

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

By: Nicole Lobegeier

To the Committee,

My name is Nicole Lobegeier, and I am a 36 year old Gladstone local who has been actively volunteering in the local community since before I turned 18. Over the years, I have dedicated countless hours to various volunteer roles, including involvement leading the local RSPCA group, later founding my own independent animal rescue in 2019. Additionally, I have served as a Director for NFP House, an organisation dedicated to supporting and strengthening local non-profits.

I currently work for the local Federal Member. However in my previous professional role, I worked for EQIP (Education Queensland Industry Partnership), a highly successful organisation that served as a central point of contact between local state schools, industry, business, and the community. Our small but dedicated team of three facilitated over 1000 work experience placements annually for local students—breaking records and earning recognition as winners of the Queensland Training Awards for Innovative Industry Collaboration, as well as becoming finalists in the Australian Training Awards.

Beyond work experience, EQIP provided *authentic workplace learning* programs for senior high school students, integrating vocational education, industry placements and volunteering to equip students with real-world skills. Unfortunately, despite the program's proven success, increasing bureaucratic red tape and risk management concerns from Education Queensland ultimately led to its demise. The excessive permissions and paperwork required by school staff to allow students to engage in off-campus activities became unmanageable, leading to the shutdown of invaluable learning opportunities—particularly for students not on an ATAR pathway. This is a clear example of well-intentioned regulations having unintended consequences, ultimately limiting student access to critical community engagement and skill-building experiences.

The Decline of Volunteering

From my experience, the decline in volunteerism has become increasingly evident in recent years. While animal rescue may enjoy more public goodwill than other non-profits, we have not been immune to the broader challenges facing volunteer-driven organisations. The COVID-19 pandemic in particular, played a significant role in shifting volunteer engagement. Many long-term volunteers, who previously took on multiple roles within the community, experienced a rare but forced break from their commitments during lockdowns. Many of them realised the benefits of stepping back and unfortunately, did not return to their previous levels of involvement.

While my organisation is fortunate to have a committed core team, the reality is that much of the responsibility falls on a small number of individuals. This makes it difficult to dedicate time to important but non-essential activities such as volunteer engagement, promotions and community outreach. This struggle is not unique to animal rescue as many small to medium-sized volunteer organisations, including show societies, Rotary clubs, Lions clubs and sporting associations, are facing similar challenges.

Another significant barrier is funding eligibility. Many modern grant opportunities are restricted to specific focus areas, such as environmental initiatives, First Nations programs, or emergency preparedness, leaving groups like ours, or operational funding in general, largely unsupported. For organisations like ours, operational costs—including veterinary expenses, transport, and insurance—have skyrocketed due to inflation and the rising cost of living. Unlike businesses, we cannot increase the "price" of our services (i.e., adoption fees for rescue animals) to offset these expenses, making financial sustainability increasingly difficult.

Issues with Work for the Dole Programs

While Work for the Dole programs have been seen as a potential solution to encourage community engagement, my experience with them, particularly through the RSPCA, has shown that they are often ineffective. These programs frequently place additional strain on already overstretched volunteer organisations, as significant time and effort are required to travel and meet, train and supervise participants. In many cases, Work for the Dole volunteers would either not show up at all or only attend once, making the investment of resources to support them unviable.

Rather than continuing with an ineffective one-on-one placement model, a more structured approach may be needed, where a central organisation could coordinate Work for the Dole participants and provide group-based volunteering activities for local non-profits. For example, a system where volunteers contribute one day per week to a different organisation—rotating through various community programs—would allow for greater participation, better oversight, and more meaningful contributions. This approach would also lessen the administrative burden on already overworked volunteer groups and increase accountability for participants.

Lack of Government Support

Unfortunately, my personal experiences with local government have not always been positive when it comes to how volunteers and community organisations are treated. While council offers grants and occasional recognition events, the way volunteers are communicated with may often be rigid and impersonal—treating us more like business staff who are bound by tender and procedural obligations rather than community-driven volunteers trying to make a difference.

Over the years, we have received correspondence from local council representatives that has been quite derogatory, and many of us in the community have become hesitant to engage with them unnecessarily out of fear that they may make it even more difficult for us to operate. This is incredibly disappointing, especially considering that it is at the local government level where we are making the biggest impact—helping with responsible animal management processes, pet desexing, and animal registrations.

Whilst an annual volunteer breakfast is a nice gesture, I believe more emphasis needs to be placed on Councils and other levels of government through genuine engagement, respect, and recognition of the effort volunteers put into their communities.

The Future of NFP House

As a former director of NFP House, I have seen firsthand how critical collaborative models like this can be for supporting volunteer organisations. NFP House was designed as a central point of contact for non-profits in the region.

Despite its proven success, this model is on the brink of failure due to a lack of core foundation funding from local, state and federal governments. This is a missed opportunity, as NFP House should be championed as a pilot model that could be replicated in other communities across Queensland.

Governments at all levels should be actively supporting initiatives that promote collaboration and sustainability in the volunteer sector. Instead, organisations like NFP House are forced to fight for survival, despite the fact that their work directly benefits the communities that governments are meant to serve.

Conclusion

I have been—and remain—a steadfast ambassador for volunteering in my community. I strongly believe that with the right support, we can reverse the decline in volunteer participation and build a more engaged, connected society. I am eager to contribute to future discussions on how best to support and revitalise Queensland's volunteering sector.

I commend the Queensland Government for taking a proactive stance on this issue, both by launching this inquiry and appointing a Minister for Volunteering. These are critical and necessary steps in addressing the challenges facing volunteer organisations across the state. I look forward to seeing the outcomes of this inquiry and hope that it leads to meaningful, lasting change for volunteers and the communities they serve.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my perspective.

Sincerely,
Nicole Lobegeier