


Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Volunteering is a topic I am passionate about. I'm grateful to the Parliamentary Committee for the opportunity to make a submission. I will begin by explaining my experiences in volunteering and then go into some more specific insights into what I perceive as barriers and proposed solutions.

Volunteering is a very broad topic with a varying range of issues and challenges. The stories of someone volunteering in an op-shop are going to be very different to the needs and insights of a rural fire fighter for example. The insights in my submission relate mostly to my roles in Qld Rural Fire Service and various community development roles I've played in not-for-profits in my community (hosting events, creating connections, mental health promotion etc.)

My Volunteer Roles

I have volunteered in a range of activities throughout my life. Since 2020, I've been volunteering between 20 and 50 hours per week. My volunteer roles have included volunteer rural fire fighter for Qld Rural Fire Service as well as community development positions with a focus on promoting connected communities and ameliorating loneliness.

As you are aware, volunteer numbers are declining. Unfortunately, I am at the point of joining those who are turning away from volunteering.

As volunteer numbers decrease, the demands being placed on the diminishing "workforce" are increasing. When you become recognised as somebody who will "get things done", you quickly become inundated with ever-increasing roles and responsibilities. In particular, the expectations of volunteers who hold executive positions are too high and don't come with enough support and/or training.

I have been feeling overworked and under appreciated for some time so I am making changes and have recently resigned from an executive role. Ultimately, the costs of volunteering have become too high for me to continue. I am open to volunteering again in the future if the right role comes up - but at this time, I am focusing on my own priorities and goals whilst informally supporting others without the red tape and bureaucracy of a large community organisation.

My Perceived Positives of Volunteering

- Made friends with like-minded people
- Developed relationships with members of other community organisations
- Increased sense of belonging to my community
- Learnt new skills
- Increased confidence
- Sense of achievement and meaning

My Perceived Negatives of Volunteering

- Time. As a volunteer, I don't have days off or downtime. With phones, emails, What's App and other social media, contact is constant. As a volunteer rural firefighter, we are on call 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. I am working far harder as a volunteer than I ever have in paid roles.
- Financial - eg petrol, donating resources (eg food, materials). The financial cost of volunteering can be significant. Volunteering interferes with my capacity to earn money as it takes up so much of my time.
- Impact on relationships - volunteering so many hours each week has interfered with my relationships with friends and family.
- Giving up other hobbies - volunteering has taken up so much of my time, I've stopped spending time enjoying my other hobbies
- Freedom - I feel guilty taking holidays and leaving my volunteer responsibilities for others to take on.
- Negative effects of stress on my physical and mental health.
- Stress from managing difficult personalities.
- Volunteers are not given the same respect as paid employees
- Volunteers often don't have the same protections and support in place that you would receive in a workplace.

Proposed solutions:

One approach to making volunteering more appealing would be to decrease costs and increase the *benefits* of volunteering. This might include:

- Increased training and personal/professional development opportunities (eg the Government could create training that all community organisations/NFP's could access to provide skills in universal topics eg utilising social media and platforms like Canva to promote your organisation's activities). All over the country, community organisations are paying for this kind of training, spending money that could be used on their core business.
- I would also like to see Government grants for volunteers to build role-specific skills. Imagine if there were Government-funded scholarships specifically for volunteers who have displayed dedication to a field/role to gain formal university qualifications. This would be a big incentive for me personally.
- Financial incentives eg free public transport for volunteers, discounts for volunteers, eg discounted gym memberships for volunteer fire fighters, Governments collaborate with companies to provide discounted insurance for volunteers of registered community organisations etc.
- These are Federal Government matters, but expenses incurred in volunteering activities should be able to be claimed on tax or perhaps for retired volunteers, they could use the expenses to reduce their income for pension purposes.
- Increased grant/funding opportunities for community organisations - when you consider the value of the hours volunteers donate to their community, a grant for a few thousand dollars to host an event or purchase equipment is insignificant.

Other ideas for increasing participation in volunteering:

- Increase awareness of volunteering opportunities - perhaps a government website where community organisations can advertise available volunteer positions
- Reduce the age at which you can volunteer in lieu of applying for jobs (and receive Centrelink payment).

Justifying Volunteer Positions

One question I'd like the Parliamentary Inquiry to ask is: Why are some roles/jobs expected to be performed for free? Which roles are appropriate for volunteering? Which roles are not appropriate to be carried out by volunteers? What type of organisations can recruit volunteers?

Volunteering has many benefits for communities and individuals but it's important to ensure that volunteer roles aren't taking advantage of people and being used by employers to reduce spending on wages.

As a volunteer firefighter, I've worked on fire grounds alongside firefighters from Fire & Rescue, National Parks and our local council, with police and ambulance personnel sitting in vehicles nearby in case their services are required. We were all playing very important roles but we (the volunteer firefighters) were the only ones not being paid. I would like to have that discrepancy explained and justified.

I knew the role of firefighter was unpaid when I joined and am not interested in becoming a paid firefighter. I became friends with people who were volunteer firefighters, and I wanted to play my part in protecting my community. However, as time passes, the Rural Fire Service increasingly feels less like a community organisation and more like the Government Department that it actually is - I signed up as a community volunteer but have come to feel like an unpaid public servant.

I question the appropriateness of first line emergency response roles being voluntary. We don't have volunteer police or ambulance officers. Why are rural firefighters an exception?

The Queensland Fire Department acknowledges that a changing climate may lead to an increased demand on QFD, greater exposure to risk for staff and volunteers and reduced ability to deliver services (source: <https://www.fire.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-07/QFD-Strategic-Plan.pdf>).

So, it is important to consider whether it is safe/responsible/advisable to rely on a volunteer workforce for emergency responses provided by Rural Fire Brigades.

My concerns about volunteers offering front-line emergency responses include:

1. Community-minded individuals being taken advantage of
2. Volunteers being given too much responsibility
3. Safety risks (for volunteers and community members)
4. Attracting the wrong applicants
5. Paid staff treating volunteers as inferior

From my several years experience in a Rural Fire Brigade, I don't believe all the roles we play are suitable for volunteers. When a crew arrive at a fire, decisions made in those early minutes can have major impacts on outcomes. Lives (both human and animal) and assets (houses, businesses, machinery, forestry, National Parks etc) are at stake. I think this is too much responsibility to place on a volunteer. I want to make it clear that there are volunteers in my Brigade who are better at this role than most paid employees in RFSQ - my point is that I don't think it is reasonable to place the *responsibility* for controlling an incident (Incident Controller) on a volunteer. The skills and experience of volunteers vary wildly and the first fire appliance to arrive at the scene may contain volunteers that don't have the necessary skills, training or experience to take on this role - however, they are on the scene and fire is spreading, adrenaline is pumping and they are in charge until other crews arrive.

I have seen the damaging effects this kind of situation has had on the mental health of volunteer firefighters in my brigade and neighbouring brigades. Damaged mental health is not a reasonable cost of volunteering. If we continue to ask people to fight wildfires for free, their work should be overseen by Fire Department employees who take responsibility. RFSQ volunteers should absolutely be included in the decision-making but not ultimately responsible for outcomes.

I also believe First Officers of Brigades should be paid. It is not reasonable to expect somebody to take on a role that requires you to be on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. During fire season, we can have back-to-back incidents and/or protracted fire events. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find people who are willing and able to take on the role of 1st Officer as it is incredibly difficult to juggle this role with paid work and family.

Proposed Solutions:

- RFSQ staff should work collaboratively and respectfully with volunteers in Incident Control, taking responsibility for the event and its outcomes.
- I believe rural firefighter should be a paid position. The model that is used with auxiliary firefighters could be extended to Rural Firefighters. Auxiliary firefighters are paid to train and receive a fire call (text) when incidents arise. If they attend the incident, they are paid a callout fee and are paid an hourly rate for work they do beyond the callout timeframe.
- Auxiliary firefighters generally have other employment to ensure sufficient income but this model works. Trained Auxiliary Rural Firefighters could also be offered paid deployments around Queensland, Australia and internationally as required.
- RFSQ could continue to have volunteers who work under the supervision of paid Rural Firefighters. These volunteer firefighters should not have unreasonable demands placed on them in terms of how much work they do and what roles they play.

Attracting the Wrong Applicants

One of the appeals of volunteering is that you get to do jobs you might not be able to do in a paid capacity. For example, we have volunteers who have unsuccessfully tried to join the police force, Fire and Rescue etc. In a small number of cases, people volunteer for organisations such as RFSQ for the wrong reasons. They are looking for power/authority and lights and sirens. Having to deal with these volunteers creates extra work and can create risk for other volunteers and the

community. We don't need adrenaline-fuelled people rushing in and taking action without proper planning.

Proposed Solution:

I believe there should be a better recruitment procedure for RFSQ volunteers that includes a medical exam to ensure volunteers are suitable for the work they will be asked to do. The more volunteering decreases, the more brigades may become willing to accept anyone who applies but this is not the answer and is not in the best interests of the individual, the brigade or the community they serve.

Wildlife Carers

Another volunteer area that warrants attention from all levels of Government is wildlife rescue and rehabilitation. This is an area that interests me but I have not signed up with any groups yet as I know I will be put under pressure to take on more and more work as the need far outweighs the capacity of services.

I would like to see all levels of government providing additional support for wildlife rescue/rehabilitation organisations and their volunteers. Where do Government responsibilities lie in terms of protecting our environment/native animals? Why is the onus placed on individuals to carry this burden?

Wildlife caring is an incredibly demanding role with significant impacts on physical and mental health as well as finances (petrol to collect animals/vet appointments, purchasing food and other supplies etc).

I have friends in this field and know the industry is very much struggling. The victims of the reduction in volunteer carers will be our native wildlife.

Proposed Solutions:

- Government funding for approved wildlife care service providers
- Increase in Government Grants available
- Financial assistance to cover volunteers' expenses (eg fuel cards, cash reimbursement for relevant expenses).

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission. I look forward to hearing the outcomes of this Inquiry.