

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No:	228
Submitted by:	<div></div>
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Attachments:	See attachment
Submitter Comments:	

1. The current state of volunteering in Queensland and the value it contributes, including benefits to volunteers, organisations, communities and the State;

It is our view that the current state of volunteering within our group is abysmal.

- In the last 5 years the average number of recruits for our group from a recruitment has been approximately 8. Recruitment has been restricted to once a year which has hampered building in numbers.
- From our limited data (other data not available) of those recruited in any year only 25% remain active after 16 months (again this data is limited to our group).
- Morale is low due to the shift and uncertainty of the upper levels of structure in SES.
- Movement from a group to unit-based community has diminished the social rewards of belonging to and connecting with a SES group and becoming part of its community first.
- On a positive note, having the region in assisting in coordinating the administrative parts of the indoctrination process has lightened the burdensome load on the new recruits and group staff.
- The value of volunteering depends on one's perspective. From a government standpoint this is a reduced labour cost as no man hours are charged against any account.

The recent emergency in Northern Queensland has assisted in this year's recruiting efforts due to the publicity and public wanting to assist during times of crisis. The main take aways from this with regard to recruiting.

- Make the intake for volunteers coincide with a short period of time from the end of the disaster.
- Utilize the media to point out where to volunteer during this time period.
- Provide social media sites that cover both the ongoing efforts of the volunteers and the ability to join such a group.

From a volunteer's viewpoint are their benefits of volunteering via Social and Psychological rewards?

- Does volunteering provide meaning and fulfilment in life?
 - For some volunteers the group structure provides a community where the volunteer has common interests. The community at the group level should be emphasized as being critical to the individual volunteer as the volunteer becomes part of the group and bonds with the group.
- Does the volunteering reduce stress, anxiety and depression or does it add too it due to the demands of training and required performance?
 - When the group is allowed to have social interactions, the volunteer has a reduced stress level as they receive support from the group.

- When extremely high-performance levels are placed upon a volunteer who has limited time to devote to training the stress level increases. Results from this is to remove the stress the member leaves the organization.
- Acknowledging that the volunteer only has limited time to devote to any specific training and accommodating the that individuals' needs through timing and location of training keeps the individual as a volunteer.
- Does the SES identify individual goals achievable in the SES and promotes the individual to achieve those goals?
 - Skills are achievable through training, although highly sought-after training is limited and restricted by either region or district making it difficult for the individual to achieve gratification through training.
 - Some volunteers wait up to 5 years for courses such as flood boat, air observer, vertical rescue or even 4x4 driving. Reasons given are training demands, number of trainers and equipment.
 - These reasons are valid but need to be reviewed with regard to what the end goal is. Is it to train members or just to run a course? It has been stated that quotas are set for the groups and units allowing them only a certain number of members to be given training in some high-risk activities.
 - It must be understood that any volunteer that has been trained in any high-risk activity may only have a fleeting connection to stay in the SES. They may be here for this week's training and resigned at the next training night. Having multiple personnel within a group trained allows for flexibility of response and ability to fill gaps due to volunteer resignations.
 - The organisation needs to focus on training to give members multiple skills to allow them to effectively respond to disasters and incidents.
 - The organisations training rules places restrictions of student numbers per course reducing the number of members being trained.

2. The views of volunteers, prospective volunteers and the volunteering sector on the current barriers to volunteering, including excessive legislative and regulatory burdens and other restrictions adversely limiting active volunteers;

Prolonged time between the initial interview and filling out of paper work to being assimilated into the group for the first time is detrimental and our group experiences anywhere between 10-35% loss of prospective volunteers from initial signup (from group records). The organisational policies and rules need to be reviewed to allow for better recruitment and retention.

- There is now a six-week vetting process experienced at the group level that includes police checks, blue card application, and other forms. In this time, it is most likely that the person will not return.
 - It is recommended that this vetting process be reduced or that the applicant be allowed to attend the group during training sessions.

There currently is a problem with attempting to centralize the training of new recruits. This is not problematic if the person is being paid and compensated for travel. In the volunteer world this is not the case. This is another reason for new members to lose interest and not continue with the program.

- It is recommended that the initial training be done at a location that places the smallest burden on the new member. It is easier to have a trainer go to a location to train members rather than having members that are at a risk of not continuing to do so.

Members are issued strict time constraints to meet when performing tasks such as land searches and community events (time to arrive-time to leave). These restrictions although sometimes required are constructed under the assumption that the member is a paid member of the workforce. This results in the member who is a volunteer with a strict work schedule unable to participate in the event.

- Again, it needs to be noted that the volunteer is giving up their time and in some cases losing pay to participate.

Acceptance by the paid SES community that the volunteer is giving up more than receiving.

Placing volunteers ahead of paid staff in highly sought-after training. The training is usually given when the paid staff can take the training in lieu of their regular work commitments. They are also more aware of the availability of the training the normal volunteer due to inside information. Volunteers are aware of this and it has become a soar point for those who have requested the training and are passed over.

Favouritism is present within the organization and this presents a problem to the overall leadership. It has been seen that when a desirable course, training event, or opportunity presents itself that the overall consideration for the applicants is usually given to a paid staff member or someone that the paid staff member knows.

Resolution to this problem could be.

- Minimum quota for volunteer members that are not paid staff or dual paid staff and volunteer, for courses.
 - Priority given in cases where limited activities are available for volunteers to the volunteers.
 - That paid staff are advised and trained that they are to seek out special training only after the quota for volunteers has been met or that a sufficient time has elapsed that indicates no volunteer requests the training.
 - That an exclusion period be adapted for staff that excludes them for a period of time for registering for specific courses until the notice of training has been published for the volunteers.
 - Place volunteers wants and needs above paid staff.
3. The current experiences, motivations and challenges for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations and their recommendations for addressing challenges and improving the volunteering experience;

Put the needs and wants of the volunteer above those of paid staff. Staff are already receiving compensation a volunteer only receives recognition. A volunteer gives rather than receives (time, loss of compensation).

A recent event for a member of the group was a call for counselling (regarding a complaint) with the area coordinator, the local, and the group leader, with the following occurring.

- No reason was given to the individual volunteer as to the matter of the complaint or that this was the matter for counselling. All that was given was a time to meet and those who would be attending and ability to call a support person.
- The meeting was rescheduled three times over a period of a month, again no particulars as to the complaint were given to the affected volunteer. The volunteer suffered extreme stress and anxiety due to the lack of information and postponement.
- The complainant was not listed in the complaint and the complaint was lodged at a level above the group leader. The local controller and area controller allowed for this to occur.
- Although it is pushed that according to the code of conduct that the lowest levels (person to person) of action, should occur, in this case none of this was allowed. The volunteer whom the complaint was against, was never made aware by the unknown accuser, of any actions that they did, by the accuser, nor was the group leader. The complainant was allowed to bypass the code of conduct and utilize a higher level of enforcement to achieve their goals.
 - It is recommended that if there is a code of conduct that it be followed for all members. The complaint should be handled as is taught on the lowest level.

- The member should be given an outline of the complaint so that they can gather information to support their defence, otherwise they are facing an inquisition.

Continuing events have shown that the property managers of rental properties in our area are taking advantage of the SES to perform their maintenance. A count taken for 2024 of tasks assigned to the group 27% (47 of 174) were from renters that had called the rental agency about a leak or flooding problem and were told to call the SES as a means of support.

- This continued calls from renters when the rental agency fails to deliver has an impact on the moral of the volunteer. One volunteer has restricted himself from callouts other than land searches since he feels taken advantage of by the rental agency to perform their maintenance.
 - Recommendation is that Qld State Emergency Service ie Chief Officer provides information to the Real Estate Institute that SES volunteers are not maintenance people and that our response to leaking roofs is temporary repairs not a permanent fix. The restrictions to solar panels reduce our ability to undertake temporary repairs and residents may have to wait for after hours for volunteers to respond.

A member was given the duty phone for the group during the deployments and was met with requests to immediately answer messages. The member was questioned as to why it took so long to acknowledge some messages.

The tasking that the volunteer was asked, was to figure out how to provide transportation for volunteers going on deployment. This was asked of the volunteer holding the duty phone when the local controller felt that he could not do it. The transportation requests were given out with as little as only 18 hours notice (in some cases less than that) by the region.

The communication is limited in that one must utilize a browser-based email due to security reasons. This puts an extra burden on those who do not have ready access to a large screen pc.

When sending out communications the volunteer holding the duty phone has to use 2 different emails and 1 other phone sms to get one message out. Messages are sent to one mail system address while the volunteer is monitoring another.

- To rectify this situation, it is recommended:
 - that the person having the duty phone have administrative rights to directly access emails via an app. This was allowed while the SES was under QFES.
 - that the person that has been delegated a task where a cost expense could be occurred (travel to and from airport) that they are permitted to give

authorization for that expense (i.e. allowed to authorize use of UBER for transportation).

- That if the authorization is not permitted that such tasking remain with the individual who have the authority (return the tasking to the higher up for them to take care of).

Group leader positions are hard to fill due to the demands placed upon them. Group leaders are required to perform administrative and leadership functions for the group. For their efforts a small stipend is provided by the Moreton City council. The local controller regulates the stipend and decreases the monthly stipend dependent on how many hours are logged.

The group leader's position is a voluntary position and not a paid position. The group leader is usually required to provide immediate response to messages at all hours. Further the group leader is required to attend monthly meetings. Most group leaders are employed elsewhere for their income. During the week the group leader will easily log between 8-12 hours per week and during times of callout up to 40.

It should be noted first the legal definition of a stipend; *A stipend is a fixed sum of money paid on a regular basis, usually to cover expenses or services. Stipends are often different from salaries because they may not be paid for work performed.*

To alleviate the stress placed on the group leaders the following is recommended.

- That the full monthly stipend be provided to the group leader regardless of hours put in (it is a stipend not pay).
- Contact hours (towards the position) be limited no more than 6 hrs per week.
- That the contact hours are strictly observed by paid staff unless during a declared emergency.
- That meetings, where attendance is required, a recording is made available to the group leader when they cannot make the meeting.
- That viewing the recording is considered being present at the meeting.
- Travel time is considered as part of the contact time for the position.
- Requirement for attendance at remote locations for meetings be made to be non-obligatory.
- That no evening meeting last beyond 21:00 to include travel time to return home.
- Monthly meetings go to quarterly meetings as most issues and information is delivered by email. These meetings could also be via TEAMS
- Some Group Leaders are also trainers and are required to attend monthly meetings as well equating to two meetings per month.

4. The unique challenges experienced by people from diverse backgrounds, genders, age groups, abilities and locations, and opportunities to improve volunteering.

Those volunteering that have the ability to perform duties during the week are normally older retired members. These members may have limited physical abilities to perform

tasks at the same level as younger members but those members are time constrained. The following should be considered.

- Providing ability to adjust callout times to fit the needs of the older volunteers. Does every member need to be present at 07:00 for a land search if they need to travel for more than an hour (sometimes 2 in traffic)?
- Acknowledge the effort to perform at a lower physical level than that of a younger member.
- Do not give negative feedback of performance due to lack of physical mobility due to age.

It has been seen and heard discriminatory remarks made by senior members and paid staff regarding non binary gender volunteers.

- Training needs to be given with regard to acceptance of all volunteers.
- Negative remarks should not be allowed by any member paid or volunteer to these members.
- Exclusion from specific training should not occur.

Volunteers that have been around for a period of time (more than 3 years) have found it difficult to be motivated to continue with volunteering in the SES. A few of the reasons that have been collected are:

- No new training is being provided. The volunteer has taken all of the courses available to them or they are restricted due to the number of allowed training spots available.
- The training system does not officially allow them to pass on their knowledge gained through experience as it is required to have a Cert IV in training to do this. This marginalizes the more senior volunteers experience and thus their personal status within the social group.
- Training to maintain competency has moved to an evaluation structure where the experienced person who may have a minor flaw in their technique is belittled by the evaluator.

Possible resolutions to this problem would be;

- Allowing senior experienced members to act as subject matter experts in conducting formal training classes. This would give social motivation to the senior volunteer to continue to pass on their experience.
- Allow more flexible competency maintenance procedures.

5. The extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support at all levels for the volunteering sector in Queensland and sustainable opportunities for improvement;

At the local level over the past few years, the support from the City of Moreton Bay has been extremely good. They have done the following.

- Provided new Ford Ranger vehicles for the groups.
- Replaced two SES building and have started on the replacement of a third SES building.
- Proposed renovation of a fourth SES Depot.
- Provided maintenance support for all vehicles and powered equipment.
- Provided welfare support for major call outs.

Support from the regional level has been chaotic due to the shift to QPS.

Areas that need improvement are:

- Processing of volunteer paperwork for acceptance into the SES.
- Timely response to stores request for equipment and PPE.
- Ability to easily request training. Current online system requires multi step process to find a course.
- Incorrect item/sizes supplied by the warehouse – quality control issues.

6. Opportunities for the Queensland Government to leverage all portfolios to support growth in volunteering across Queensland, including through hosting the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games;

In 2018 our local SES supported the Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast. Our major tasking was to provide crowd surveillance for major long-distance events such as the distance walk, marathons, and open road bike events. Although the tasking was crowd surveillance, many of the volunteers were tasked with crowd control, traffic control and lost person assistance.

Take away's from this experience were.

- The SES provided a minimally trained volunteer force to support the crowd control and it proved effective in most cases.
- Although receiving commendations, and small paraphernalia from the games organizer the SES volunteers were considered as outsiders supporting the games.
 - If utilized in support of the Olympic games it is recommended that the SES be more fully integrated into the Olympic organization. This could be done by:
 - Providing volunteer members with specific Olympic IDs with regard to their task and position within the games.
 - Utilize the volunteers as well as the paid staff to function within operation centres for the games.
 - Plan for and provide training for specific roles that the SES could perform other than just crowd monitoring.
 - Extend the volunteer callout to remote parts of Queensland for the games.
 - The benefits would be that

- the volunteer members become part of the social fabric of the games community and function as a cohesive team.
- the volunteer receives social reinforcement of belonging to an established organization.
- Volunteering recruitment for the SES would increase by placing an association to be part of the volunteer effort for the games.
- A more highly trained volunteer would be available for the needs of the games vice those who volunteer through other means.

7. Opportunities to increase emergency response volunteering in Queensland, including how to optimise the engagement, support and integration of volunteers assisting with natural disasters and community recovery;

Cross training SES volunteers to support and RFS in their efforts and should be looked at and vice versa.


8. First Nations peoples volunteering, including in remote and discrete communities, and the role of First Nations volunteering in Closing the Gap; and

Not enough effort has been made to include first Nations people in the recruitment drives. Remedies for this situation are

- Region to provide the contacts of first Nations peoples social groups.
 - Contact with Parliamentary representatives should be made by regional staff to find out who the political contacts are for a region and an area.
 - Information on contacts need to be passed on to the lowest level.
9. Any other relevant matters, including academic and other diverse sources, and any relevant reports and reviews at the national level and across other states and territories.
 - The QLD State Emergency Service does not have a leadership program to provide knowledge and skills to effectively manage and effectively lead volunteers.
 - Any SES leader is appointed to the role utilizing only their life skills which mostly does not include leadership.

- Recommendation that a leadership and an effective program be developed for individuals who wish to be leaders or are appointed as leaders.
- The QLD State Emergency Service does not have a standard operations management process to manage large operations. In Queensland every SES Unit undertakes operations management differently.

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The information is submitted as it pertains to the terms of reference for information by the committee on the following 2 points.

Point 2. The views of volunteers, prospective volunteers and the volunteering sector on the current barriers to volunteering, including excessive legislative and regulatory burdens and other restrictions adversely limiting active volunteers;

Point 3. The current experiences, motivations and challenges for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations and their recommendations for addressing challenges and improving the volunteering experience;

On 30 January 2025 I was informed (as a volunteer member of the [REDACTED] group) that I had had a meeting regarding a complaint, with the area coordinator, the local, and the group leader. At that time the following occurred.

- I was given no reason as to the matter of the complaint or that this was the matter for counselling. All that was given was a time to meet and those who would be attending and ability to call a support person.
- The meeting was rescheduled three times over a period of a month, again no particulars as to the complaint were given to myself the volunteer.
- During that time, I as the volunteer, suffered extreme stress and anxiety due to the lack of information pertaining to the inquiry. Further postponements increased this anxiety.
- I was given no reason to provide any supporting material for the inquiry.

On 27 February the meeting that had been postponed finally occurred where I was accused of the following (as in attachment Meeting Plan – Manager Copy).

- That on 30 November 2024 I Failed to comply with SES Policies:
 - Used/directed members to use defective equipment (ladder/broken hauling rope) in the course of their work against policy
 - Allowed to be used a piece of SES equipment by the member of the public.
 - Allowed a member of the public to enter an SES work zone without proper considerations for safety.
 - Established an SES work zone without the required exclusion from a mains power supply.
 - Failed to address a safety concern identified by a member of your team (ladder established within 3m of power supply)

- Failed to report a near-miss/incident (tripping in hole).

At the meeting due to the time that had passed between the date of the so-called incident I responded that I could not recall any of the alleged accusations. Further research in the Task and Management System showed that I was not present at the time (given as page 2 of TAMs report on the job “incident”)

During the meeting it was stated that I would be placed under a performance improvement plan (given as an attachment).

During the meeting I was given a copy of the Standard of Professional Practice.

The meeting that was held was adjourned due to my non recollection of the matters and to be held at a later date. My stress level has increased due to the allegations.

Key points with this incident with regard to the terms of reference:

- That I, as a (non paid volunteer), I am dealt with at same level but without consideration as a paid member of QPS.
- That as a volunteer for the SES, if the alleged accusations were felt correct that I would have a personnel file kept by (unstated person) listing the accusations and being a derogatory record. This file would be in perpetuity.
- That a performance improvement plan (never given prior) is the same performance improvement plan given to a paid employee of QPS. No distinction is made between volunteer and paid employee.
- That even though team cohesiveness and function are stressed at all levels that an individual can be held as the scape goat for any problematic occurrences of a team. This is highly negative aspect of volunteering that needs to be advised to all incoming volunteers.
- That allegations can be made against a volunteer without recourse, and that the findings (no appeal process has been given) are determined by the individual performing the inquiry. With result of a derogatory report being placed in the volunteers personnel file available to the public.
- That in the interpretation of “Leader”, “for all members” on page 7 of the Standard of Professional Practice that members “Demonstrate courage by intervening in and reporting behaviours inconsistent with the values of the Service and Community expectations. & Identify and community integrity risks in the workplace to their managers” has the result of other volunteers providing either true or false information on fellow volunteers as they see fit with the result in an adverse action being placed in a personnel file of a volunteer.

It should be noted that with regard to the current structure of the SES with regard to leadership at the team level.

- That there is no official designation of team leader when a team goes out other than by possible indication made by the recorder of the task and management system.
- That there is no authority bestowed on any individual deemed a team leader just responsibility.
- That a team leader is picked at random for any job where 2 or more volunteer members are assigned.

Impact from the method of dealing with performance as seen from the eyes of a volunteer.

- That one has no faith in working with any other volunteer as they are required to report you for the least infraction on each other. No one has your back.
 - **Result low morale low retention, team cohesiveness falls apart, effectiveness of the team diminishes.**
- That the upper management of the volunteer organization will reach a conclusion without reasonable evidence and act upon that leaving the volunteer with our recourse.
 - **Result again low morale, reduced volunteer rate, loss of volunteers who have gone through this negative review process.**
- That any position above a simple volunteer puts one at risk of having a derogatory record placed in a personnel file due an even minor infraction of misstep. The probability increases as the required position becomes more technically demanding.
 - **Result I will give up my advanced operator appointments that will reduce the effectiveness of the unit by losing a capable member.**
 - **I will counsel all newer members of the now additional risk in imposed by accepting higher risk roles and the diminishing returns on accepting such roles.**
- That leadership roles are to be avoided since no support is given to the role and the person so selected (never appointed) is deemed the scape goat for all inconsistencies.
 - **Result team cohesiveness diminishes, trust in the group fails.**

Recommendations from this incident to improve volunteering.

1. That a separate code of conduct, Standard of Professional Practice, be created specifically for volunteers and their special needs and concerns are met by it.

2. That if any official personal files are kept, that they are kept only at the lowest level with the group leader.
3. That any negative input in the personal file of a volunteer be removed after 6 months of approved performance and no other record kept.
4. That the personal file of the volunteer be purged and destroyed upon leaving the volunteer service.
5. That reporting of incidences by volunteers is strictly controlled at the group level to reduce the probability of revenge false complaints.
6. That the current system of review for volunteers that has been established which has been adopted (exactly the same) for paid staff be abolished.
7. That the requirement to report behaviours be only done once the behaviour has been addressed at the lowest level between the observer and offender and that from that point only brought to the attention of the supervisor when the behaviour continues.
8. That if the reported behaviour is determined to be reported to the superior that both the reported person and person reporting be present to ascertain all facts.
9. That if any official action where information is held in or placed into a personal file, that proper notice of the action is given and information regarding the action is given to the volunteer so they may be prepared to provide evidence on their behalf.
10. That counselling by ambush (where the person to be counselled is not given notice) is abolished.
11. That minor infractions of stated procedures occur only personal guidance is given and no record of the infraction kept.