

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission to the Queensland Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering I have been a volunteer in multiple organisations for more than 40 years and continue to contribute in my retirement. On average, I currently spend about 15 - 20 hours per week on voluntary work. Consequently, I am aware of the challenges and constraints facing many people in the volunteer sector. Volunteering does provide the opportunity for people to put something back in to their community and see beneficial outcomes. It also provides many social benefits for participants such as friendships and community links. However, while many people are willing to give their time, there are limits to how much out-of-pocket expenses associated with their volunteer work they can sustain. This also applies to many non government organisations who do not have the financial capacity to reimburse the expenses of their volunteers. The Federal Government's Volunteer Grants Program provided a useful way not for profit groups were able to access some funding assistance. However since 2021, the way this program is now administered has limited many groups access to funding. Previously, officers from the Department of Social Services determined successful applicants in an open and fair process. However, the process by which organisations can even be considered is now determined by the local Federal member instead, with groups invited to apply. This assumes the member knows about the activities of all volunteer groups in their community and could be open to bias and favouritism. It would be beneficial for the Queensland Government to consider developing its own volunteer funding program, perhaps funded out of income from the gambling industry. The volunteers I work with do not want medals or even public recognition for their contributions but some reimbursement for their out-of-pocket expenses such as travel would be greatly appreciated. The constraints on volunteers is particularly apparent in our State Emergency Services and rural fire brigade groups. Some people may be able to contribute a couple of days to assist with a particular incident but weather related problems such as storms, flooding and bushfires are increasing and may require a sustained effort over many days. Younger people with job and family commitments may not be able to easily contribute for days of deployment, especially away from home. Consequently, the bulk of the volunteering falls on older, retired people. With many of these activities, a reasonable level of fitness is required so older volunteers may be limited in the work they can undertake. In addition to the actual incidents, volunteers in both organisations are required to participate in detailed training activities and this requires a further significant time commitment. Consideration should therefore be given to establishing a system of some payment to acknowledge their efforts and commitment. For example, a person could earn points for days of volunteer work and once a minimum is reached they could be eligible for a flat rate payment. Those volunteers who are self employed can suffer considerable loss of earnings while they are undertaking many days of this vital community work. This limits their ability to volunteer for multi-day incidents and would be a deterrent for others seeking to join.