

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission to the Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland – Challenges for Local Governments in Disaster Management

Dear Committee Members,

Cairns Regional Council (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland. Our submission highlights the significant challenges local governments face in managing emergent and surge volunteers in disaster management, particularly in the absence of adequate Volunteer-Involving Organisations (VIOs) in our region. The response to Tropical Cyclone (TC) Jasper underscored critical gaps in volunteer management, funding, coordination, and risk mitigation. Without targeted funding and operational improvements, local governments will continue to bear an unsustainable burden, ultimately affecting their capacity to respond effectively to disasters.

The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement and Disaster Management in Queensland

The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement provide a best-practice framework for engaging volunteers across Australia. However, these standards do not explicitly recognise the varying disaster management structures across states. In Queensland, disaster response and recovery are locally led and state-supported, meaning local governments coordinate volunteer efforts within their Local Disaster Management Plans (LDMPs). While VIOs traditionally play a role in volunteer management, many Local Government Areas (LGAs) lack capable or willing VIOs to manage emergent volunteers during disasters.

Key Issues Identified

Local governments are encountering difficulties in recruiting and retaining volunteers for disaster management roles, partly due to regulatory complexities and a general decline in volunteer participation. The following outlines key issues impacting the current state of volunteering in Queensland:

1. Lack of Capable VIOs in some LGAs

- Many regional and rural LGAs lack VIOs with the capacity to recruit, train, deploy, and manage volunteers effectively during disaster events.
- This forces local governments to assume volunteer coordination responsibilities, stretching their operational capacity and exposing councils to liability risks.

2. Limitations of the EV CREW program

- The EV CREW program, managed by VQ, primarily functions as a volunteer registration platform rather than a full-service deployment and coordination model.

- Local governments still bear the responsibility of screening, briefing, and managing volunteers during disaster activations, even when no VIOs are present.
- VQ currently does not provide trained team leaders or direct coordination of emergent volunteers.

3. Inconsistencies in Volunteer Management Across LGAs

- Without a formalised structure, volunteer deployment varies significantly across LGAs.
- This inconsistency impacts the effectiveness of disaster response, particularly in fast-moving disaster situations where timely and structured volunteer activation is crucial.

4. Gaps in Training and Screening

- No clear protocols for monitoring safety at volunteer sites. The lack of on-site management can lead to volunteers entering hazardous areas unknowingly.
- Shortage of trained Team Leaders created chaotic deployments and unstructured relief efforts. Particularly where emergent volunteers lacked disaster response knowledge, and organisations struggled to conduct briefings.
- Formal leadership training was absent, making it difficult to organise large volunteer groups effectively.

Impact on Cairns Regional Council During Tropical Cyclone Jasper

The challenges outlined above became highly evident during CRC's response to TC Jasper. CRC experienced significant difficulties in mobilising emergent volunteers due to:

1. Lack of Volunteer-Involving Organisations (VIOs) in Cairns

Volunteer-involving organisations face significant administrative burdens, including complex compliance requirements, which can discourage volunteer participation.

CRC currently has little to no VIOs equipped to manage emergent and surge volunteers in the disaster management space. During TC Jasper, CRC relied on a single VIO that was unable to deploy volunteers efficiently due to its small volunteer base, lack of funding and/or training. The VIO cited financial constraints as a primary reason for its inability to undertake necessary training and secure insurance coverage. Given that there are no other VIOs willing to provide this service in Cairns, it is clear that funding remains a critical issue in this space. A high demand for volunteers during the disaster stretched available resources. Additionally, some external volunteer groups (e.g., SES, Red Cross) were already overcommitted to other disaster zones, limiting the number of

personnel they could provide. Cairns Regional Council received multiple requests for external volunteers but struggled to meet needs due to:

- A lack of redundancy in volunteer teams.
- Difficulties in reallocating volunteers between areas once the disaster escalated beyond initial expectations.

2. Emergency Volunteering CREW (EV CREW) support and coordination limitations

At the time of response during TC Jasper, CRC sought support from Volunteering Queensland's (VQ) EV CREW initiative. While VQ provides a formalised framework for managing volunteers in disaster situations, CRC encountered challenges in engaging with the program in a timely manner:

- **Lack of 24/7 Support:** VQ was unreachable outside business hours, which delayed the deployment of volunteers by 48–72 hours.
- **Reliance on Local Governments for Coordination:** While VQ provides a registry of available volunteers, the responsibility of screening, briefing, and managing volunteers during disaster activations, when no VIOs are present. Additionally, coordinating deployment still falls on local governments, further straining their operational capacity during activations.

3. Risks associated with uncoordinated volunteer efforts

Due to the lack of formal volunteer management structures, a local Facebook group took it upon themselves to rally community volunteers for disaster recovery efforts. While well-intentioned, this unregulated approach posed serious risks, including:

- **Lack of Insurance:** Volunteers were not covered by liability or personal accident insurance, creating financial and legal risks.
- **No Screening or Training:** Volunteers were not vetted for suitability or trained in disaster response.
- **Absence of PPE:** Volunteers were deployed without appropriate protective equipment, increasing injury risks.
- **Chaotic Deployment:** The lack of structured coordination placed additional stress on disaster-affected residents.

Community-led volunteering efforts (local residents stepping in to help) were largely uncoordinated, leading to:

- **Safety concerns:** Untrained volunteers engaging in high-risk recovery activities without proper oversight.

- Resource constraints: A lack of proper volunteer management processes meant that some willing volunteers were turned away due to an inability to assign them effectively.
- Lack of integration with official response efforts: Many public volunteers acted independently of the official disaster response, sometimes duplicating efforts or working inefficiently.

4. Training, screening and management capabilities

There is a necessity for comprehensive training to equip volunteers with the skills required for effective disaster response. This includes regular drills, scenario-based training, and access to updated resources. A number of challenges can be experienced when training is not coordinated, including:

- A shortage of trained Team Leaders to manage emergent volunteers creates chaotic deployments and unstructured relief efforts.
- No formal leadership training exists to prepare individuals for organising large groups of volunteers during disaster events.
- No clear protocols for monitoring safety at volunteer sites.
- Lack of on-site management means emergent volunteers may enter hazardous areas unknowingly.
- Many emergent volunteers arrive without knowledge of their roles or responsibilities.
- Training for emergent volunteers is lacking, and organisations struggle to conduct briefings during disasters.

Proposed Solutions for volunteering

1. Establish Sustainable VIO Funding:

- Provide dedicated funding for VIOs in disaster-prone regions like Cairns to ensure they can recruit, train, and deploy volunteers effectively.
- Ensure funding includes provisions for insurance coverage, PPE procurement, identifiable uniforms and leadership training for emergent volunteer management.
- By building the capacity of VIOs within their jurisdictions, local governments can rely on a more robust volunteer workforce to support community programs, including disaster management, environmental conservation, and social services.

- Provide temporary insurance coverage options that can be quickly activated during disasters.

2. Expand Volunteering Queensland's role to provide direct support where no VIO exists

- In LGAs where no willing or capable VIO exists, VQ should actively coordinate emergent volunteer deployment under the EV CREW framework.
- This includes:
 - Providing trained team leaders to manage spontaneous volunteers.
 - Overseeing volunteer screening, briefing, and risk management.
 - Ensuring PPE, insurance coverage, and compliance with safety standards.
- VQ should also ensure 24/7 availability to respond to disaster situations in a timely manner.

3. Formalising VQ's role in the QDMA structure

- The Queensland Government should formally recognise in policy and legislation that disaster management in Queensland is locally led and state-supported.
- Amend Queensland's Disaster Management Arrangements (QDMA) to explicitly define VQ's responsibilities in disaster volunteer coordination where no VIO exists and the National Standards should be interpreted and applied within this framework.
- In LGAs where no willing or capable VIO exists, develop Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) between VQ and local governments to ensure a clear process for activation, support, and resource allocation.

4. Expanding training and deployment capabilities

- Establish a state-supported specialised training program to ensure that VQ team leaders are prepared to mobilise volunteers effectively.
- Enable pre-disaster accreditation system for volunteers who register with EV CREW to streamline onboarding and risk assessment and ensure volunteers complete emergency response training before being deployed.
- Create a dedicated Regional Response Team of trained leaders who can deploy emergent volunteers quickly and efficiently.
- Require regular training sessions for emergent volunteers in disaster response, risk management, and operational readiness.

5. Strengthening Local Government Capacity

- Establish regional VIO partnerships to share resources and expertise in volunteer management.
- Fund dedicated volunteer coordinators within local councils to manage volunteer deployment during disasters.
- Develop a statewide deployment hub within VQ to assist local governments with spontaneous volunteer management.
- Through the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ), develop a formalised volunteer surge capacity network to prevent future shortages.

6. Digital and Technological Support for Volunteer Deployment

- Implement a statewide volunteer database and deployment app to streamline volunteer registration, role allocation, and communication.
- Introduce an automated emergency alert system to notify pre-registered volunteers about activation needs and roles.
- Enhance disaster dashboards and communication tools to improve coordination between councils, VIOs, and volunteers.

Conclusion

Managing emergent volunteers during disasters presents significant challenges in insurance, coordination, logistics, safety, and communication. In Cairns, the absence of capable Volunteer-Involving Organisations (VIOs) and the limitations of the current EV CREW model place an excessive burden on local governments, impacting their ability to effectively mobilize and manage volunteers during disaster response and recovery.

The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement do not currently differentiate between state-led and locally led disaster management models. As a result, Queensland's unique locally led disaster management structure is not adequately reflected in formal volunteer coordination frameworks. This creates a gap in guidance, resources, and operational clarity for local governments managing volunteers in the absence of a VIO.

Without these critical reforms, local governments will continue to bear an unsustainable burden, compromising Queensland's overall disaster response and recovery capacity.

Aligning Queensland's disaster volunteer management system with the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement requires a structured, state-supported role for Volunteering Queensland. By expanding EV CREW into a full-service volunteer

coordination model in LGAs without capable VIOs, Queensland can ensure a consistent, efficient, and locally integrated disaster volunteer response while reducing the operational pressure on local councils.

This recommendation supports a statewide approach to disaster volunteer management, enabling local governments to effectively leverage volunteer resources while focusing on critical response and recovery efforts.

We appreciate the Committee's consideration of this matter and look forward to collaborative solutions that create a sustainable, effective volunteer management system for disaster response in Queensland.