Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO VOLUNTEERING IN QUEENSLAND

SUBMISSION BY CO.AS.IT. COMMUNITY SERVICES LTD

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IDENTIFICATION OF VOLUNTEERING PASSIVITY

Australia's declining volunteer participation rates reflect a deeper structural challenge: the absence of volunteering as an integrated component of our social fabric.

Unlike countries such as South Korea, where volunteering is systematically woven into daily life through national programs and gamification incentive structures, and Singapore that has implemented an innovative "Skills Passport" program where volunteers' professional skills are matched with specific community needs, Australia has traditionally relied on more informal, ad-hoc approaches to volunteering and community service.

This fragmented system fails to recognize volunteering as a vital force for social cohesion and community resilience nor does it acknowledge the astounding informal financial endowment volunteering contributes to the country's economy. Research finds that the economic value of volunteering in Queensland was over $117 billion in the 2022-23 financial year. (https://volunteeringqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/State-of-Volunteering-in-Queensland-2024-Report.pdf)

While Australians historically pride themselves on the concept of 'mateship' and community spirit, our institutional frameworks have not evolved to embed volunteering into our educational, government, professional, and social systems. The lack of a coordinated national or state approach combined with minimal integration into: i) schools, ii) workplaces, and iii) government policies, has created barriers to participation and failed to nurture a culture where volunteering becomes an essential aspect of citizenship and community living.

The potential benefits from a community volunteering system needs to be nurtured from primary school level to create a sustainable community service model that is self – supporting, increases civic engagement and participation and shifts from a transactional to a reciprocal community support model.

1. Co.As.It. Historical perspective

Co.As.It. Community Services has been operating a Community Visitors Scheme (CVS) and now the Aged Care Volunteers Visitors Scheme (ACVVS) since its introduction in the late 1990s. With decades of experience in recruitment and management of volunteers as friendly visitors to lonely older CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) people in aged care facilities or vulnerable and isolated people living at home, the following identified factors hinder availability and willingness to volunteer within this target community.

Other factors that limit volunteering uptake are:

- The difficulty in incentivising people who traditionally do not have a culture of volunteering
- Linguistic differences that hamper volunteers getting matched to a host task
- 'Isolationist' residue of the Covid pandemic
- General apathy in enduring community engagement.

Based on our research and experience in the aged, disability and community care sector, it is recognised that these barriers are endemic across the broader volunteering sector.

1.1 Time Constraints and Work Patterns

- The rise of irregular work hours arrangements makes consistent volunteering difficult
- Many people juggle multiple jobs or have family commitments
- Traditional volunteering may require fixed time commitments that don't suit modern lifestyles
- Gap between volunteer and organisational availability (e.g. Volunteering during weekends)

Recommendations:
- *Implement micro-volunteering opportunities (15-30 minute tasks)*
- *Create virtual/remote volunteer roles that can be done from home*
- *Develop "flash volunteering" programs for one-off contributions*
- *Offer after-hours and weekend opportunities*
- *Allow job-sharing of volunteer roles between multiple people*

1.2 Administrative Burden
- Complex paperwork and screening requirements, especially as these are repeated for each organisation volunteers approach (Police Checks, inductions and orientations)
- Cost of necessary certifications and checks (although these are not as significant in the CVS and ACVVS models)
- Induction processes and orientation may be lengthy and over complicated

Recommendations:
- *Create a centralized Queensland volunteer portal for all certifications*
- *Implement a single standardized volunteer passport system*
- *Subsidize or waive certification costs*
- *Streamline application processes through digital platforms*

1.3 Socioeconomic Factors
- Cost of transport to volunteer locations
- Limited access to volunteering opportunities and volunteers in areas outside the metropolitan areas and rural/remote areas
- Digital divide, lack of technological fluency affecting access to online volunteer platforms

Recommendations:
- *Introduce transport subsidies or carpooling systems*
- *Create local volunteer hubs in different regions*
- *Establish mobile volunteer units for remote areas*
- *Provide expense reimbursement programs*
- *Enable skills recognition offsets for study and employment*

1.4 Cultural and Awareness Issues
- Lack of awareness about available opportunities and how to research opportunities
- Cultural and linguistic barriers in some communities
- Limited recognition of the value of volunteering on a broader perspective
- Lack of recognition and incentives that energise the take-up of volunteering roles
- Perception that volunteering is only for retirees or students.
Recommendations:

- *Launch targeted marketing campaigns in different languages*
- *Create cultural liaison positions within volunteer organizations*
- *Develop school-based volunteer programs*
- *Implement a recognition and rewards system*
- *Share success stories through various media channels*

These barriers need to be addressed across a number of platforms at a national and/or state level if the trend of community volunteering is to continue to make a positive impact on Queensland's economy and most of all, in creating a collective sense of belonging and civic responsibility.

Based on previous statements that an embedded volunteering ethos needs to be embraced to increase levels of volunteering, a number of strategies may be investigated that not only provide incentives to volunteer but that also provide volunteers with a tangible as well as an altruistic sense of achievement.

2: STRATEGIES FOR LONG TERM VOLUNTEERING IN AUSTRALIA

2.1.0   Integration of volunteering within the educational system

Whilst we acknowledge that our teachers are consistently and often burdened by onerous administrative duties the face of volunteering needs to be introduced at an early stage creating a higher level of community awareness and volunteering within this framework.

This requires an educational state funding input for a curriculum where volunteering service learning begins from primary continuing on through tertiary education. Volunteering hours would be included into curriculum requirements, creating clear pathways between student volunteering and career development. There would be a requirement to establish school-community partnership frameworks and to develop standardized volunteer education program.

2.1.1 Establishing an ethos of volunteering early:

Primary school aged children:
- Create "Mini Volunteer" programs where students help within their school community
- Develop classroom helper roles (reading buddies, garden maintenance)
- Partner with local environmental groups for supervised conservation activities
- Organize intergenerational programs with senior centres
- Include volunteering concepts in social studies curriculum

Secondary school aged students:
- Establish service-learning programs linked to curriculum (e.g. Link volunteer activities to civics and citizenship studies; Integrate arts and crafts volunteering with creative subjects; Connect environmental volunteering with science classes)
- Create leadership opportunities through volunteer coordination roles
- Develop skills-based volunteering matched to subject areas (e.g., IT students helping with community digital literacy)
- Create student-led volunteer clubs and committees

Tertiary students:

- Developing university partnerships for student volunteering programs
- Including volunteer education in TAFE courses
- Offering work experience credits for youth volunteering

2.1.2 Curriculum inclusion of volunteering within the education system would require local government and educational funding and collaboration to increase student volunteering opportunities through:

- Developing take-home information packs about volunteering
- Including volunteering updates in school newsletters
- Creating volunteer coordinator roles for parents
- Building relationships with local charities and community groups
- Developing ongoing projects with aged care facilities
- Creating partnerships with environmental organizations
- Establishing connections with cultural groups
- Partnering with local councils for community projects
- Partnering with high schools to introduce volunteering programs
- Creating family-friendly volunteer opportunities that parents and children can do together

2.2 Integrating volunteering in the workforce

- Introduce tax or other operational incentives for businesses that support employee volunteering
- Establish national standards for volunteer leave (similar to sick or annual leave)
- Create frameworks for recognizing volunteer experience in hiring processes (Skills recognition)
- Develop corporate-community partnership guidelines
- Implement formal volunteer skills recognition via credits in professional development

2.3 Creating a government framework

- Create a centralized digital platform for volunteer management
- Implement standardized volunteer certification systems
- Develop cross-jurisdictional recognition of volunteer skills and qualification viz. Volunteer passport
- Provide tax benefits for active volunteers

2.3.1. Professional Development Program for volunteers

- Create standardized training modules for volunteer coordinators
- Establish mentoring relationships between experienced and new coordinators
- Offer regular workshops on best practices in volunteer management
- Provide certification opportunities for volunteer managers
- Include training on digital tools and modern volunteer engagement strategies

2.4 Increasing Cultural Integration of Volunteers

- Launch national campaigns promoting volunteering as civic responsibility in different languages
- Create multicultural volunteering programs
- Establish intergenerational volunteering initiatives
- Build volunteering into cultural events and celebrations
- Recruit community leaders as volunteer ambassadors
- Establish partnerships with cultural and religious organizations
- Develop mentoring programs pairing experienced volunteers with newcomers
- Host volunteer information sessions at community festivals and cultural events
- Create pop-up volunteer centres in shopping centres and community spaces
- Develop partnerships with local sports clubs and community groups
- Use community radio and ethnic media for outreach
- Establish regular volunteer open days where people can "try" volunteering

3. INNOVATIVE VOLUNTEER INITIATIVES ELSEWHERE

Our research has identified a number of innovative volunteering initiatives overseas that have yielded evidence-based data. Volunteering uptake and retention has increased by as much as 30% and 60% respectively through some of these overseas programs. Rather than testing untried volunteer uptake methodology, these initiatives may be adapted to operate successfully also in Queensland.

Digital Micro-volunteering Platforms
Several European countries have embraced digital platforms that break down volunteer work into small, manageable tasks that can be done remotely. For example, Sweden's "Volunteer Match" system allows people to contribute as little as 15-30 minutes at a time, making volunteering more accessible for busy professionals.

Skills-Based Matching
Singapore has implemented an innovative "Skills Passport" program where volunteers' professional skills are matched with specific community needs, e.g. IT professionals might help local charities with their digital infrastructure, while marketing professionals assist with campaign strategies.

Intergenerational Partnerships
Japan has developed programs that pair retired seniors with young volunteers, combining the seniors' experience with younger volunteers' energy and tech-savvy. This approach has been particularly successful in addressing social isolation while providing meaningful volunteer opportunities.

Corporate Integration
New Zealand has pioneered "Volunteer Time-Banking" where companies allow employees to bank their volunteer hours and use them as flexible time off. This has significantly increased corporate volunteer participation rates.

Gamification and Recognition

South Korea has implemented a national volunteer points system where participants earn points for their service that can be used for cultural events, public transportation, or continuing education courses. This has created a tangible reward structure while keeping the focus on community service.

3.1.0 Recommendations for incentives for volunteering in the Queensland context

Queenslanders are a relaxed population, their cultural values are deep-rooted in mateship; sharing and enjoying sporting, arts and cultural activities; digital gaming and social media engagement and enjoying the myriad multicultural and cosmopolitan activities on offer. Incentives to encourage volunteering need to be flexible, cover a wide range of interests and be accessible for people from a CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) background. The Gamification model where volunteers gain credits for volunteering fits well within the cultural and recreational milieu of our state and is a model that can be translated across cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Incentives focused on a Point System Structure would require tracking via a government-verified centralised digital platform that automatically connects volunteers with organizations based on skills and interests. A mobile app would allow real-time logging of hours and verification and organizations can post opportunities and track volunteer participation.

Volunteers then earn points based on hours served (1 hour would equal 1 point) and additional points would be awarded for high-impact or specialized volunteer work.

3.2 Reward Categories:

Points System Benefits Credits could be exchanged for:
- Recreational facility access (pools, gyms, sports centres)
- Cultural event tickets (theatres, museums, concerts)
- Educational programs and workshops
- Public transport credits
- Local business discounts
- Community service access (childcare, senior support)
- Educational Opportunities: Access to courses and workshops
- Public Service Recognition: Annual awards and certificates for significant contributions

The social impact of these initiatives and recommendations for early inclusion within the education system creates a culture where volunteering is seen as both civic duty and personal development. It strengthens intergenerational connections through community service and helps address labour gaps through consistent volunteer participation.

4.   QUEENSLAND RECOGNITION OF VOLUNTEERS

Formal recognition of volunteers at the state level represents far more than ceremonial acknowledgment - it serves as a crucial foundation for sustaining and growing Queensland's volunteer sector.

When volunteers receive official recognition through state programs and awards, it elevates their contributions from informal community service to validated professional achievement. This recognition not only honours individual volunteers but also creates ripple effects throughout the entire volunteer ecosystem, from improving recruitment and retention to establishing clear pathways for career development and leadership opportunities.

As volunteer work underpins countless essential services across Queensland, from emergency response to community care, formal state recognition helps ensure this vital workforce remains strong, skilled, and sustainable for future generations.

4.1.0 State-Level Volunteer Recognition Impact

- Validates the essential role volunteers play in Queensland's social infrastructure
- Demonstrates that volunteer work, valued at billions of dollars annually, significantly supports state services
- Shows how volunteers are crucial in disaster response and recovery (particularly relevant for Queensland's natural disasters)
- Highlights the role of volunteers in maintaining critical services in regional and remote communities
- Creates pathways for professional development and career transitions
- Sets standards for volunteer management and support across organizations

4.1.1 Benefits of High-Level Recognition for Volunteers

- Attracts more people to volunteering through increased prestige
- Encourages corporate support and partnerships
- Facilitates better funding and resource allocation
- Creates pathways for policy development supporting volunteers
- Enables better coordination during national emergencies
- Provides leverage for improving volunteer support systems

Recognition of volunteering is not just about the awards – it's about our acknowledging volunteering as a vital force in maintaining and strengthening our society. Without proper recognition at state and national levels, we risk undervaluing and potentially losing this crucial community resource.

4.1.2. Economic and Social Validation of Volunteer recognition for Queensland

State-level recognition serves as a powerful acknowledgment of the substantial economic and social impact volunteers make to Queensland's economy, with contributions valued in the billions of dollars annually. This formal recognition demonstrates how volunteer work fundamentally supports and enhances state government services across numerous sectors.

When volunteers receive official validation of their contributions, it elevates their work from simple community service to recognized professional contribution. This recognition helps secure ongoing funding and support for volunteer programs, while creating meaningful pathways for volunteer work to be acknowledged in professional contexts. The economic

validation of volunteer work at a state level also helps organizations demonstrate their value when seeking grants or corporate partnerships.

4.1.3. Attraction and Retention Impact

High-profile state recognition serves as a powerful catalyst for volunteer engagement, encouraging more people to step forward and contribute to their communities. This recognition creates positive competition between organizations to develop and support outstanding volunteer programs, leading to improved conditions and experiences for volunteers.

The establishment of prestigious awards programs particularly appeals to younger volunteers who value formal recognition of their contributions. Long-term volunteers benefit from milestone recognition programs that acknowledge their sustained commitment, while increased visibility through state recognition programs often attracts corporate partnerships and support. This enhanced profile of volunteering helps organizations maintain strong volunteer numbers and engage new demographics in community service.

4.1.4. Career and Professional Development

Queensland recognition of volunteering creates meaningful pathways for professional advancement by providing official certification of skills and experience gained through volunteer work. This certification becomes particularly valuable as volunteers seek to transition into paid employment or advance their careers.

Organizations can confidently assess volunteer experience when it's backed by state-recognized standards for training and development. The transferability of volunteer experience across different organizations becomes smoother when there's state-level recognition, allowing volunteers to build comprehensive portfolios of their contributions and capabilities. This formal acknowledgment helps volunteers effectively leverage their experience for career advancement, particularly in sectors where their volunteer work aligns with professional goals.

Leadership Development and Legacy Building State recognition plays a vital role in developing volunteer leadership and creating lasting impact in the sector. By identifying and celebrating volunteer leaders, the state creates visible role models who inspire and guide others in the community.

This recognition naturally fosters mentoring relationships and encourages innovative approaches to volunteer management and program development. Beyond individual recognition, formal state acknowledgment helps build a historical record of volunteer achievements and best practices, creating valuable institutional knowledge that benefits future initiatives. This documentation of success stories and effective strategies establishes clear benchmarks for volunteer programs and maintains continuity in volunteer services across generations. The result is a stronger, more resilient volunteer sector that continues to evolve and improve while maintaining its core values and effectiveness.

IN SUMMARY - LEGACY BUILDING FOR QUEENSLAND

The early integration of volunteering into Queensland's education system represents a transformative opportunity to shape our state's future social fabric.

By embedding structured volunteering programs within schools, we create a foundation where community service becomes a natural part of children's development and understanding of citizenship. This early exposure not only develops crucial life skills and empathy but establishes lifelong patterns of community engagement and civic responsibility.

When combined with a comprehensive credit system that offers recognition through educational, recreational, practical benefits, and employment volunteering becomes both meaningful and rewarding.

The resulting ecosystem supports a self-sustaining volunteer infrastructure where participation flows naturally from education to career development. As young people witness their contributions making real differences in their communities, while simultaneously building their own skills and receiving tangible benefits, Queensland develops a robust social foundation.

This pipeline of active, engaged citizens who understand the importance of giving back to their communities has ripple effects - early integration can be seen in stronger community bonds, more resilient local support networks, and a self-sustaining culture of volunteerism that strengthens our state's social infrastructure.

Most importantly, an integrated approach transforms volunteering from an occasional activity into a core component of our state's identity, creating resilient communities with strong support networks and a shared commitment to collective wellbeing that will serve Queenslanders for generations to come.