

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No:	359
Submitted by:	Fiona Hawthorne
Publication:	Making the submission and your name public
Attachments:	See attachment
Submitter Comments:	

Submission to Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland 2025

To Whom It May Concern

I am making this submission based on my thirty years of experience as a volunteer and as a volunteer manager. Currently I am an unpaid coordinator and committee member of an unfunded neighbourhood centre run 100% by volunteers. I am also currently volunteering as an Energy Champion for a COTA QLD energy literacy program for seniors. I have previously served on our local P&C Association and was a Founding member and long-serving committee member of Cooloola Coastcare. The observations here are based mostly on the last four years of volunteering in my current role, although many of the problems are similar to the ones I faced in earlier roles.

About CIRS

To give you some understanding of the range of skills and training required of our volunteers, here is some background to our organisation. Bear in mind that all of these services are carried out by unpaid workers, and are dependent on donations, grants and fundraising activities. Without our organisation, our small town would have none of these services or opportunities.

Community Information & Resource Service Association Incorporated (CIRS) was established in 1999 to attract health and human services and provide public resources to residents of Rainbow Beach. Years of community campaigning resulted in the opening of our community hall complex in 2012. CIRS has been managing the facility through five-year Management Agreements with Gympie Regional Council.

The next Agreement is due in 2026 and CIRS is currently undertaking a review of this arrangement to identify and address serious issues with maintaining our commitment into the future.

- CIRS is a 100% volunteer-run incorporated association, funded by memberships, donations, grants, second-hand book sales, monthly markets, and office services such as printing, photocopying, and public access computers.
- CIRS has assisted and auspiced grant projects for other local organisations and individuals.
- CIRS conducts community capacity building events such as free monthly movie nights, monthly community catch-ups, live music, arts and cultural events.
- CIRS hosts another organisation that runs a Community Pantry and, until recently, a learning community for home-schooled students.
- CIRS provides Emergency Relief weekly at Tin Can Bay and fortnightly at Rainbow Beach, auspiced by Community Action Inc and conducted by our volunteers.
- CIRS manages hall hire and meeting room bookings and is allowed to retain hire charges. This means volunteers are responsible for briefing all hirers on hall

equipment and procedures, and being on call to sort out any issues that arise during the hire, including at night and on weekends.

- CIRS committee members are responsible for the centre's security alarms and must respond to call-outs, including by police, when alarms are activated.
- CIRS is responsible for all cleaning, most repairs and maintenance of the hall, and our own assets, public liability and contents insurance.
- CIRS is registered with Centrelink as a Voluntary Work Organisation and can accept volunteers with Mutual Obligation requirements or combined work / volunteer options.
- CIRS runs monthly markets to raise funds to cover hall insurances, repairs and maintenance costs, including regular professional cleaning as our volunteers are all over 60 with physical limitations.

About Our Volunteers

There are no paid positions and volunteer numbers fluctuate in line with a national trend of overall diminishment.

- CIRS has currently (February 2025) 165 members, of whom 35 volunteer with some regularity. The office pool has 12 volunteers; the monthly markets have 25.
- Office volunteers are on a weekly roster and, until recently, have kept our doors open Monday to Friday 8.30am to 4pm. Weekend and outside hours tasks are usually filled by committee members.
- Office duties involve serving and assisting customers with printing jobs, photocopying, scanning and emailing, setting up new mobile phones, online government services, contacting telecommunications, energy providers and utilities, job applications and resumes, plus information about local and online service providers.
- Office volunteers receive basic training in office procedures from committee members and other long term volunteers and are always rostered on in pairs.
- Other volunteer roles include our monthly Friday Community Catch-up, \$100 board sellers, hall sound and AV tech, Emergency Relief team, and of course, the committee roles.

What have we done to attract volunteers?

Through a series of grants over the last few years, we have improved office conditions for volunteers with the following upgrades:

- ergonomic office furniture,
- personal lockers for their valuables,
- larger computer monitors to reduce eyestrain and improve posture,

- self-closing stainless steel bins for better hygiene,
- upright fridges and freezers to avoid bending to clean,
- a lighter and quieter stick vacuum cleaner,
- a Square cash register with touch screens and card payment facilities.

The cash register solved a lot of issues. Previously each office transaction was handwritten and totalled on a daily balance sheet which was invariably under or over on most days. This caused great anxiety amongst volunteers as some were more equipped than others to do the calculations, and others were worried they would be held responsible for any discrepancies. The register removed the need to do those calculations and provided us with a much quicker end of day procedure. It made the Treasurer's job easier and restored harmony amongst the volunteers. It also gave them new skills and confidence, and they were pleased to be able to tell customers that we could accept card payments and issue digital receipts. The lockable till drawer meant they didn't have to lift heavy strongboxes or transfer cash to a secure locker each afternoon. (Best purchase ever!)

We also removed a long-held requirement that all volunteers be prepared to clean the hall toilets. This had been a major deterrent to volunteering as expressed to us by unsuccessful recruits. We now pay cleaners to do a regular clean and add the cost of cleaning to each hall hire.

Where do we find our volunteers?

Rainbow Beach is a small coastal town in Queensland with a permanent population of 1,220 (ABS Census 2021). The main industry is tourism and the population fluctuates with holiday seasons, increasing to more than 10,000 during peak times. The main employment is hospitality-related, resulting in a gig economy with mostly low-paid casual workers. Younger locals and backpackers fill most of the tourism jobs market. Some long-term local workers (and even small business people) have had to leave town to find accommodation and now commute from Cooloola Cove, Tin Can Bay or other parts of the Gympie Region. They do not have time or capacity to volunteer anymore.

We have promoted our volunteer roles through local newspapers and social media, via membership group emails, at our monthly markets and community events, but our main source is referral from a Workforce employment service that uses our rooms weekly. They recognise that the only jobs available in our town require standing long hours and a physical stamina well beyond the capacity of most of our over 60's JobSeekers. The employment service direct them to us to fulfill much-needed roles, to carry out worthwhile tasks, learn new office skills, connect socially and maintain a sense of self-worth in a small community. Yes, our volunteers do jobs that should be paid employment but with no funding source to pay them, they rationalise their fortnightly JobSeeker payment as partial compensation (at well below current minimum

wage rates) for the work they do. The other volunteers appreciate the stability that the JobSeekers's reliable routine hours provide, although there are still the usual roster disruptions of medical appointments, illness and caring duties that fall to the over 60s.

What are the deterrents to people volunteering with us?

- During the 2022-current property boom, a considerable number of properties that were either owner-occupied or permanent rental properties changed hands and became AirBNB or holiday lettings. This has significantly reduced the number of permanent residents available to volunteer in local organisations.
- Due to the increased rents and cost of living, there are very few younger residents available to volunteer.
- With fewer locals left for employers to call upon, older residents are often called on to fill in the job gaps where physically possible, or care for children of working parents. This reduces their availability and reliability as volunteers.
- Some of our office volunteers drive from Cooloola Cove (50km round trip) but the fuel cost impost often ends up becoming an issue for them. We have discussed full reimbursement but have only provided one-off fuel vouchers through a grant. Even this can be problematic, though, if the remaining local volunteers get nothing. We cannot reliably afford to routinely provide fuel vouchers to all volunteers and don't want to build up unattainable expectations.
- The increased volume of traffic (4WDs towing caravans and boats, tourist buses and commuting workers) has impacted road safety. Recently we have had the added complications of logging trucks travelling on our one road in. Bad weather has also significantly impacted the road surface, making the drive a major deterrent to older volunteers from outside our town.

What are the deterrents to finding committee volunteers?

- Our committee members are all over 60 years old and increasingly faced with complicated and intrusive reporting and administrative tasks. True, we no longer need to have our financials audited by an Auditor. That saves us a considerable sum each year but it means that the committee is expected to be across any and all changes in reporting requirements for the ACNC and Office of Fair Trading.
- There is no branch of any bank for 75 kms, so we had been depositing cash into a bank account via our local Post Office for many years. Due to some administrative cost-saving initiative, our bank dispensed with the deposit card and required the Treasurer and President to each set up a personal account with them. We had to then deposit the association's banking into one or the other of our own accounts using our personal card to make deposits at the Post Office and transfer it into the CIRS account online when we got home.
- The implications for our committee members as Centrelink recipients would have been a nightmare, having to routinely explain why they briefly held a sum of

money in their bank account, where it came from and where it went. No doubt it would also draw attention from the ATO as it looked like our members were not declaring some clandestine income. Then there were the more obvious problems of delays in bank transfers and simply forgetting to transfer after depositing at the Post Office. This was unacceptable on every level and so we changed banks.

- The bank we changed to required a Source of Wealth form to be completed by the committee members, detailing their personal financial circumstances, including theirs and their spouse's pension payments, any inheritances, lottery wins or other windfalls they may be expecting. This was required before they could set up or be authorised on the bank account for the association they volunteer for.
- Our committee members were not prepared to have their personal and financial details retained by a bank that they do not do personal banking with. While bank security is vitally important, there is no guarantee that the volunteer's own details will not be shared, stolen or divulged in a cyber-attack on the bank, as unlikely as that may seem. Seniors are not prepared to take that risk and many are no longer prepared to volunteer on committees.
- We ended up going to another bank that charges us \$4 every time we deposit. This resulted in us storing more cash on hand for longer periods to save on deposit fees, and puts a greater security and safety burden on our office volunteers and our committee members who carry the cash to bank.

Watching other volunteer groups fail around us ...

Alarmingly, CIRS has received assets from two organisations that folded in the last couple of years. There are many reasons why these groups failed, however the common denominator is the lack of anyone willing to take over committee positions from long-serving visionary leaders. I thought perhaps they should have started succession planning years earlier, but that's easier said than done. If a committee has demonstrated reliable and effective leadership, community members become complacent about them always being there. Possibly others may feel ill-equipped and confronted by the prospect of taking on such a responsibility-laden role, especially if the old committee has made it clear that they are over-worked and underpaid. Not making it a very attractive proposition, are they?

Getting new committee members

As a current committee member who is looking to step down, I am aware of the need to make an organisation look buoyant and well-resourced while leaving scope for passion projects that new leaders might envision. I tried unsuccessfully to retire from the committee at last year's AGM, having filled the coffers and completed successful community-building projects that provided 'how to' knowledge for the incoming crew.

The Treasurer and I had already given notice to members of our intention to step down along with nomination forms but had received no response prior to the AGM. We stepped down and waited for nominations from the floor but they never came. Staring into the faces of our faithful members, and picturing those who did not come to the meeting, I suddenly saw some of the reasons that no-one put up their hand.

All were over 60. Some had hearing impairment, others failing eyesight, mobility issues, cancer or other health issues. Others had tenure problems, financial insecurity, self-employment or onerous caring responsibilities. They did not want to make time promises they could not keep.

With no further nominations received, we adjourned the AGM and resumed two weeks later. This gave members time to digest the implications of no-one stepping up. The organisation would be wound up. Eventually one member volunteered to be Treasurer and then accepted the Secretary role as well when no-one else put their hand up. We found a member to be Vice President on the basis that he didn't actually have to do anything. I reluctantly agreed to continue for one more year as President or until a replacement could be found. The next AGM is fast approaching and we have spent the whole year seeking our replacements. It looks hopeful but they will need all the help they can get, starting with a paid centre coordinator who can do volunteer management.

Why? The most obvious need is for someone to be across all aspects of the centre – our office services, volunteer recruitment, training and retention, hall bookings and management – while the committee is responsible for grants, establishing community needs, attracting programs and events, liaison with Council and other government bodies and authorities.

The coordinator would be the anchor for volunteers in regards to rostering and role developments. They would provide better supervision for the Mutual Obligation volunteers and identify any gaps in skills training.

Ideally, the coordinator could manage volunteers for a hub of local community groups who otherwise might struggle to stay afloat.

Volunteering is not what it used to be.

Our society is not like it used to be so it follows that volunteering is different too. We can use technology to communicate with volunteers quickly but that doesn't mean they will be any the more available. As part of the sandwich generation, fifty to seventy year olds are not as available as they once were, with their parents needing Aged Care, partners needing medical treatments, and their adult children needing them for childcare. Yet this is the demographic that our society has traditionally relied on to do all the heavy lifting in community organisations – taking on serious financial and governance

responsibilities that require updating with every legislative change while having to familiarise themselves with the technology needed to report.

Community organisations are also changing the way that they operate, and sometimes keeping the doors open may not necessarily be the best use of volunteer time. Many things can now be done remotely or via an app, and the human connection that volunteering provides in face-to face activities will disappear. Hopefully it will eventually be recognised as the priceless social experience that glues communities together, and one that needs support if it is to continue fighting social isolation and loneliness.