

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Acknowledgement of Country

SSI acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise their continuous connection to Country.

Background

SSI welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Queensland Parliament's Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee's Inquiry into volunteering (the Volunteering Inquiry).

SSI is a national non-for-profit organisation that delivers a range of human services that connect individuals, families, and children from diverse backgrounds with opportunities – including settlement support, disability inclusion programs, community engagement initiatives and training and employment pathways. At the heart of everything we do is a drive for equality, empathy, and celebration of every individual.

SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other social services and geographical areas.

In 2018, SSI merged with the Queensland-based Access Community Services, and in 2019 opened in Victoria, providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia. In 2023-24, SSI supported more than 60,000 people across almost 60 programs and community-based services nationally. We are also a leading provider of evidence-based insights into the social sector and are known as an organisation that can reach communities considered by many to be 'hard to reach'.

With respect to volunteering, SSI's volunteer program spans across New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Queensland. In 2023-24, SSI worked with 124 volunteers who bring a broad range of skills, experience and interests to assist in more than 45 unique roles.¹ More than half of our voluntary workforce speak a language other than English, including Arabic (24%), Farsi (9%), Hindi (9%), Urdu (8%), Dari (6%), Spanish (5%), Assyrian and Chaldean (both 4% respectively) and the remainder speak 28 other language groups.²

Volunteers bring enormous life experience to the organisation and assist in the delivery of services including helping newly arrived refugees and people seeking asylum, hosting workshops, mentoring, entrepreneur coaching, housing assistance, teaching English, gardening, playgroups, assisting on excursions, and supporting SSI's signature festivals and events. The duties of volunteers vary greatly and can range from helping with ticketing at events, sharing business knowledge with Ignite® program participants, or providing translation services for newcomers seeking jobs.³ It is from this perspective across several service delivery domains, that SSI welcomes this Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland and our submission is targeted to specific Terms of Reference where we can provide a unique perspective.

Summary of SSI Recommendations

Volunteering brings a range of benefits to the individuals who partake in it, to the organisations they work with, to the stakeholders of these organisations, and to Australian society more generally. It builds community resilience, reduces social isolation and loneliness, and reinforces social and cultural cohesion.⁴

SSI notes that the newly established Supporting Volunteers Unit of the Queensland Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers will develop the Queensland Government's response to this Inquiry process and oversee delivery of any recommended actions accepted by the Government.⁵

For Queensland to maintain and secure volunteering and harness its contribution to civic life, including to respond to natural disasters and support community recovery, the Committee is urged to make the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1:

The Queensland Government develop and invest in a Volunteer Management Framework, dedicating resources to volunteer infrastructure, inputs, investment and impact across Queensland which aligns with the focus of the *Queensland Volunteering Strategy 2024-2032* on building the foundations and strengthening the conditions for volunteering to thrive.

Recommendation 2:

The Queensland Government support greater engagement and involvement of refugee and multicultural organisations to support volunteering in a way that aligns with those communities' motivations to volunteer and, in turn, social inclusion.

Recommendation 3:

The Queensland Government to invest in capacity building initiatives that focus on multicultural and refugee community organisations to support and maintain robust community structures in disaster preparedness, which can then be rapidly deployed in response to natural disasters and community recovery.

Response to Terms of Reference

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

SSI's approach to improving the volunteering experience

SSI's Volunteer Program supports the Volunteering Australia's National Standard for Volunteering Strategic Objectives by using the 'I-Model' volunteer management framework developed by the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) to outline and plan program goals.

The I-Model focuses on four key components:

1. **Infrastructure** to create a supportive environment for volunteering, including policies, procedures and systems to recruit, train and manage volunteers;
2. **Inputs** that address the resources needed for successful volunteer engagement, such as funding, staff support, and training programs;
3. **Investment** in building and maintaining positive relationship with volunteers. This includes recognising and appreciating their contributions and providing ongoing support;
4. **Impact** of volunteer efforts on both the organisation and the community it serves.

Practical ways of applying these key components involve:

- Raise the profile and awareness of the opportunities that volunteers can bring to an organisation;
- Identify internal organisation-wide opportunities for roles that more fully utilise volunteers' untapped skills that will also provide more impactful and meaningful contributions;
- Develop ways to recognise and celebrate the efforts of volunteers;
- Ensure skills-building access to resources (e.g. IT equipment, training) is provided for volunteers to properly undertake their role.
- Value the specific volunteer management skills and experience identified by staff that are recruited to paid roles;
- Invest in supporting the maintenance of staff volunteer management skills.

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Motivations and challenges experienced by SSI's volunteers

SSI's experience of volunteers from refugee backgrounds indicates that the main reason they volunteer is for skill development and employment pathways. However, there are challenges in connecting their volunteer experience to employment outcomes. There is a need for more support around how to make volunteering lead to "meaningful" employment aligned to career paths. This is likely to be a challenge that applies to most organisations that work with volunteers who are not employed to their full capacity.

Considering the backgrounds of our volunteers, and the comparatively narrower and limited number of volunteer opportunities available, SSI has experienced occasions where the skills and experience of some of our applicants from refugee backgrounds are not able to be matched as there are no suitable types of volunteer opportunities available. For example, SSI has had several overseas-qualified veterinarians and engineers apply to volunteer.

Measures to strengthen volunteering and address a mismatch between skills and roles available could be to invest in a more co-ordinated approach to the volunteer sector, with industry-specific and cross-sector networking opportunities, so that community organisations such as SSI can partner with others to increase the scope of volunteer opportunities for skilled refugees and improve their experiences aligned to their career goals.

Refugees have the same desire to volunteer as the general Australian population

SSI's *Foundations for Belonging* research, conducted in partnership with Western Sydney University, examines newly arrived refugees' social connections, their access to rights and fulfilment of responsibilities.⁶ In doing so, we aim to deepen understanding of the social and civic dimensions of integration in the early stages of settlement. Four phases of this research have been conducted, and a fifth phase is currently underway.

In the 2020 and 2021, refugees were asked about their experiences of volunteering, finding that refugees have an almost universal sense – irrespective of gender – of wanting to contribute to Australia and fulfil social and civic responsibilities.⁷ Specifically, rates of volunteering reported by refugees in 2020 and 2021, which were lower in the 2021 survey (most likely due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions) were comparable to rates of volunteering seen in a representative sample of the Australian population in Australian Bureau of Statistics data.⁸

The research recommended that settlement services, civil society organisations and service providers should leverage the willingness of refugees to volunteer in meaningful ways to strengthen two-way social and civic participation between refugees and other members of the Australian community. The Queensland Government can similarly seize on this opportunity.

In the case of SSI in Queensland, examples of refugee volunteers contributions include:

- the Multicultural Sports Club whose volunteers (refugee young people - under 25 years of age) engage in the Club's activities, build their confidence while providing a sense of belonging in the community and develop skills and access employment pathway opportunities;
- volunteers providing a form-filling service. Predominantly supported by Afghan refugee women, community members were assisted to complete sponsorship and citizenship application forms;
- Afghan volunteers supporting the Thriving Afghan Women project with activity planning and support for sewing classes, driver knowledge test sessions, practical driving lessons, Zumba sessions, and information on navigating support systems in Australia, starting home businesses, and maintaining healthy relationships.

The *Queensland Volunteering Strategy 2024-2032*⁹ recognises that volunteering helps to build more inclusive, accessible and connected communities, and can create better social, cultural, religious, spiritual, and place-based connections to environments and people, to drive social inclusion.

The unique challenges experienced by people from diverse backgrounds, genders, age groups, abilities and locations, and opportunities to improve volunteering participation, accessibility and experience for these groups

Refugees' conceptualisation and approach to volunteering

A national consultation with refugee communities conducted by the Refugee Council of Australia has found that 'volunteering' as a concept may have limited usefulness from the perspective of refugee communities and refugee community organisations.¹⁰ The consultations found that the significant social and economic contributions of refugee community organisations is often not recognised even by refugees themselves, whose commitment to the plight of fellow refugees is seen as a duty and the welfare of their community as a shared, collective responsibility. As one community worker describes:

"Often the work of these communities isn't seen or promoted as volunteering by these organisations".¹¹

This mismatch in perceptions and meaning of the term 'volunteer' can mean less recognition for the voluntary contributions of refugee community organisations.

In addition, refugee community organisations have a unique context that informs their volunteering and operations. While collaborating to support refugees, volunteers from refugee backgrounds are likely to be simultaneously navigating their own forced migration experiences and trauma as well as settlement challenges. To respond to these challenges, Refugee Council of Australia highlighted that, a "strengths-based approach to assisting refugees to resettle must not only focus on individual and family resilience and strengths but also the strengths and resilience within refugee communities."¹²

The *Queensland Volunteering Strategy 2024-2032*¹³ includes a goal to ensure that volunteering reflects the diversity and vibrancy of our communities. However, the Strategy is silent on how

that is going to be achieved for multicultural and refugee communities where refugee community organisations, and many multicultural organisations, are often volunteer-led and operated.

Recommendation 2:

The Queensland Government support greater engagement and involvement of refugee and multicultural organisations to support volunteering in a way that aligns with those communities' motivations to volunteer and, in turn, social inclusion.

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

SSI's experience of volunteering in response to natural disasters and community recovery

With respect to natural disasters, SSI effectively adapted to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in a way that provided additional, voluntary contributions to support refugee and migrant communities. During the pandemic SSI's volunteers assisted local refugee and multicultural communities despite the pandemic's restrictions. To enable this, SSI adapted its practices such as facilitating virtual volunteerism through video conferencing and remote engagement, which helped overcome geographical barriers for training and networking events.¹⁴

The pandemic highlighted significant gaps in government communication with multicultural communities, particularly regarding public health orders that were often unclear for individuals with limited English proficiency.¹⁵ An independent review of Australia's response to the pandemic found that language barriers that were inadequately addressed at multiple levels contributed to poorer outcomes for migrants and refugees,¹⁶ resulting in public health messaging that was hard to read, difficult to understand and confusing to action.¹⁷ The recent Commonwealth Government's review of the pandemic response also acknowledged this failing, which provides lessons for communications in natural disasters.¹⁸

Governments improved their communication strategies with multicultural communities during later stages of the pandemic, aided by settlement providers such as SSI and the voluntary efforts of multicultural community leaders who shared crucial information through their networks. In SSI's case, early in the pandemic, we launched one of the first online community portals for multicultural populations, providing easy-to-understand and multilingual information on COVID-19 protocols. This initiative was bolstered by a social media campaign in nine languages to reach diverse communities and the amplification of this work through multicultural community leaders' virtual networks. This provides an effective model for responding rapidly in natural disasters.

Not-for-profits can build community and volunteers' capacity and disaster preparedness

SSI has invested in building the capacity of the volunteering sector. For example, in collaboration with the NSW Centre of Volunteering and funded by SSI, Volunteer Voices developed an online training program for organisations who use volunteers. The resulting e-module focuses on the experiences of people who have volunteered, attempted to volunteer, or are thinking about volunteering, with a view to promoting more inclusive volunteering practices.

While Not-for-Profits (NFPs) use their strong and direct relationships with communities and community leaders to build knowledge and capacity, governments can also play a role by investing in the sustainability of this contribution, especially when it comes to emergency and disaster preparedness and response.

As an example of NFPs and governments working together, SSI responded to a significant gap in emergency preparedness knowledge among multicultural communities, particularly those with disabilities in NSW. To address this, SSI received funding from the NSW Government to deliver information aimed at enhancing emergency preparedness multicultural communities and people with disabilities in a culturally responsive way.¹⁹

The initiative sought to strengthen partnerships between SSI and emergency services, focusing on local hazard risks and the unique needs of people with disabilities during emergencies. A community leadership model, drawing on volunteers, was employed to disseminate information in multiple languages, targeting families and caregivers across prominent language groups in NSW. Multicultural community leaders were trained in emergency preparedness and encouraged to co-facilitate sessions with emergency personnel, utilising engaging methods such as videos and informal teaching styles.

The evaluation indicated that multicultural community leaders felt more equipped to understand and prepare for emergencies, significantly enhancing their ability to educate and raise awareness within their community networks. They reported that the involvement of emergency services and local council representatives greatly strengthened the impact of their sessions. One participant remarked that:

He came in uniform so they could identify and visualise and then [we] say, 'these men in their orange overalls and with all the emblems and everything they'll be the ones door knocking or, you know, giving a helping hand on the day'.²⁰

This example highlights the critical importance of engaging multicultural community organisations and leaders in disaster planning and preparedness and building capacity as an essential precursor to assisting with natural disasters, when they occur, and community recovery. While NFP organisations work closely with their communities, funding and resourcing is essential to build and maintain relationships and capacity in readiness for disasters and crises.²¹ Furthermore, organisations vary in the extent to which their workforce are comprised of volunteers and their efforts, which underscores the importance of sustainable, continued investment by government.²²

SSI's work is similar to the Queensland Government's funding of Volunteering Queensland \$250,000 for the Care Army Mobilisation Project which looked at ways Care Army volunteers can support a broader range of vulnerable groups and be called upon to assist during disasters.

This work was previously considered by the Community Support and Services Committee's Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland.²³

Recommendation 3:

Queensland Government to invest in capacity building initiatives that focus on multicultural and refugee community organisations to support and maintain robust community structures in disaster preparedness, which can then be rapidly deployed in response to natural disasters and community recovery.

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