


Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Volunteering within QLD.

I have been involved with SES for approximately 15 years, having really become involved in SES following the 2010/2011 floods and our involvement locally within my community which was affected by this event. As a member of my community employed within the emergency services, I have known and have been heavily involved with SES volunteers within my community which initially sparked an interest and an association and ultimately my engagement with SES.

I have long been involved in volunteerism, having been involved in the scouting association throughout my youth and from this, I believe that I developed a strong affiliation with volunteering in the wider community. I have throughout my life been involved in Scouts, Venturer's, Rovers, local community groups, show societies, sporting clubs, Qld Bluelight Association, multiple school P&C associations, Men's Shed and SES to name but a few.

I feel that my contributions within these agencies and associations throughout my life stands me in good stead to pass comment on volunteerism within our society with a specific focus on the QLD SES.

I feel that my association with the SES is the agency which will provide the most insight into Volunteerism in our community, and I hope that my contribution is a constructive viewpoint.

Officially, I have been involved in the QLD SES for approx. 6-7 years, and I have largely enjoyed my association with SES and my community.

The recent restructure of the SES organisation and re-alignment from the former QFES organisation to QPS has been very poorly managed, and from a volunteer perspective, has been a complete disaster.

Now more than ever there is a clear-cut delineation and separation within the SES organisation here in QLD. We have a vast controlling body of paid SES staff, and an ever-dwindling number of SES volunteers. The system is broken, and the captain is asleep at the wheel. Volunteers cite a lack of support and clear disconnect from the SES organisation at a state, regional and local level. Only recently have we seen a budget uplift for SES and another volunteer organisation left out on the margins of a larger organisation – RFS. For our SES we still suffer the “tyranny of our local government”, with the clear and obvious inconsistencies with the provision of equipment and facilities and is often accompanied by a poor and inconsistent level of support for the volunteers of the organisation.

If you compare a state government funded SES organisation such as that which exists in NSW and Victoria, the provision of equipment, vehicles and facilities demonstrates the commitment of the government of the day to the organisation. QLD does not have such commitments and the differences in standards, equipment leads to disgruntled SES volunteers within the organisation.

Demonstrated examples of Politics, personal gain, empire building and clear-cut cases of unethical and unlawful behaviours which are reported to SES/QPS and are not being treated with the seriousness that they warrant, and the investigations are ineffective and not conducted in a timely manner.

Volunteers in the SES are disrespected by their paid staff, as being less important or 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 nigh on impossible to find.

Are the paid regional staff delivering for the needs of our community and volunteers within the organisation? Is the public getting value for money through these paid employees? Who is the body who is ensuring compliance, of ethical and diligent behaviour, of best practice within the government body as government employees/public servants.

Did the management of our organisation (SES) utilise the significant funding provided to QPS through the SES uplift money to employ a significant number of middle managers? From the outside looking in - it certainly appears to have been just that. What control measures were put into place to ensure that the created positions within SES were justified and provide value for investiture and a positive return for the volunteers of the organisation? Were those new paid executives required to apply for those positions in the required manner or were they just "shoulder-tapped" by those who justify their jobs by creating more bureaucracy, rather than purchasing equipment and other resources needed by our volunteer organisation.

In-line with the prompts provided within the submission outline - I will provide a response utilising the provided headings:

experiences and motivations of volunteers and their recommendations to improve experiences.

- ***Experiences and motivations***

It is my opinion that volunteers join volunteer organisations to derive satisfaction out of helping others and to value add to our communities or chosen fields, to share your knowledge/abilities, to build friendships, to experience new things and to generally feel a valuation of themselves by doing something for either themselves or others. There are some in volunteer organisations who are there "to feather their nest" or to derive some other benefits out of the experience - but by and large, most volunteers do what they do for the altruistic benefit to themselves.

To improve the experience for volunteers - and I am specifically raising SES as an organisation here - there needs to be a wholesale review of practices employed by SES to entice, engage, recruit, train and retain volunteers to the organisation. SES need to fill the void left after the mass exodus of qualified and knowledgeable volunteers - the stalwarts of the organisation who have left en-masse following the merger debacle.

I know for a fact that our volunteers are not being listened to with their concerns, i know that volunteers are being stood down without explanation, investigations are being conducted by persons without the necessary backgrounds or abilities to conduct behavioural investigations and the investigative procedures are protracted, ineffective, unnecessarily stressful and are fraught with danger in the psychosocial hazard spectrum. I would expect that the SES organisation will be taken to task with lawsuits concerning workplace conduct and other psychosocial issues in coming years.

- ***Improvements***

Value our Volunteers – Our volunteers within our communities are the cornerstone of any organisation – be it SES, Scouts, Meals on Wheels, or the local pet walker's association. If we – each organisation and our respective governments or agencies do not value, the contributions of the

volunteers and give the requisite level of support back to those volunteers – we are doomed and our volunteers are going to walk away.

Our volunteers within SES are not being supported from a local council, or from our regional offices and I can provide several examples to demonstrate the lack of support for our volunteers.

An SES facility was broken into, and a considerable amount of equipment was stolen by low-lifers from the community. Our regional Council have provided minimal support to our members and were reticent to even attend the facility to see what support could be offered locally to keep our local SES group moving in the right direction.

An SES volunteer lost her entire home during the Tara bushfires in 2023 – Our Acting Regional Director and the then Acting SES Assistant Commissioner came to Tara, spoke with our member, promised support and have failed to deliver any measured response to support our volunteer or her family...(Compare this with another local volunteer organisation where several volunteers also lost their homes, and whose organisation and other agencies have banded together to provide assistance with replacement accommodation, replacement uniforms and replacement medals/certificates)

Investigations – Utilise trained and professional investigators to investigate disciplinary complaints with designated levels of severity. Serious/criminal matters to be referred to QPS or External Investigations agencies in the first instance. Disciplinary investigations to be conducted in a timely and defined time schedule.

Incidences for investigation have been dragged out over significant periods causing genuine mental health concerns and opening the services for legal ramifications. Investigations have been handled poorly and in most instances have been handled by persons with conflicts of interest or who are not suitable to the task.

Training – our training needs an overhaul – make SES training a nationally consistent approach where courses in QLD are recognised in NSW, NT, Tasmania, or WA – surely it can't be that hard and we can get our volunteers trained appropriately.

Recognise external training and industry qualifications – recognise that people come from all walks of life and bring with them experiences and qualifications from external agencies. Why should a professional tree-lopper with industry qualifications have to do a SES based chainsaw course before undertaking a chainsaw activity? Why should a teacher with a diploma of education have to do a TAE to be a volunteer trainer? Why should a builder have to do a storm damage course and so the list goes on – move with the times and be realistic about qualifications.

High School students - Encourage teenagers in late high school (16 years +) to the organisation with accredited training and QCE points toward their ATAR.

Financial incentive – SES volunteers do not receive any fiscal return for their services. Volunteers go on deployments to large scale disaster events (such as Townsville floods recently) where SES volunteers join QFD, QPS, Ergon, QAS, ADF and other organisations and undertake duties in difficult situations. Except – SES volunteers sleep on a stretcher in a hall, are provided with ration packs for food, have limited facilities or amenities and received next to no recompense for their efforts. Contrast with QFD or QPS who are paid significantly for their efforts and who are accommodated in hotels and suitable accommodation. We wonder where and why our volunteers lose enthusiasm and

feel undervalued to the organisation and society. Our SES volunteers also usually forego work commitments to enable their participation in these deployments meaning that they lose income from their primary role and receive no financial incentives to offset their losses.

We also send our paid regional staff members on deployment to the likes of Townsville where they swan about, take photos and they are also paid overtime and receive additional incentives in the form of allowances, accommodation and they don't have to sleep in a hall with 50 other people and shared facilities. In some instances, the paid regional staff are not even remotely qualified to or have no discernible role to perform in being deployed – such as sending the Recruitment officer to Townsville.

A Financial benefit needs to be explored as a matter of urgency within SES.

Facilities/Equipment – QLD SES is a hotchpotch of facilities and assets due to the current arrangements of some equipment being provided governmentally (state), through generous sponsorship arrangements (Powerlink/Ergon) and through local government. As such – there is no uniformity of equipment/vehicles/assets & facilities between groups and agencies. If in the event of a large, scaled activation of SES volunteers from around the state, volunteers from Roma cannot travel to Cairns and have a rough idea of equipment locations, assets, and capabilities. Establishing uniformity of vehicles, assets, facilities, and expectations allows the volunteers to maximise their abilities and for most efficiency/safety.

Western Downs SES operate with a mixture of 14 vehicles ranging from a 1997 Ford Courier utility through to the newest incarnations - a 2020 Isuzu DMAX with over 200,000kilometres on the clock. Western Downs has several trailers dating to the 1980's through into the latest Storm Damage trailer...there is no consistency or uniformity of vehicles and trailers.

Paid Staffing – Employ staff who have a volunteering background, employ staff members who hold the necessary qualifications to do the job, employ SES volunteers who are suitable to the role. Don't hire an unqualified trainer to perform the role of a Senior Operational Capability Officer who cannot train in any capacity for a considerable period of time.

benefits of volunteering and opportunities to increase emergency response volunteering.

As a volunteer with SES, and with a few years of volunteering in multiple agencies and community groups in capital cities and smaller communities, beyond the satisfaction of helping others, the benefits to volunteering on the health and wellbeing of volunteers is immense – when done right.

Numerous studies have shown the benefits of volunteering in our community for volunteers which promotes strong social networks due to “prosocial behaviour”. A volunteers actions benefits other people through the act of giving, helping, sharing and just volunteering. Volunteers connect in a beneficial way with community, by building positive relationships and trust both internally and externally.

Doctor Tim Sharp or “Doctor Happy” proffered that “When we're helping others we're more likely to feel good about ourselves which is, not surprisingly, a positive contributor to mental health. Mental and physical health are highly correlated so when we're psychologically well, we're also

more likely to be physically well,” vindicating the thought that volunteering makes a person feel good – mentally and physically.

Volunteers who “give” of their time – have been reported to be happier and healthier than those who don’t. Dr. Rebecca Pinkus says, “Volunteering keeps you in a positive mood and can help lift you out of a negative mood.” The reason for this is that helping others triggers the reward pathway in the brain and the buzz you get from these neurotransmitters is sometimes known as “the helpers high”.

legislative burdens and regulatory restrictions limiting volunteers.

It is my belief that the defining issues relating to volunteers within the SES include the application/onboarding process and the general treatment of SES volunteers here and across the state. I am also certain that there are many factors which limit the successes on engaging and retaining volunteers within volunteer organisations not only here in Qld, but dare I say it nationally.

- **Application/Onboarding process:**

New volunteers are disheartened when it comes to the application process and the outcomes or complexity of this process. Some Regional offices can have a new applicant processed within only a matter of days to weeks, others (████ - █████) are unable to process new applications within months - leading the applicants to feel undervalued and questioning their commitments to applying to the organisation.

How are we as an organisation able to enthuse and encourage new members to join if our processes for recruitment and on-boarding are so hit and miss. How are we as an organisation able to claim our organisation to be "volunteer centric" and making the needs of our volunteer's paramount within their focus – yet this is how we treat applicants for the organisation.

Regarding SES, I have personally seen that highly skilled and volunteer-ready persons from our community has been denied the opportunity to join SES because of minor drug convictions from their youth or early years in life. This has prevented them from joining when their CHC (Criminal History Check) came back with a negative result. That very person has had over 20 years of life experiences, has a business, has a blue card, has a family, has societal influence, and has plenty to offer his SES community, but is prevented from doing so by a one-off 20+year historic minor drug conviction. At what point can we look at an appeal process or acknowledgement that people often do and will make mistakes but go on to be valued members of our communities – can our volunteer organisations afford to deny that person's application and what are the impacts of denying that membership. (Private industry, the mining industry, general society can bring themselves to the conclusion that people can grow and become valued members of society – can government and SES?)

- **Red-Tape & Bureaucracy:**

No inquiry into government organisations will ever be free of submissions concerning red tape & bureaucracy. These factors are a significant cause of volunteers leaving the organisation in droves and a recommendation for a red-tape reduction review should be seriously considered. The

significant and deep-seated issues caused by the complex and onerous compliance required under the multitudes of government acts and policies is far too great. Consideration of new models for operating volunteer organisations to reduce red-tape can only serve to enhance volunteer participation and engagement – especially in rural environments where volunteer numbers are often limited.

barriers and challenges of volunteering in Queensland

- **Training issues and inadequacies:**

Anecdotally - I am aware that most SES groups are losing volunteers in significant numbers and over a very short period - with most Our new volunteers are unable to be trained in the basic competencies required by SES to be an accredited volunteer able to respond to activations within the community.

Our current training arrangements are laughable, with multiple complaints being made to ASQA of training inadequacies such as unqualified "trainers" training volunteers in courses for which they do not hold competencies, of "trainee trainers" training volunteers outside of the supervision of competent/qualified trainers, of trainers being unable to arrange courses and materials to enable a course to be completed in the manner required by ASQA and any accredited RTO.

Our volunteers have experienced senior regionally paid SES staff who are unable to complete required training correspondence effectively, leaving volunteers to volunteer their time and efforts in the belief that they will obtain a recognised SES competency which are not forthcoming due to basic administration incompetency. Our volunteers have experience intoxicated senior paid staff instructing volunteers on a high-risk training activity which has been reported to AMSA (Australian Maritime Safety Authority), QPS and SES.

■ SES has employed senior training officers who do not hold training competencies (Cert IV TAE) and who cannot provide training to any volunteers, yet who is paid over \$100,000 per year for his services. Another senior training officer was subject of a vote of no confidence by an overwhelming majority of volunteer trainers within the organisation which was not actioned by ■ regional office, and this person maintains his position. The volunteer training officers struggle to have effective assistance from paid training staff within regional office.

There have been clear examples of bullying by way of exclusion of entire SES units from regional training activities which have been raised with the appropriate investigative bodies which several months later have not been addressed. There have been clear examples of threatening behaviours from regional senior training staff toward volunteer trainers which have been subject to complaint to the appropriate agency, however these also remain un-resolved and unactioned.

To improve the experience for volunteers, SES need to improve the recruitment and engagement processes for SES volunteers to engage and to fill the void left after the mass exodus of qualified and knowledgeable volunteers - the stalwarts of the organisation who have left en-masse following the merger debacle.

- **Governmental support for volunteers:**

With the distinct rise in the cost of living and decline in real wages crisis, most volunteers are required to work long days and weekends to provide for their families and selves. The old volunteering notion of doing this on top of your everyday commitments is reduced.

Consideration of state and federal governments to provide financial incentives to emergency service volunteers should be up for discussion. Perhaps consideration of measures to assisting with costs associated with volunteering. Such support measures could be in the form of a tax incentives in the form of a rebate, or a reduction on land rates or vehicle registration.

Local government can assist by encouraging participation from employees in the form of supported emergency leave for response to SES matters or just an enthusiastic participation/supportive relationship with emergency volunteer agencies.

- **The growth of spontaneous volunteerism:**

A significant difficulty for SES is the growth of “Spontaneous Volunteerism” in society. Our society has grown and moved away from traditional volunteerism models associated with volunteer emergency service agencies. Spontaneous volunteers are individuals or groups of people who seek or are invited to contribute their assistance during and/or after a disaster or emergency. They are unaffiliated with any part of the official emergency management response and recovery system and may or may not have relevant training, skills, or experience

Spontaneous offers of help during and following a disaster are a growing phenomenon. The amount of coverage an event receives in the media, coupled with the desire to do something for those who need help, are strong motivators.

Significant and protracted flood events in Northern NSW in recent years saw an army of “spontaneous volunteers” who rolled up their sleeves and utilised whatever measures they were able to muster up to rescue fellow community members. The next day – social media and mainstream media feted these people dubbing them heroes and dumping praise on their actions from afar. Australia has historically volunteered and rolled up their sleeves when the going got tough, think mud army, think blaze aid, think the Burrumbuttock hay-runners and so forth the list goes on. Our traditional SES volunteers were hamstrung by bureaucracy or all manner of reasons (not to denigrate their roles and their responses in any way shape or form) and the rise of spontaneous volunteerism arrived.

Since the interruption of COVID, the volunteer cycle was effectively severed, and our communities lost the connection with volunteers within the organisations. Previous volunteers learnt during COVID that they had other options, that they did not have to engage and for arguments sake – turn up every Wednesday to be a member of an organisation that does not value their time.

I note that NSW SES have actively embraced spontaneous volunteerism where they have a designated process and support mechanism for spontaneous volunteers from community members during a disaster. Appropriate research on recent emergencies where spontaneous volunteerism has occurred elsewhere both here in Australia and overseas. This research could examine and analyse the motivations and experiences of individuals seeking to volunteer and the agencies that work with them such as SES Such research can be used to investigate and adapt, to develop and to perhaps trial, management tools for such instances.

Let's not re-invent the proverbial wheel as our governments tend to do – have a look at what works elsewhere and make it happen as a national or a state-run approach.