

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No: 409
Submitted by: Traveston Rural Fire Brigade
Publication: Making the submission and your name public
Attachments: See attachment
Submitter Comments:

Volunteering Qld submission

Full time permanent staff deployments to disaster zones:

Area/Region support staff have conflicting priorities and are deployed when volunteers can fill the role,

Area/Region Support staff have both operational and administrative responsibilities. Disasters elsewhere divert Operational staff away leaving volunteer members with degraded administrative support. With these staff deployments work in progress frequently comes to a halt.

- Volunteers are quite capable and trained to fill operational relief at disasters. As planners, Incident command control, operational and so on.

Volunteers are capable to fill many of these roles: Permanent Area/Regional staff are deployed operationally without volunteer members being given the opportunity to undertake these roles even though they have the skills and experience to do this. Some volunteers do this but many others are not called upon with limited opportunity to gain experience. Volunteers actually do exactly the same training as permanent staff. If volunteers were given these opportunities, it would release staff to remain working in the district. Not recognising volunteers or giving preference to the few who are used is insulting. **Every time an experienced member is called to a disaster they should be accompanied by a trained volunteer allowing them to gain experience.**

Training:

These dual responsibilities [above], also see training halted during the fire season. There is no reason why training shouldn't be available throughout the year. New members who join at the start of the fire season have a 6-month delay before they can engage in formal training and therefore it can be 12 months until they are skilled to join in fires.

Volunteers who put in for advanced training are often not even contacted or responded to, advanced training does not come up very often and so the volunteer interests are not fulfilled due to poor responses to advanced training and the limited times advanced training is done. It is common not to hear from RFS after a call out for advanced training.

Some advanced roles require perquisites and if volunteers are unable to get into these done, they cannot advance.

Onboarding new members:

It takes too long for new members to be accepted into the service. 6 - 8 months it can take twelve to fourteen months to get a new recruit on the fire ground. Taking into account delays in processing the application, training and Clothing. Even for experienced firefighters moving from other states.

Fulfilment of uniform orders needs a complete overhaul as it can take months adding to the prolonged wait for new volunteers.

Brigade support:

Lack of responsiveness, lost emails and lack of response is having to be dealt with every day with no improvements. When emailing often never getting replies requires excessive amount of time following up.

Provision of essential equipment, tv computers washing machines extra battery operated chainsaws is cumbersome and requires filling in grant applications, there are essential items and shown be provided to brigades.

Buildings

Building Developments like enlarging the shed for the brigade are ignored, our request took over a year just to get to get a reply after badgering the office, it is still in the air as to what is to happen for our new building. Permanent staff can get aggravated if the Brigades pursues this themselves. it can take decades to get expansion to the building or a new building, we are forced to apply for grants to slowly develop our sites bit by bit, mainly grabbling with the poor response from HQ. Buildings, it can take 15 years to get a building replacement, absolutely no support for expanding and getting facilities, we have no facilities for women and no washing facilities or toilets but have a very active brigade.

The service needs to have a specialised group that expedites the development of buildings for the brigades. This service could also be done by enlisting some volunteers who know the process.

Applications for funding:

A number of times we have spent weeks getting quotes and submitting applications to be told we have the wrong form on other occasions the applications are lost or we are not given feedback after an application is vetted or on one occasion the application is lost.

We are Forcing us to redo the applications making up for irregularities and miss information about the applications.

There are several types of funding application forms and it is unclear which should be used for what, even when advice has been given. We get the feeling they are at the whim of managers.

Weeks can go into an application. Submissions are rejected in totality when one small item doesn't seem to be accepted, we are then not notified until we badger the office for responses. We are then forced the redo the whole application a year later. This is not sustainable for a volunteer.

Reimbursements:

Servicing expense claims, Volunteer out of pocket expenses takes too long. In addition, we and are not reimbursed for general mileage, many volunteers have to use their own cars. We have members still waiting for reimbursements for attending service events for months.

Credit card applications for have not been serviced, Difficult and cumbersome procedures, paying for small items require too much work for simple things like buying water.

High staff turnover Permanent staff impacts:

Not only are volunteers frustrated but it appears that staff are too, and there is a high turnover of staff. If feel management structures are insufficient for volunteers. Managers exercise strict control over the whole operation. Freedom to be Creative, have alternative ideas, be more flexible with our service and to develop skills is non-existent. Both volunteers and staff need to have the freedom the exercise their skills and abilities. They need freedom to grow.

A program-based approach should be initiated in RFS not a hierarchical operational approach to running the service. This would remove the restrictions and open up capacity and creativity.

Respect and understanding of time:

Respect for volunteer time is limited, no emails are summarised for volunteer convenience, high Volume of email correspondence as if we are paid permanents. For volunteers to be informed they are forced to read too much material, **“all material should have a small prelim summary or dot point at the start”** to help volunteers determine if they need to read.

What we see should come out of the volunteer’s review.

- What we need is a support structure that supports creativity, skills development and enhancement of the current skills volunteers have. Volunteers want the Fire service to commit to calling upon those skills in advanced situations. Highly skilled volunteers are vetted and used based on their previous employment skills and current RFS training, unlock advanced training and find incentives to get volunteers doing work. “Buddy system” to grow skills for advanced roles in disaster management.
- We want to have the equipment and facilities to do the job, no half measures, eg halo on half the truck not the full truck.
- A Program management structure focussed on member development, support and skills base and creativity. Develop an effective “volunteer” response unit. Volunteer focus and not operational focus. Skills will cover operational situations.
- Administrative and fulltime support be separate from fires expand volunteer skills and use them.
- Training officers who regularly train keep them with the volunteers don't send them away to deployments.
- No managers and support staff sent to fires or disasters when volunteers are available at high levels.