


Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Parliamentary Submission

Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland.

Personal representation from experience and observations from 30 years of volunteering

Submission from –

██████████ – GradCert (Data Science), BAppSc (Applied Chemistry), JP (Qual),
MRACI, CChem

Volunteering background –

██ – 15 years

Justice of the Peace (Qual) – 14 years

Volunteer Scientific Officer – QFD – 14 years

Other volunteering in Victoria for 15 years prior to moving to QLD

What is Volunteering? -

Meaning of Volunteer –

a person who **does something**, especially helping other people, **willingly** and **without being forced** or **paid** to do it.

VOLUNTEERING | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary

Reasons to Volunteer -

- support important causes
- fill in time in retirement
- connect with other people
- learn about different cultures
- **give back to your community**
- learn new skills
- get experience to improve your employment chances

Benefits of volunteering | healthdirect

Benefits of Volunteering -

- Volunteering in the community creates opportunities for social interaction, improves mood and increases happiness.
- Volunteering offers people health and wellbeing benefits, including lower symptoms of depression and anxiety than people who don't volunteer.
- **Volunteering not only benefits the community but also builds something called social capital. This is the value you get from trust and community connections built on a shared set of values.**
- Through volunteering, people build stronger relationships, learn from each other, and feel more connected to their community.

Benefits of volunteering | NSW Government

Background Rural Fire Service (RFS) history – Observations/Experience

Rural Fire brigade (RFB) original intent – Established by the community, manned by the local community, funded by the local community and grants (where available) entirely for the community needs. Assistance provided if needed to other communities in times of need.

Apolitical. Community focussed.

Historical path of the RFS (before my involvement) – The RFS developed a centralised board backed by legislation that recognised the original intent. The legislation provided guidance for the board and limited legal coverage for members. Funding was limited but slowly improved over time with assistance from government.

Apolitical. Community focussed with centralisation slowly being implemented.

Occurrences during the last 15 years (my involvement) – RFS slowly integrated as a “sister” organisation aligned with Fire and Rescue (FRS) resulting in Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES).

Ultimately, the result was continued limited RFS recognition, limited tested volunteer legal support with the expectation of increasingly professional performance. Limited resourcing was provided to “support” the increasing demands on the RFS and RFB's.

The push for change to legal coverage of RFS members increased. Finally, the government publicly acknowledged that “**NEW**” legislation was to be drawn up that would address the legal concerns and improve the RFS situation.

This was seen by existing members as huge step forward and was portrayed by the government and RFS as dramatically improving the legal situation for members. Many members that I spoke to at the time were sceptical but waiting to see what the outcome would be.

Over the period that legislation was being developed, reporting via the RFS was haphazard with little transparency for the members. Members became increasingly concerned as the time period before introduction of the legislation got smaller.

When a “for review” copy of the legislation was released, there was outrage and disgust at the result.

1. This was not **NEW** legislation but a revised version of the old legislation
2. The size and scope of the changes to the original legislation was massive. How could this be a revision of the existing legislation with so much change?
3. There appeared to be a significant downgrade to the status of the RFS within the legislation when compared to the previous legislation.
4. There was particularly prescriptive wording as to the appointments for the FRS and the RFS which precluded, in many cases, people from a volunteering background and practical experience within the RFS.
5. In general, the legislation appeared to be a hastily written document that had little genuine input from the RFS.

The feeling was that something was afoot but there was no way to alter the outcome as seemed to be “done deal” given the extremely limited time frame for reviews to be presented.

Overall, the feeling was that we had been conned, led to believe that everything was going to be resolved with the “**NEW**” legislation. This does not appear to be the case. That is not an effective way to retain members who are giving up their own time voluntarily.

Several of the members who expressed concern over this have reduced their input into the RFS as a result.

RFS became much more political due to RFS now operating under FRS control (subunit of the FRS) with significantly more government interaction. Significant reduction in Community focus.

Current Situation – RFS is centrally controlled with severe limitation to what an RFB can do for the community when needed. Minimal ability for the RFB of the RFS to direct its own destiny within the framework of the current legislation.

The assets that community have built up and the RFB’s ability to make decisions based on community needs have been severely eroded so that the RFB’s are extensions of a centralised government body with limited knowledge of community requirements. There is now extraordinarily little linkage to the local community.

This framework does not promote the correct environment to support the RFB members or the RFS on a long-term journey due to the ability of the people to assist their local community is severely eroded when that is why people volunteer their time – **for the local community firstly** followed by the greater community

It will only exacerbate the conditions that are causing a reduction in volunteers working for the RFS under already very trying conditions within the community.

Essentially we have gained some additional legal cover, that is yet to be tested in court, and an increase in funding (that was LONG overdue) at the expense of loss of community developed resources (now government owned – not community owned

when they were paid for by the community), loss of autonomy and loss of the original intent of the RFB's. The community has lost out from this.

RFB's are now a fully government-controlled entity with severe limitations on what the RFB's can do for the community when needed – IE we need to ask permission to do something that the community needs urgently.

RFS is now highly political with the situation “locked in stone” by legislation, severely limiting what the RFS can do and by default the RFB. Significant reduction in Community focus.

Analysis/Discussion

People volunteer for a myriad of reasons, personal and otherwise. In all cases, they do it “willingly and without being forced or paid to do it”

The unspoken part of this is that they want to give their time as easily and freely as possible.

Nothing retains the input of a volunteer other than personal motivation.

Lose the personal motivation, prevent people from providing their time easily, have legal fears from volunteering and people will not volunteer.

In order to get someone to volunteer, the following needs to occur -

1. Some spark/desire occurs within the person to do something constructive for the community.
2. Direction of that spark/desire to a useful destination – volunteering organisation.
3. Smooth transition into the organisation.
4. Allowing people to feel needed, be useful with purpose as soon as possible.
5. Allow them to grow and feel productive within the community and organisation.
6. Continue to nurture and meet the personal needs of that person throughout their volunteering career.

Note that **time** is **NOT** noted as one of the items required

At any stage if one of these steps fail, the person will remove themselves. They are under **NO OBLIGATION** to stay. **ONLY** their personal desires/needs drive them to provide their time.

People work to provide for their families. They may spend a considerable time away from their families in order to provide for them. They will endure, sometimes difficult, circumstances in a workplace as they know there will be a benefit to their family from their hardships.

Volunteering takes people away from their families, in at times, distressing situations with no financial compensation. This is exceedingly difficult for many people to handle personally. When there is NO FINANCIAL incentive to do so, the threshold for not being involved is exceptionally low. Anything could become a roadblock in these circumstances.

A quite common argument is as follows –

- Modern life has many more challenges than in previous times
- Time is now a precious element of life.
- With the increasing demands, time is one thing that is not be available.

This argument becomes a barrier to most people.

There are a plethora of people volunteering, so something else other than just time availability.

A motivated person will find the time. An observation is that in many cases, volunteers seem to have extremely full lives before volunteering. But somehow, they fit it all in.

In general, I have seen a common theme from all the volunteers I have met and worked with in 30 years or so.

They want to make a difference

Nothing about financial return, nothing about time, nothing about sacrifices, nothing about politics.

Making a difference is not about submitting paperwork on time or making sure that all your clothing is ironed correctly or other seemingly non-related requirements.

Making a difference is about **DOING SOMETHING PRODUCTIVE.**

In order to support this desire, the following Elements **MUST** be in place -

- Maximised time **BEING PRODUCTIVE.**
- **SUPPORTED** by the organisation when giving their time.
- **MINIMAL PERSONAL STRESS** when carrying out their volunteering.
- **NO FEAR** of legal implications from their volunteering – clarity of legal position.
- Minimal cost to the volunteer.
- Coherent group of like-minded individuals.
- Clarity of **PURPOSE** and **ROLE.**
- Evidence that their efforts are helping to meet the intended purpose.
- Ability to provide time when they want to or are able and under no pressure.
- Ability to progress within the organisation as far as they desire.

These elements **MUST** be present to allow volunteer numbers to stop falling.

Over time, within the RFS, many of these elements have been eroded. This is reflected in volunteer numbers (retention rates of the RFS for example).

The structure is now much removed from the original intent that it is hard to justify the effort and time devoted to the RFS for many people, myself included.

I have been lucky enough to benefit from the “other” side of volunteering to see what a good arrangement looks like. So the comparison is clear to me.

Summary

Ultimately, the RFS via the individual RFBs provide a huge service to Queensland via the use of a huge, motivated volunteer labour force that is driven by the desire to assist their community/township/area/region/state whatever way they can.

This an immensely valuable service that the Government and the community gets at a vastly lower cost than if the same service were provided by paid professional personnel.

This support is only because of the **good will** of the volunteers and the **support** of the communities that the RFB's belong to.

As shown above, the framework that the RFS now operates under has changed to an organisation that does not support the effective operation of the RFS manned by volunteers. The elements noted above have been eroded to an extent that membership is suffering and will continue to suffer due to these elements not being met.

As time progresses, the demands on the RFB's will increase while the work force numbers decrease. Younger people have a much lower threshold for putting up with things outside their control. So it easy to extrapolate to the situation as years progress and the senior members depart from the RFS.

Either the RFS evolves to deal with this situation, or the volunteer numbers will decrease.

If the volunteer work force decreases, the community standard of living will fall as a result – poorer service provision or increased costs to support a professional service.

Although the fall in volunteer numbers appears to be a small issue, it will eventually affect many more people throughout the communities of people as the number of volunteers fall.

The input effort required to retain volunteers may seem high, however the benefits far outweigh the input efforts – improved community cohesion, more satisfied communities, stronger communities, more reactive community support, lower cost to the government etc.

Please consider this submission with respect and I implore the committee to recommend implementation of some or all of these elements to improve our way of life in the long term.

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25/2/2025

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