Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submitted by: Lockyer Valley Regional Council

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Submission to the Queensland State Government's Inquiry on Decreasing Volunteering Participation Rates in Queensland

Overview

This submission addresses the declining volunteering participation rates from a general perspective for sporting and other community organisations, as well as the specific challenges faced by rural and regional councils, particularly in the areas of Events, Tourism, and Libraries. Volunteering is an essential pillar of community cohesion, cultural development, and economic activity, and urgent action is needed to address the barriers that deter people in the community from participating.

Key Issues

Rising Costs of Traffic Management for Events

- Traffic management is an essential component of ensuring public safety at events, but the associated costs are prohibitively high for community organisations and councils. Small-scale and volunteer-led events are disproportionately affected, leading to cancellations or reduced scope of the events.
- For rural and regional areas, where distances are greater and professional service providers are limited, these costs are escalating even further.

Rising Costs of Insurance for Community Groups

- The increasing cost of insurance is a major challenge, particularly for rural halls and other community facilities. Community organisations that manage these spaces struggle to afford premiums, which are exacerbated by natural disaster risks in certain areas.
- Higher insurance costs deter new volunteers from taking on leadership roles, as they fear personal liability or financial responsibility for unforeseen issues.

Implications of Volunteer Management and Compliance

- The complexity of volunteer management has grown significantly due to increased compliance requirements, including workplace health and safety legislation, child protection laws, and mandatory training.
- Volunteers often find the administrative burden overwhelming, discouraging them from ongoing participation. For organisations, the costs and resources needed to ensure compliance are unsustainable without additional support.

Demographic Shifts and Aging Volunteer Base

- An aging population in rural and regional areas means that the traditional volunteer base is shrinking. Younger generations face competing demands, such as work, study, and family responsibilities, reducing their availability for volunteering.
- The lack of targeted recruitment strategies and incentives to engage diverse demographics exacerbates this decline.

Impact of Digital Technology and Accessibility Gaps

- The increasing reliance on digital platforms for volunteer recruitment, training, and management excludes individuals in areas with limited internet access or those who are not digitally literate. This issue disproportionately affects rural communities.
- Community organisations often lack the resources to invest in user-friendly digital tools or provide adequate training for volunteers.

Burnout and Limited Recognition

- Volunteers frequently report burnout due to high workloads and limited support from organisations. This is particularly true for smaller community groups that rely heavily on a handful of committed individuals.
- Insufficient recognition of volunteers' contributions leads to disengagement and reduced morale, particularly in rural areas where the same volunteers often contribute across multiple sectors.

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Recommendations / Proposed Solutions

Subsidies for Essential Costs

- Introduce subsidies or grants to offset the rising costs of traffic management and insurance for community organisations and rural facilities.
- Create funding programs specifically tailored to the unique needs of rural and regional councils to ensure equity.

Streamlined Compliance Processes

- Develop simplified compliance frameworks for volunteer-driven organisations, particularly in workplace health and safety legislation.
- Provide accessible training modules and resources to assist organisations in meeting legal obligations without overburdening volunteers.

Support for Volunteer Recruitment and Retention

- Launch state-wide campaigns to promote volunteering, targeting younger demographics and underrepresented groups.
- Introduce incentives such as tax breaks, fuel vouchers, or professional development opportunities for regular volunteers.

Enhance Digital Access and Training

- Fund initiatives to improve digital infrastructure in rural areas, ensuring equitable access to online tools.
- Provide free or low-cost digital literacy training for community organisations and volunteers.

Recognition Programs

- Establish formal recognition programs at the state level to celebrate volunteer contributions, particularly in rural and regional communities.
- Promote volunteer stories through media campaigns to highlight their impact and inspire others to participate.

Capacity Building for Community Organisations

- Allocate funding for capacity-building programs that strengthen the operational capabilities of community groups, including grant writing, volunteer management, and event planning.
- Partner with universities and training organisations to offer workshops and mentorship programs tailored to the needs of volunteers and community leaders.

Conclusion

One significant implication of most of the issues identified above is the level of disappointment and frustration for volunteers which reduces their willingness and interest to join or remain involved. It's not that they are not interested in volunteering; it's that they feel so restricted by the various red tape and requirements that it's no longer enjoyable or rewarding.

The challenges facing volunteering in Queensland are multifaceted and require a collaborative approach between government, community organisations, and the private sector. By addressing the financial, administrative, and demographic barriers outlined above, the State Government can play a pivotal role in revitalising volunteering and ensuring the sustainability of essential community services and events. We urge the Inquiry to consider these recommendations and take decisive action to support the volunteers who form the backbone of Queensland's communities.

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