, which enables them to deploy when required, without using other forms of leave. Queensland has one of Australia's strongest approaches to community service leave, particularly for voluntary emergency management activities.

- 3.8 There is an opportunity for the Queensland Government to advocate for community service leave to be embedded in national and other state and territory jurisdictions and in a greater range of sectors.

Promote innovative co-designed volunteer programs

- 3.9 The Queensland Government could engage untapped pools of employee volunteers by co-designing programs with corporate partners and volunteering organisations. For example, we are part of an incentive trial in Victoria which provides targeted discounts for essential workers in a range of businesses. As we receive further feedback from our volunteers, we would be happy to provide this advice for the Inquiry.
- 3.10 Corporate organisations are seeking ways to advance corporate social responsibility objectives, which could align with the Queensland Government's objectives to increase volunteering numbers. We are eager to be involved in such co-designed projects.

Promote programs for individuals who volunteer

- 3.11 The Queensland Government could consider other financial incentives for individuals who volunteer. These have been shown to be effective in other jurisdictions. For example in the United States, tax rebate programs reportedly increased retention and engagement among emergency services volunteers, allowing them to earn points through activities like emergency response calls, training, and public outreach ([FEMA, 2023](#)).

Promote programs for young volunteers

- 3.12 Evidence suggests that young people are willing to volunteer when opportunities align with their values ([National Volunteering Strategy](#)). We know that young people are looking for flexible opportunities to make an impact.
- 3.13 Increasing cost-of-living pressures are particularly acute for younger people who may be studying or early in their careers. Our Youth in Emergencies example mentioned above shows our targeted effort to recruit young people.

Conclusion

For 110 years, Australian Red Cross has helped Queenslanders prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. We have been established by Royal Charter to work alongside Australian governments, and those who act with their authority, whenever there is an emergency, crisis or disaster.

No other organisation has this unique auxiliary status. We are embedded in emergency management arrangements in Queensland. We support the State Disaster Coordination Group and contribute to local and district disaster management groups across the state.

At Australian Red Cross, we are independently seeking to modernise our engagement with our own volunteers and improve the volunteering experience. In 2025, Australian Red Cross is planning further consultations with our volunteers and members, to learn from their experiences and to strengthen processes and systems that support the volunteer journey. Australian Red Cross would be happy to continue to engage the Department on this process.

In addition to our existing Queensland-based programs, Australian Red Cross is exploring how best we can contribute to the 2032 Brisbane Olympic and Paralympic Games agenda, anchored in our focus in supporting humanity. We will draw on lessons from other National Societies which have supported the Games in Paris and Tokyo, as well as identifying roles where we can add value aligned with our humanitarian mission.

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