


Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Volunteering within QLD.

I have been involved with State Emergency Service (SES) for approximately 28 years, initially as a Coordinator for a SES Cadet Unit and then moving as an employee with the organisation (remaining also as a volunteer). I have 25 years of service as an employee of the SES rising to the position of [REDACTED], a position I have held for approximately 10 years. I am currently on suspension for allegations made by staff members. I have served across the State and interstate on numerous disaster operations and have an excellent understanding of SES volunteers, their motivation and their commitment.

I do have complete admiration for the tasks undertaken by volunteers in the SES. At times they undertake very unpleasant and dangerous undertakings in conditions that are generally far from ideal. Time and time again the volunteers step up to assist their communities whenever needed often at significant personal and monetary expense.

Like most volunteer organisations the SES has a constant battle recruiting and subsequently retaining volunteers.

In this submission, I would like to raise a number of points in relation to the SES. My submission is particularly related to the [REDACTED] and the overall SES Organisation.

Lack of understanding of volunteers, lack of adequate support and lack of respect

The current senior paid staff [REDACTED] region and the senior staff in the Organisations Head Office have no understanding of volunteers motivation and the support they require. I have found (in the various positions I have held in the organisation) that it is imperative to develop a rapport with the volunteers. Take the time to talk to them - get to know something about them, make them feel part of the organization - provide a sense of belonging. Our volunteers do amazing work, often in less than ideal conditions. They take time away from their families and work to help others for free. The very least staff can do is appreciate this and show appreciation. Current Senior Staff in the region (Area Controllers, Trainers and the Acting Regional Director, along with senior Staff at Head Office appear to be totally disconnected from the volunteers. They don't seem to understand that without volunteers there is no SES. Their level of self interest and indulgence is appalling and lack of respect for volunteers

Example - On [REDACTED], I attended the funeral of [REDACTED], [REDACTED] had been a dedicated member of the SES for 38 years. Not a single senior officer from the Regional Office or the State Office bothered to attend. Fifteen volunteers from [REDACTED] and across [REDACTED] gave up another work day to attend to form a Guard of Hour and pay respect to John.

The current SES Chief Officer [REDACTED] and the previous Acting Assistant Commissioner [REDACTED] both have military backgrounds. This is ideal for the forces but they have little understanding or appreciation on what motivates volunteers and how they need to be managed.

Volunteers constantly quote a lack of support and clear disconnect from the SES organisation at a state and regional and local council level. Volunteers in the SES are disrespected by their paid staff, as being less important or simply not valued. Our Volunteers are paid lip service by our paid regional staff but when it comes to them doing their paid job of supporting the volunteers, that support is high

on impossible to find. Regional staff are so focussed on their own self interest and what they can get out of the organisation that they have lost sight of the fact that they are employed to serve the volunteers.

Lack of Support

A serious example of this lack of support - a volunteer from the [REDACTED] SES Unit had the horrendous task of retrieving a dead body for a dam via a flood boat some 12 months ago. This was a young member and the body had been in the water for some days. As you can appreciate, the member has suffered significant physiological damage from this experience. Despite ongoing requests to the organisation's Peer Support Unit to assist this member, nothing has been done. to this day this member is unable to enter an SES facility.

Complaints to State Office and HR regarding unethical and unlawful behaviours of paid staff that have been reported to SES/QPS and formerly QFES have not been treated appropriately or on many occasions just swept under the carpet and ignored. While this behaviour exists the volunteers are not receiving the appropriate level of service and are subsequently leaving in significant numbers due to sheer frustration.

The worst thing that happened to SES was their inclusion within Queensland Fire and Emergency Service. The toxic environment that existed in that organisation saw SES volunteers treated and referred to as 3rd class citizens. I am unable to comment whether this has improved following the transition to QPS.

Training issues:

Training within the SES has become farcical. Despite repeated advice and reminders, the SES as an organisation is likely to lose its training accreditation. The appropriate procedures during the transition to QPS were not followed. What this also means for the volunteers is that a considerable amount of training they have undertaken cannot be accredited and they may have to re-do the training. This is an onerous burden on people who are giving up their time to gain skills to assist their communities and then finding out they are unable to utilise those skills.

Regional staff have been accessing the Volunteer information management System (VIMS) to give themselves qualifications so that they can then conduct training courses. The trouble is the volunteers' accreditation is nullified because the staff have delivered training without the proper qualifications. This leads to significant frustration with volunteers and they decide to leave as it all becomes too hard.

Volunteers on a flood boat course, a potentially high risk course, some 18 months ago had to assist a [REDACTED]. This matter has been reported but to date no action taken.

One senior Training staff Officer does not hold the required Cert 1V qualification, another senior Training Officer has had all of his training qualifications removed. This same officer was subject of a vote of no confidence in his ability to manage training by the volunteer instructors but no action was taken by the organisation. Courses are cancelled on numerous occasions due to poor management by the Training Coordinator which is very frustrating to volunteers who often rearrange daily and work requirements to attend this training.

Recruitment

New volunteers are disillusioned with the application process and the time it takes for this process to be completed. Volunteers attend because they want to be involved in something positive and give something back to their community. When they first attend, they are required to fill out a myriad of paperwork and then advised it will take some time for this to be processed. They are virtually told to go home and they will be contacted in a few weeks. In the majority of cases we have lost them from day one. While documentation is an essential element of any organisation it needs to be reviewed and re-structured if there is to be any hope of increasing membership of the SES.

The [REDACTED] Regional office appointed a Regional Community Engagement & Recruitment Officer in December 2023. The first task was to present a recruitment strategy for the region. The Officer was unable to achieve this. I fail to understand how membership can be increased when you have a recruitment officer who does not understand what a recruitment strategy is?

Local Government Support

With [REDACTED] ZRegion covering 11 Local Governments, the level of support the local SES Units receive can vary from excellent to virtually non-existent. There needs to be a review of the relationship between the State Organisation and Local Governments across the State to achieve a more substantive arrangement.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, I can only comment on SES Volunteers and the SES Organisation as that is where my experience rests.

I am constantly in awe of what volunteers do - flood operations, searching for missing persons, forensic searches, refuelling planes for bushfire operations, assisting at community events to name just some of their roles. These tasks are generally undertaken in hazardous, hot and difficult conditions. Yet the volunteers do these tasks willingly to assist others in times of need. I have witnessed on so many occasions the difference they make to people's lives. I do not believe they receive anywhere near the due recognition and respect they deserve.

I hope as an outcome of this inquiry, that a significant review of the SES [REDACTED] Regional Office and the senior staff of SES State Headquarters is undertaken. I know from talking to volunteers across the region that they are about to walk in significant numbers. It would be sad to see an organisation with such a proud history disappear,

Thank-you for reviewing my submission.