

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee

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The Department of Justice (DoJ) is pleased to assist the Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee (the Committee) with a submission addressing the inquiry's terms of reference relevant to DoJ. This submission provides information to assist the Committee in its consideration of these important matters.

Overview of DoJ services and current state

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

Current state of volunteering in DoJ and value

The DoJ works to deliver a fair, just and inclusive Queensland. Volunteers play an important role in supporting and delivering justice services to the Queensland community.

There are more than 80,000 general volunteer Justices of the Peace (JPs) or Commissioners for Declarations (CDecs) in Queensland. This includes approximately 3900 volunteers working across 24/7 dedicated signing sites offering witnessing services in the highly valued *JPs in the Community Program*. In 2024, volunteers involved in the *JPs in the Community Program* witnessed 1.91 million documents for over 625,000 clients and volunteered over 132,000 hours of their time. In response to community needs, an additional seven witnessing sites were established around the state in 2024.

Volunteers who attend Queensland courts deliver services to court users, including mental health, housing and general social support services. In general, external volunteer agencies and organisations manage volunteers rather than the Courts engaging directly with volunteers. Most courthouse volunteers work for entities that have entered into a written agreement with a Queensland Government department, normally the DoJ. While Supreme and District Courts provides volunteers with space and facilities to operate, information regarding the number of volunteers operating in each courthouse is primarily held by the organisation coordinating the volunteer service (including number of First Nations volunteers).

Benefits

Some of the benefits provided to the community from key organisations managing volunteers in Queensland Courts include:

- pro bono legal advice to court users provided by LawRight through both paid employees and pro bono advice from lawyers at private firms
- adult victim and witness support programs, child witness support programs and child witness support dogs provided by PACT
- support for persons impacted by the trauma of manslaughter or murder from Queensland Homicide Victims Support

Other organisations with significant volunteer participation providing assistance to court users include Court Network and Community Justice Groups.

Court Network volunteers act as a central and first point of contact for clients attending specialist domestic and family violence (DFV) courts. Court Network is funded by the Courts Innovation Program to deliver court reception services in DFV courts in Ipswich, Southport, Beenleigh, Cairns and Brisbane. Court Network manages these services internally and supports accessibility and participation for their staff. Services provided by Court Network which assist in the operation of the specialist DFV courts include checking-in court users and connecting them with other onsite supports such as legal support and specialist DFV supports, and operating a court reception service which requires recruitment, training and rostering onsite volunteers. Additional to the benefits to court users, volunteers value the sense of belonging and respect they have from being part of the broader integrated response in DFV Courts.

The DoJ also funds 52 Community Justice Groups (CJG) around the state. The CJG Program supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who come into contact with the criminal justice system and work with the local community and various stakeholders to address justice related issues. CJGs deliver various programs and services including prevention, awareness, education and early intervention programs, and programs throughout the criminal justice system including while individuals are in custody, under supervision or transitioning from custody back to the community.

Registered Justices of the Peace (JPs) or Commissioners for Declarations (CDecs) are volunteers who provide benefit to the community through witnessing the signing of documents as prescribed by law, certifying copies of documents, issuing summonses and warrants, conducting minor bench duties, attending police records of interviews and if required constituting a court to deal with certain types of matters in the absence of a Magistrate. They have a trusted and important role within the community.

Possible barriers and challenges

ToR 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

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

ToR 4. 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

The *JPs in the Community Program* has defied the downward national trend of volunteer numbers with the program growing by 8% in volunteer numbers in 2024. However, there are costs associated with the pre-requisite training required for appointment as a CDec or JP (Qualified) which may be a barrier for some potential volunteers. There are sometimes small out of pocket expenses for volunteers in the *JPs in the Community Program* which may also limit participation. To improve the volunteer experience the DoJ JP Branch looks to improve the conditions of volunteering informed by feedback from JPs and CDecs including through recognition of service, establishing a sense of engagement and belonging for volunteers, and ensuring strong governance which includes complaint management and responding to harassment and bullying.

When registering an application to become a volunteer at a courthouse the applicant must complete a written application and provide the following:

- National Police Certificate;
- certified copy of driver's licence/photographic identification;
- certified copy of current Working with Children Blue Card (if applying to volunteer within Childrens Court); and
- two character references (from within the last 12 months).

An applicant organisation must also supply:

- a copy of public liability insurance policy providing coverage for personal injury and property damage to the value of \$10,000,000.00 (if applicable); and
- an ABN number if it is a registered business.

Sourcing appropriate levels of insurance can be a barrier for some volunteers. Therefore, given the nature of the services delivered within courthouses it is preferred that volunteer services are delivered in accordance with agreements for service between a coordinating organisation and DoJ. This allows for appropriate onboarding, training, support, oversight and health and safety for volunteers and reduces risks to volunteers and court users accessing supports or services.

There may also be infrastructure limitations in some courthouses which make it difficult to deliver a full range of volunteer services.

Important contributions of First Nations volunteers

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

CJGs are run by members of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and provide a community-based response to local issues. Each CJG determines their own staff and volunteering structure based on local needs. They work cooperatively with magistrates, police, corrective services personnel and staff from other government agencies and community organisation. They deliver services to DFV Specialist Courts, Thaa'Pant Services, remote Justices of the Peace program, Youth Court in Townsville and Murri Courts. Murri Court is a bail-based specialist court program operating in 15 locations across Queensland. CJGs coordinate the participation of Murri Court Elders and Respected Persons who provide cultural advice, expertise and guidance to clients interacting with the criminal justice system in these courts.

It is generally recognised that CJGs rely on the generous volunteer support provided by Elders and Respected Persons who are committed to improving justice related outcomes for their communities.

The CJG Program has a broader impact across a range of areas including housing, employment, education, social and emotional wellbeing, cultural connection and family safety, all of which contribute to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement). The long-term goal of the CJG Program under the [Framework for Stronger CJGs](#) is "Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in and contact with the criminal justice system is reduced" which is relevant to [targets 10 and 11](#) under the National Agreement.

The JP Branch partners with the DoJ Courts Innovation Program to regularly deliver training courses for persons from remote Indigenous communities to appoint new, local JPs. In 2024, five training courses were delivered for persons from remote Indigenous communities at locations including Lockhart River and Weipa which encompassed the communities of Mapoon, Aurukun and Napranum.

Other relevant matters

ToR 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.

Civil Liability Act 2003

Section 39 of the *Civil Liability Act 2003* (CL Act) provides that a volunteer does not incur personal civil liability in relation to any act or omission done or made by the volunteer in good faith when doing community work organised by a community organisation, or as an office holder of a community organisation.

Under the CL Act, the terms 'community organisation', 'community work' and 'volunteer' are widely defined to capture a broad range of community activities that are not carried out for private financial gain.

This law is intended to promote and support volunteering by allowing individuals to undertake valuable community activities without the risk of facing legal proceedings (provided they are undertaking activities and performing their duties in good faith).