

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No:	413
Submitted by:	Serving Our People Inc.
Publication:	Making the submission and your name public
Attachments:	See attachment
Submitter Comments:	



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28 February 2025

Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee (Committee)

Serving our People Inc. Submission for the Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity for our organisation, Serving Our People (SOP) to make a submission to the inquiry into volunteering in Queensland.

Volunteering contributes significantly to Queensland's wellbeing, yet declining participation, increasing frequency of natural disasters and demographic shifts threaten the sector's sustainability. Despite these trends and challenges, SOP has grown to a 6,000-volunteer base since inception in 2020 by offering a flexible, impactful and enriching experience.

We encourage the Queensland Government to:

- Grow participation by supporting pathways for diverse groups, enhance youth engagement and fund flexible, skills-based opportunities, including micro-volunteering.
- Enhance retention by funding volunteer recognition initiatives, mental health support and stress management programs.
- Increase engagement by investing in structured training leading to accredited qualifications, recognising volunteer experience for employment.
- Reduce barriers to volunteering by supporting partnerships, digital tools and funding for volunteer management systems to alleviate administrative burdens.
- Strengthen disaster response by improving coordination and logistical support for more efficient volunteer mobilisation in such circumstances.

These actions will help strengthen Queensland's volunteer sector, ensuring its sustainability and amplifying its impact. We welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the Committee and the Queensland Government to build a stronger and more effective volunteer sector.

Yours sincerely,

Yas Daniel Matbouly

Chief Executive Officer

Serving Our People Inc.

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission Paper

Serving Our People Inc.

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1 Introduction

1.1 About Serving Our People

We are 'Help in Action'

Serving Our People (SOP) is a registered charity established in 2020 to support vulnerable communities by providing essential services and material aid. Our mission is to ensure that no one is left behind, particularly those affected by financial hardship, natural disasters, social isolation and other socio-economic challenges. We provide both rapid emergency relief and work towards long-term solutions that enhance financial stability and wellbeing.

From emergency relief to empowerment

Operating across Brisbane, the Gold Coast, Logan and Inner Sydney, SOP coordinates a volunteer network of nearly 6,000 people. Through our hybrid service model, we deliver up to one million meals annually and support over 500,000 recipients, including children, young people, cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, low-income households and individuals experiencing homelessness. Our primary services include food deliveries, The People's Market, which is a free supermarket, café and a second-hand store offering essential material goods.

To ensure accessibility for diverse populations with complex needs, SOP provides up to 120 service pathways. Every individual or family seeking assistance undergoes a personalised consultation to assess immediate crisis needs, such as food insecurity, financial stress, or risk of homelessness. Based on this assessment, they receive tailored case management and, where necessary, referrals to external partners for specialised support in areas such as housing, mental health and financial literacy. This holistic approach helps individuals move beyond crisis towards long-term stability.

In 2025, SOP forecasts assisting 429,000 people across 11 locations, delivering tangible cost-of-living relief through material aid drop-offs, food deliveries and mobile food tents. This scale of impact is made possible by our volunteer-led model, with fewer than 1% of our team being paid staff. As a result, maintaining a strong, diverse and engaged volunteer network is critical to our ability to provide these services.

Our volunteer base is growing

As SOP continues to grow, our volunteer base expands by approximately 150 people per month. Volunteers are integral to all aspects of our operations, from logistical coordination to direct client support. Their dedication enables SOP to be a first responder during crises such as floods and natural disasters, ensuring rapid and efficient emergency relief. Without volunteers, SOP's ability to deliver critical services, such as meal distribution and disaster response, would be significantly constrained.

SOP is proud to be a growing organisation in Queensland's volunteer sector and we welcome the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. We have shared our experience and insights into the challenges, opportunities and best practices that shape effective volunteer engagement.

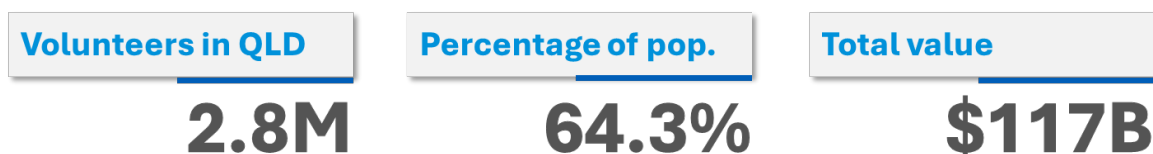
The following sections will highlight the value of volunteering for the State, volunteers and organisations involving volunteers, it will then explain the challenges that volunteers and organisations are facing that threaten the sustainability of the sector. Finally, it will outline opportunities for improvement based on Serving Our People's experience and success in growing its organisation. The submission will conclude with a list of recommendations for the Queensland Government to improve volunteering in Queensland.

2 The value of volunteering

Volunteering provides significant economic benefits and strengthens communities. This section examines the broad impact of volunteering, the key motivations driving participation and the essential role of volunteers and charitable organisations, particularly for organisations like SOP that rely on volunteer networks to address critical service gaps.

2.1 Impact of volunteering to the State

Volunteering is a cornerstone of Queensland's economy and social fabric, delivering both substantial economic benefits and strengthening community ties. Across 2022 and 2023, the economic contribution of volunteering was estimated at more than \$117 billion.¹ This highlights its critical role in sustaining essential services and enhancing community resilience.



Beyond its economic impact, volunteering strengthens social connections by reducing isolation, promoting civic participation and building stronger, more inclusive communities. An estimated 64.3 per cent of Queenslanders, or approximately 2.8 million people aged 15 and over, participated in volunteering between July 2022 and July 2023.² This demonstrates the widespread commitment of Queenslanders to supporting one another.

2.2 Value for volunteers

Being a part of the local community

Many volunteers are driven by a desire to strengthen social bonds and support their local communities. More than 64% of volunteers are motivated by the opportunity to give back, while 34% are inspired by social and community connection. This reflects a strong commitment to communal wellbeing.³

SOP's volunteer activities are deeply embedded in the community, providing diverse opportunities for engagement. From food deliveries and operating The People's Market to facilitating donations and disaster relief, our initiatives offer meaningful ways for volunteers to contribute while directly supporting those in need.

Having sense of purpose, enjoyment and wellbeing

Personal wellbeing and enjoyment are another significant motivator, with 75.7% of volunteers reporting that their involvement enhances their own wellbeing.⁴ Volunteering provides a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from helping others, offering individuals a sense of purpose and belonging. At SOP, we celebrate each volunteer's achievements, recognising the profound impact their contributions have on others. With over 200 volunteer activations and celebrations since 2020, we believe this recognition is a key highlight to our growing success in attracting volunteers.

¹ Volunteering Queensland. *State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report*. Brisbane: Volunteering Queensland; 2024

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Learning new skills

The opportunity to learn new skills and gain professional experience also attracts many to volunteering. Almost 25% of volunteers are motivated by the chance to develop new skills.⁵

SOP supports this by offering training programs such as the Served Academy, where volunteers can gain accredited qualifications, enhancing both their personal and professional development.

2.3 The value of volunteers and charitable organisations

Charitable organisations play a vital role in bridging societal gaps by providing services that may otherwise be inaccessible to many individuals. These organisations often rely heavily on volunteers to deliver essential support in areas such as emergency response, healthcare and social services. Without the dedication and efforts of volunteers, many of these critical services would be unavailable, leaving significant voids in community support and wellbeing.

With around 65% of the State's population engaged in volunteer activities over the past year, volunteers remain the backbone of many sectors, including emergency response, disaster recovery and community services, demonstrating their indispensable role in maintaining Queensland's wellbeing and resilience.⁶

SOP addresses critical service gaps by providing complimentary delivery and logistics support to vulnerable individuals, including the elderly, disabled, or those facing financial hardship, who often struggle to access essential items such as groceries, medicine and baby formula. SOP's network of volunteers ensures these necessities are delivered directly to those in need, effectively reducing barriers to access and promoting food security.

In addition to individual support, SOP plays a pivotal role in disaster relief efforts. During emergencies, timely access to resources is crucial, yet traditional services can become overwhelmed or disrupted. SOP's agile and responsive logistics model enables the swift delivery of aid, ensuring affected communities receive prompt assistance. As natural disasters become more frequent and severe, effectively recruiting, engaging and retaining people to support our mission is critical.

⁵ Volunteering Queensland. *State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report*. Brisbane: Volunteering Queensland; 2024

⁶ Ibid.

3 Current problems and challenges

Despite its value, maintaining volunteer participation has become increasingly challenging. This section explores the challenges and barriers of volunteering from the perspective of the State, volunteers and charitable organisations.

3.1 Volunteering is in decline

Volunteering rates in Queensland have reduced across all indicators.⁷



Several challenges affect the sustainability and effectiveness of Queensland's volunteer sector, particularly for organisations that rely heavily on volunteers. The decline in both formal and informal volunteering has placed increased pressure on service delivery. In addition, less hours donated only makes it more difficult to meet growing community needs.

3.2 Volunteer challenges

Opportunity costs and time commitments

Volunteering requires a time commitment that could otherwise be spent on paid employment or personal activities. Balancing work, family, education and other responsibilities can make it challenging for individuals to dedicate time to volunteering. Fixed schedules and rigid hours can create further barriers, making volunteering feel more like a job with strict rules rather than a voluntary act. As the cost of living rises in Australia, the opportunity cost of volunteering, or the value of engaging in income-generating activities instead, also increases.

Health and wellbeing

Volunteers are at risk of fatigue and burnout, especially those involved in consecutive disaster responses. Without proper support or training, many experience physical and emotional exhaustion, which can lead to high turnover and diminished long-term engagement. Lack of training and support resources often leave volunteers ill-prepared to manage the complexities of helping those in need, especially amidst disaster response.

3.3 Challenges for organisations involving volunteers

Administrative and regulatory burden

Administrative processes for volunteer organisations are time-consuming and costly, creating significant barriers to efficiency and scalability. Each volunteer requires training, background checks, insurance, and adherence to safe work practices, all of which demand extensive coordination. The need for flexible hours has also reduced average shift lengths, increasing the administrative workload without a proportional gain in volunteer output.

Significant red tape slows recruitment and onboarding, discouraging potential volunteers and adding to operational costs. Compliance requirements require resolute staff, while tools to streamline volunteer management, such as scheduling software, are often expensive.

⁷ Volunteering Queensland. *State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report*. Brisbane: Volunteering Queensland; 2024

Insurance costs further limit the ability of organisations to scale, with many struggling to expand due to the rising costs of covering volunteer activities.

Achieving effective and accessible volunteer recruitment

Maintaining a strong public presence is essential for recruiting and sustaining a diverse volunteer base, yet it requires significant time, money and specialised skills. A visible presence, both online and in the community, ensures potential volunteers are aware of opportunities and understand how to get involved. In fact, 61.9% of volunteers found roles through social media or online searches, yet over 23% of non-volunteers reported they had never been asked or were unsure how to participate, highlighting a critical gap in outreach.⁸

As traditional volunteer bases decline due to Australia's ageing population, attracting new volunteers, particularly young people and those from CALD backgrounds, requires targeted engagement strategies. Barriers such as language differences, lack of cultural understanding and lack of accessible information can deter participation. If not appropriately catered for, groups including young people, women, First Nations people, and individuals with disabilities can often experience additional barriers to participation, due to family responsibilities, economic pressures and inflexible volunteer structures.

Volunteering offers mental health and wellbeing benefits for all participants, making this particularly important to ensure opportunities are widely promoted and accessible. Maintaining public awareness requires investment in digital platforms, community engagement and inclusive outreach strategies which present significant financial and resources challenges to volunteer-involving organisations. Without these efforts, organisations risk missing out on valuable contributions from underrepresented groups, limiting the sustainability of the volunteer sector.

Increasing risk of natural disasters

The increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters in Queensland have placed mounting pressure on the volunteer sector. As the most disaster-prone state in Australia, Queensland regularly faces floods, bushfires, and cyclones. These escalating events have amplified the demand for emergency response volunteers, while also highlighting significant challenges in recruitment, retention and support.

Logistical barriers, such as transportation difficulties and damaged infrastructure, complicate volunteers' ability to access affected areas, particularly in rural and remote communities. Volunteer-involving organisations equipped with essential materials often go unrecognised in government response efforts, despite their critical role in supporting immediate recovery.

Coordination between government agencies, not-for-profit organisations, and community-led volunteer groups remains fragmented, leading to inefficiencies in mobilisation. The absence of a centralised volunteer management system delays response times and diminishes the effectiveness of relief operations. Additionally, volunteers working in high-risk environments face insurance and liability concerns, which add to the administrative burden on organisations responsible for ensuring proper risk management.

⁸ Volunteering Queensland. *State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report*. Brisbane: Volunteering Queensland; 2024

4 Opportunities for improvement

SOP is revitalising volunteer engagement and reversing volunteer decline across the State. By building a diverse volunteer base, SOP demonstrates effective strategies that enhance community involvement and support vulnerable groups. This section offers a model for Queensland Government and sector stakeholders, with recommendations for sustainable volunteer growth.

4.1 Volunteer experience

Expanding participation opportunities

The decline in volunteer participation is a growing challenge, particularly as volunteer organisations face difficulties in recruiting individuals from diverse backgrounds. People from CALD communities, individuals with disabilities, and those living in rural or remote areas encounter additional barriers such as language barriers, limited digital access, transportation challenges, and cultural misunderstandings. These obstacles prevent many from engaging in volunteering opportunities, despite the significant mental health and community wellbeing benefits that volunteering provides. Expanding participation opportunities is vital to ensure that volunteering remains accessible and inclusive, particularly for underrepresented groups.

Notably, for young people, volunteering offers a way to develop skills, build networks, and contribute to their communities in a way that aligns with their personal and professional aspirations. By integrating volunteering into education and career pathways, young people can gain valuable experience while making a meaningful impact. This is especially relevant in Queensland, where rates of youth imprisonment are the highest in the nation⁹. Flexible and skills-based volunteering roles provide a structured way for young volunteers to explore different career options, develop skills, build confidence and engage with community.

Incorporating corporate partnerships into the volunteer ecosystem is also a proven way to tackle this issue, providing both businesses and employees with opportunities to engage in community support¹⁰. Such partnerships can be developed across industries, including retail, sports celebrities, health, technology, finance, and more. By encouraging businesses from various sectors to integrate volunteering into their work schedules, the Queensland Government can help foster a broader, more diverse volunteer base. Corporate partners bring valuable skills, resources, and networks that can benefit volunteer organisations while simultaneously providing employees with a sense of purpose and community involvement.

Partnerships expand our recruitment and referral opportunities

The leadership team at SOP play an active role in expanding partnerships that provide pathways for volunteers and clients to grow both personally and professionally. They work to increase SOP's presence and attract new volunteers by establishing partnership arrangements and referral pathways, often in exchange for marketing efforts or by finding ways for local businesses to give back to the community.

Specifically, SOP's team is actively involved in:

- Engaging with universities and schools to spread the word

⁹ Queensland Youth Housing Coalition: Queensland Youth Justice Reform Submission (Jan 2024)

¹⁰ Warburton, J., Moore, M., & Oppenheimer, M. (2017). Challenges to the Recruitment and Retention of Volunteers in Traditional Nonprofit Organizations: A Case Study of Australian Meals on Wheels. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 41(16), 1361-1373.

- Promoting SOP through media outlets and public announcements
- Building community connections through word of mouth and local networks
- Securing in-kind brand collaborations, such as the partnership with Pacific Fair, to promote SOP's cause

SOP is committed to accessibility and inclusivity. Volunteers from all walks of life are welcomed, with the organisation ensuring opportunities are available for people with different abilities, including those who come with carers. The focus is on ensuring that every volunteer benefits from their participation, gaining personal fulfilment and a sense of giving back to the community.

SOP is often referred to as the "charity's charity" as it supports other organisations through referrals and collaborations. We offer a variety of volunteer opportunities, ensuring that there is a fit for everyone, regardless of background or experience.

When positioned as part of a lifestyle rather than a one-off activity, volunteering can help both volunteers and the wider community establish lifelong habits of community involvement.

Recommendation 1: Promote inclusive volunteering options to grow participation

To increase participation and ensure volunteering is accessible to all, the Queensland Government could consider supporting initiatives that remove barriers and create structured pathways for diverse groups, including young people, CALD communities, individuals with disabilities, and those in rural and remote areas. Some key actions could include:

1. Expand corporate volunteering programs: Encourage businesses to integrate volunteering into paid work schedules by offering incentives or recognition programs. This will provide a steady stream of skilled volunteers while fostering corporate social responsibility.
2. Enhance youth engagement in volunteering: Develop targeted initiatives in schools, universities, and vocational education that position volunteering as a pathway for career development and community leadership. This includes micro-volunteering, structured work-integrated learning and mentoring programs.
3. Support flexible and skills-based volunteering: Provide funding and resources for organisations to create diverse, short-term, and skills-based roles that accommodate different levels of availability and expertise.
4. Increase funding for inclusive volunteering initiatives: Allocate targeted grants to organisations that actively engage underrepresented groups, ensuring equitable access to volunteering opportunities.
5. Strengthen community outreach and awareness: Encourage local media, universities, and community groups to promote the benefits of volunteering and highlight opportunities for participation, particularly among groups that may not traditionally engage in volunteering.

Flexible volunteer roles alleviate time and opportunity costs

Volunteering requires a time commitment that could otherwise be spent on paid employment or personal activities. For many individuals, balancing work, family, education, and other obligations makes it difficult to dedicate time to volunteering. Traditional volunteer roles, which often require rigid hours or long shifts, further exacerbate these time and opportunity costs, making volunteering an impractical option for some. As the cost of living continues to

rise, these pressures only increase, making it even harder for individuals to justify volunteering over other income-generating or personal activities.

We empower people to choose how they give back

Recognising the need for flexibility, SOP offers a variety of volunteer roles catering to different levels of commitment, including short-term, one-off and emergency response opportunities. This flexibility allows individuals with varying schedules to contribute meaningfully and ensures that everyone can contribute in a way that suits their availability, skills, and interests.

Whether volunteering for just 30 minutes on a delivery, assisting in emergency relief efforts, supporting the café or People's Market, providing counselling, helping with volunteer training and activations, participating in events, fundraising, gardening, or assisting with initiatives like Bunnings BBQs and lotteries, SOP empowers people to choose how they give back.

Flexible volunteer roles, such as short-term, one-off, and remote opportunities, can alleviate these challenges. By offering a variety of options that accommodate different schedules, organisations can attract volunteers who might otherwise be unable to participate. These roles provide individuals with the flexibility to contribute meaningfully without the constraints of traditional shift-based volunteering, allowing a broader range of people to get involved, including those with busy or unpredictable schedules.

Recommendation 2: Encourage inclusive volunteering options to grow participation

To increase volunteer participation and alleviate the time and opportunity costs associated with volunteering, the Queensland Government could consider encouraging the adoption of more flexible volunteer roles across the sector. This includes promoting options such as micro-volunteering, remote volunteering, and virtual opportunities, which can attract a more diverse pool of volunteers, including younger generations and those with demanding schedules. Furthermore, organisations should be encouraged to offer flexible volunteering structures that allow individuals to contribute on their own terms, whether through short-term commitments or roles that can be performed online or in a more ad hoc manner.

Supporting the adoption of flexible volunteering options not only expands the volunteer base but also helps reduce the barriers that often prevent individuals from engaging in volunteering. The Queensland Government could consider providing incentives or funding to organisations that implement flexible volunteer programs, ensuring that these opportunities are accessible to people from all walks of life, particularly those balancing competing demands.

Strengthen the value of volunteering to increase retention

Volunteers are driven by a sense of community, purpose and the mental wellbeing benefits of giving back. In light of this, it is essential to offer continuous support, including recognition, mental health initiatives, and training to ensure long-term engagement. Volunteers who feel valued, supported and equipped with the skills to manage their roles are more likely to remain committed over time.

To retain volunteers, organisations must dedicate resources to provide recognition and support. Regular events that publicly acknowledge volunteers' contributions help foster a sense of belonging and purpose. Additionally, offering mental health support and training helps volunteers cope with the demands of their work and continue contributing effectively.

Serving Our People's health and wellbeing is a priority

SOP's Volunteer Assistance Program is an initiative designed to create a supportive environment where volunteers can thrive. Recognising that volunteers deserve the same care and protection as employees, SOP prioritises its people's wellbeing, safety, and personal growth.

Through targeted training, volunteers develop essential life skills, including self-awareness, self-care, and recognising early warning signs of mental health challenges. Expert-led psychological training is made accessible through in-person sessions, live dial-ins, and virtual recordings, ensuring national and international reach.

Support systems are in place to assist volunteers facing challenges, with pathways for GP referrals and access to free initial counselling sessions at partner universities. Above all, SOP promotes a culture of wellbeing, encouraging early intervention, self-care, and mutual support. Volunteers are empowered to contribute meaningfully while knowing their mental health and safety are a priority. By embedding mental health awareness into every aspect of its operations, SOP ensures volunteers feel valued, supported, and equipped to make a lasting impact.

The investment required for health and wellbeing initiatives includes significant time and financial resources, which can be a significant barrier for volunteer-involving organisations.

Recommendation 3: Support wellbeing and community recognition initiatives

To increase volunteer retention, the Queensland Government could consider investing in the following areas:

1. Volunteer recognition initiatives – Facilitate regular events that publicly acknowledge volunteers' time and efforts, helping them feel valued and reinforcing their connection to the cause. Queensland Government support for event logistics, venue partnerships, and public recognition would alleviate the financial and administrative burden on volunteer organisations.
2. Mental health support – Provide funding for mental health programs tailored to volunteers, including access to counselling services, peer support networks, and training for recognising burnout. By investing in these services, the Queensland Government can ensure volunteers are supported emotionally and are more likely to remain engaged.

Increase volunteer engagement with training and career pathways

Volunteers who feel adequately trained, valued and recognised will express a deeper commitment to the institutions where they give up their time.¹¹ Volunteers highly value training and certification, as this provides them with an opportunity to acquire transferable skills that can enhance their personal and professional lives.

We provide opportunities for accredited training programs

SOP delivers best-practice, cost-effective training programs to equip volunteers with the skills needed to provide client-centred care and achieve positive community outcomes. The three-month Volunteer Engagement Program includes The Served Academy, which

¹¹ Warburton, J., Moore, M., & Oppenheimer, M. (2017). Challenges to the Recruitment and Retention of Volunteers in Traditional Nonprofit Organizations: A Case Study of Australian Meals on Wheels. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 41(16), 1361-1373.

offers free, Government-accredited Certificate III training, as well as health and wellness support in collaboration with Bond University's PhD program.

The Served Academy provides accredited training in logistics, community services, and emergency response, ensuring volunteers are well-prepared for various roles. Training covers barista, hospitality, warehouse safety, operational procedures, and hands-on experience at Gold Coast's first not-for-profit café, Served Café. This initiative offers practical skills development, opening pathways to employment and further education.

SOP has also partnered with local universities to expand educational opportunities and engage students in meaningful volunteer work. Many graduates of The Served Academy go on to secure employment or pursue further study, benefiting from the free training and real-world experience provided by SOP while giving back to the community.

By supporting training initiatives that lead to formal qualifications, organisations can create more compelling incentives for volunteering, particularly for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This could provide these volunteers with pathways to career advancement, improving their employability and offering a stepping stone towards paid employment. Additionally, volunteers from corporate sectors benefit from such programs as they gain new skills that can be directly applied to their professional lives, enhancing the value of their volunteer experience. The training programs offer both groups of volunteers more than just a chance to contribute to their community; they create valuable, long-term benefits that support personal growth, professional development, and retention.

Recommendation 4: Establish structured training and career development

To increase volunteer engagement and retention, the Queensland Government could consider investing in creating structured training pathways that lead to accredited qualifications in relevant sectors, such as community services, emergency response, and logistics. These qualifications should be recognised as valuable work experience and included in formal employment-related activities. This approach could be particularly beneficial for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who can gain skills that lead to better job prospects and career opportunities. For corporate volunteers, the Queensland Government could introduce incentives that allow volunteer time to be recognised as work-related experience. This would encourage corporate involvement and give employees more motivation to participate in volunteer programs.

In addition, the Queensland Government could foster partnerships between volunteer organisations, educational institutions, and businesses to provide comprehensive training and career development resources. Supporting these initiatives would help create a more sustainable volunteer workforce while also addressing skills gaps and providing both corporate and individual volunteers with the opportunity to enhance their careers through their volunteer work.

4.2 Administrative support

Support administration and management for retention

Volunteer-involving organisations face significant administrative burdens, including but not limited to onboarding, background checks, insurance, resource management and compliance with safe work practices. With the rise of flexible volunteering hours these challenges have intensified, making it harder for organisations to manage volunteers effectively. This administrative workload also limits the capacity of organisations to grow, scale and deliver impactful services, especially during times of emergency.

We manage a connected and adaptable volunteer network

We recognise the importance of dedicated volunteer management in delivering effective services. We have established a team to oversee recruitment, training, and ongoing support for volunteers, ensuring they are well-prepared and engaged. Our volunteer management efforts have been enhanced through collaboration with Bond University, which provided valuable insights into strengthening volunteer sourcing, engagement, and retention.

Led by SOP's Head of People & Culture, the team fosters a positive and enriching environment, coordinating activities, providing training, and promoting volunteer recognition. This structured approach has been key to our ability to respond effectively, especially in emergencies, while maximising the impact of our programs.

We have also digitised the volunteer onboarding process, making it easier for prospective volunteers to sign up and access essential information. This digital approach reduces administrative burdens and improves accessibility. SOP leverages its website not only to take orders but also to attract and engage volunteers effectively. In addition to our website, we have developed the Serving Our People™ App, which enables clients to request services while allowing volunteers, donors, and partners to contribute.

While mobile communication apps are highly useful for contacting people on the go and sending mass messages to mobilise volunteers at short notice, they are not a regular or scalable solution. These apps are not linked to volunteer data such as training, expertise, or availability, making it difficult to scale or integrate into a professional volunteer management system. A more structured approach is required to ensure volunteers are appropriately resourced, assigned, and supported in delivering services effectively.

There is an opportunity to ease these burdens through the adoption of streamlined systems and tools. Digital platforms could consolidate onboarding processes, such as background checks and training, reducing time and complexity for organisations. Volunteer management software would allow organisations to match volunteers to roles based on their skills, availability, and location, improving volunteer experiences and enhancing overall efficiency.

Additionally, providing support for dedicated volunteer management teams can help organisations maintain a strong focus on volunteer engagement, training, and retention. These teams are essential for creating a positive and enriching environment for volunteers and ensuring their ongoing support and development.

Recommendation 5: Support administration and dedicated management teams

The Queensland Government could consider providing financial support to help volunteer-involving organisations implement streamlined systems, including digital onboarding tools and volunteer management software. This would reduce administrative workloads, improve volunteer coordination, and allow organisations to focus more on their core activities. Financial support could also facilitate the development of shared insurance schemes, reducing individual costs and making coverage more affordable for charities.

Funding could also be directed towards supporting dedicated volunteer management teams within organisations. These teams play a vital role in overseeing volunteer recruitment, training, and ongoing support, ensuring volunteers are well-prepared and effectively engaged. By investing in both administrative efficiency and dedicated management teams, the Queensland Government can help organisations scale, retain volunteers, and maximise their community impact.

This opportunity extends to the State's preparation for the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. A well-structured and scalable volunteer management system will be critical in supporting the large-scale volunteer workforce required for the Games. Shared resources, such as centralised databases, coordinated scheduling platforms, and

Recommendation 5: Support administration and dedicated management teams

standardised training modules, could reduce duplication and ensure a seamless experience for volunteers across multiple organisations. Additionally, collective insurance policies and liability coverage could ease the financial and administrative burden on volunteer-involving organisations, ensuring all volunteers are adequately protected while contributing to the event.

Support organisation's online presence for volunteer recruitment

Maintaining a visible and engaging public presence is essential for attracting and retaining volunteers, particularly in a rapidly changing demographic landscape. Online platforms, such as websites and social media, serve as critical tools for volunteer recruitment and awareness. They offer an efficient and cost-effective way to reach a broad audience, share impactful stories, promote volunteer opportunities, and foster a sense of community. For many charitable organisations, building and maintaining a dynamic online presence comes with significant costs, including the need for marketing expertise and resources.

There is a clear opportunity to support charitable organisations in expanding their online presence and marketing efforts through cost-effective strategies including encouraging partnerships. By facilitating collaborations with corporate sponsors or local businesses, volunteer organisations can reduce the financial burden associated with digital marketing and public outreach.

We promote a culture of service through media and community engagement

SOP's vision is to advocate for a change in the mindset of humanity globally by fostering a culture where acts of service become a natural part of everyday life. To achieve this, we remain committed to media engagement as a key avenue for spreading awareness and inspiring action.

SOP maintains an active website and social media presence, with over 3,500 Instagram followers. Online platforms serve as a dynamic tool for recruitment and engagement, showcasing volunteer stories, highlighting community impact, and promoting upcoming opportunities. By sharing compelling content and fostering an online community, we attract individuals motivated by the desire to give back and be part of a positive movement.

Beyond digital engagement, SOP actively builds brand awareness through media presence and strategic partnerships. Media coverage amplifies our reach, reinforcing our mission and attracting new volunteers, donors, and supporters. Partnerships with reputable organisations extend our ability to feature in the media, further strengthening our credibility and engagement. Maintaining this presence consistently requires ongoing investment in time, skills, and resources.

These partnerships could include sponsorships for advertising campaigns, co-branded initiatives, or pro-bono marketing services. Such initiatives would not only help raise awareness about volunteer opportunities but also create more sustainable channels for recruitment, allowing organisations to reach younger people, underrepresented or vulnerable groups and those in regional or remote areas.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen digital presence initiatives for organisations

The Queensland Government could facilitate the growth of charitable organisations' online presence by promoting marketing partnerships with corporate sponsors, local businesses, and digital media outlets. These partnerships could provide organisations with access to professional marketing services, content creation, and advertising support, significantly reducing the financial burden. The government could also offer grants or tax incentives for

Recommendation 6: Strengthen digital presence initiatives for organisations

companies providing pro-bono or discounted marketing services to volunteer organisations, encouraging further collaboration across sectors.

To foster greater independence for more mature volunteer-involving organisations, the Queensland Government could consider supporting online training for volunteer organisations to improve their digital marketing skills and optimise their use of social media platforms would further enhance their ability to engage new volunteers and raise awareness effectively. By leveraging these partnerships and resources, volunteer organisations can increase visibility, attract a diverse volunteer base, and ultimately strengthen their ability to serve their communities.

Enhancing volunteer organisational capacity for natural disaster response

The increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters in Queensland have placed immense strain on volunteer organisations. Disasters such as floods, bushfires, and cyclones demand urgent and coordinated responses, but logistical barriers, such as transportation challenges and damaged infrastructure, can impede the ability of volunteers to access affected areas. Many volunteer organisations are unrecognised in formal Government response efforts despite their crucial role in supporting immediate recovery.

We are crucial for supporting immediate relief to recovery response

SOP plays a critical role as an essential service provider during emergencies, ensuring that immediate material crises, such as food and shelter, are addressed swiftly and effectively. By integrating with other services, SOP helps to bridge the gap between emergency relief and long-term recovery. Through its comprehensive wrap-around service model, SOP not only delivers essential aid but also offers pathways to recovery, supporting clients through every stage, from crisis to wellbeing.

SOP's ability to respond rapidly is evident in the February 2022 flooding event in Logan and Brisbane, where severe flooding affected hundreds of properties and businesses. With 750 volunteers mobilising quickly, SOP provided crucial services such as clearing streets, delivering generators, and distributing food packs to families cut off from supplies. SOP's established partnerships with key organisations, such as Hertz and the Southport Flying Club, allowed for the fast regional distribution of aid.

In anticipation of the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters in Queensland, SOP is preparing to support a significant number of people annually through these partnerships, ensuring the swift delivery of essential items during crises. Without proper coordination and recognition from government bodies, delays in any response could limit access to critical resources and recovery.

An opportunity exists to enhance the engagement and integration of volunteers in disaster response efforts by strengthening collaboration between emergency services, government agencies, and community-led volunteer groups. Creating more streamlined communication channels, improving coordination of resources, and ensuring that volunteer organisations are formally integrated into emergency management plans can optimise response times and improve the effectiveness of recovery efforts.

Recommendation 7: Strengthen integration of charity organisations in disaster response

To enhance the role of volunteers in disaster response, the Queensland Government could consider a targeted focus on the following:

- **Improved coordination:** Develop frameworks for better communication between government agencies, volunteer organisations, and community groups. Establishing clear roles and responsibilities will ensure volunteers are effectively integrated into the disaster response system.
- **Streamlined volunteer integration:** Support the development of systems that allow for easier matching of volunteers to roles based on skills and availability, ensuring that volunteers can be quickly mobilised and deployed to the most urgent areas.
- **Formal recognition of volunteer organisations:** Ensure that volunteer organisations are formally included in emergency response plans and are given the recognition and resources they need to contribute effectively to recovery efforts. This will increase their capacity to engage and deploy volunteers where needed most.
- **Logistical support:** Enhance partnerships with transport providers and offer logistical support to ensure volunteers can access disaster zones, even in the face of damaged infrastructure. This will improve volunteer mobility and the distribution of resources during critical recovery periods.

By focusing on these engagement and integration opportunities, the Queensland Government can significantly strengthen Queensland's volunteer sector, enabling it to provide quicker, more efficient, and more organised support during natural disasters.

By providing volunteer organisations with the necessary tools and support, including digital platforms to coordinate efforts and better integrate volunteers with emergency services, Queensland's volunteer sector can become a more effective force in responding to natural disasters. This would ensure faster, more organised responses, particularly in rural and remote communities, where the need for swift intervention is even more critical.

5 Conclusion

The following findings highlight the critical role of volunteering in Queensland's social and economic landscape, while underscoring challenges to its sustainability. To address these, we urge the Queensland Government to act by enriching volunteer experience and support, while strengthening volunteer organisation capacity and impact. Investing in these areas will help create a more resilient, inclusive, and effective volunteer sector for Queensland's future.

5.1 Findings

Volunteering is a vital part of Queensland's social and economic fabric, providing essential support to vulnerable communities and contributing billions annually. Volunteering offers personal benefits, including social connection, fulfilment, and skill development. Volunteer-involving organisations like SOP heavily rely on volunteerism to deliver crisis relief and long-term assistance.

The sustainability of volunteering is at risk due to declining participation, increasing demands, and growing pressures on organisations. Fewer people are volunteering, and those who do are contributing fewer hours, straining essential services. Barriers such as the rising opportunity cost of unpaid work, competing personal commitments, and volunteer burnout exacerbate this trend. Without intervention, organisations will struggle to meet demand, leaving vulnerable groups at greater risk.

Volunteer-involving organisations face increasing demands which limit recruitment and retention activities. Achieving effective and accessible volunteer recruitment requires the high investment into the maintenance of a consistent public presence. Combining this with high administrative burdens, insurance costs, training requirements, and the need for flexible engagement further complicates volunteer management and scalability.

Natural disasters in Queensland are forecast to increase in severity and frequency which will strain the State's emergency response resources. Volunteers are already at risk of fatigue, especially those involved in consecutive disaster responses. Local, on-the-ground charity organisations play a crucial role in disaster response but often lack recognition and support in formal emergency planning.

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities to support initiatives that reverse the declining trend. SOP's ability to grow its volunteer network demonstrates that, with the right activities and programs to recruit, engage and retain our community, volunteerism can thrive. These initiatives could also be pertinent to volunteerism including for the upcoming Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

5.2 Recommendations

Growing and sustaining Queensland's volunteer sector requires policy reform and structural improvements. By implementing these strategies, Queensland can create a more inclusive, accessible, and sustainable volunteering landscape that fosters lifelong participation and community impact.

1. Promote inclusive volunteering opportunities

Support initiatives that create structured pathways for diverse groups to engage in volunteering, such as expanding corporate programs, enhancing youth engagement, and funding flexible, skills-based opportunities. This would remove barriers to participation and promote lifelong involvement in volunteering, particularly among underrepresented communities.

2. Support flexible volunteer options

Encourage the adoption of flexible volunteering options, such as micro-volunteering and remote roles, to increase participation and reduce barriers. This includes providing incentives or funding to organisations that implement these adaptable programs, ensuring accessibility for diverse and time-constrained individuals.

3. Invest in volunteer recognition and wellbeing

Fund volunteer recognition initiatives and mental health support to increase retention, including public recognition events and funding for mental health programs tailored to volunteers. This would alleviate administrative burdens and ensure emotional support for volunteers, encouraging their continued engagement.

4. Develop structured training and career pathways

Invest in structured training pathways that lead to accredited qualifications, recognising volunteer experience as valuable for employment. Incentives for corporate volunteers and partnerships between volunteer organisations, educational institutions, and businesses would enhance career development, improve job prospects, and create a sustainable, skilled volunteer workforce.

5. Enhance digital presence for volunteer-involving organisations

Support volunteer organisations in strengthening their digital presence by facilitating marketing partnerships, offering incentives for pro-bono digital services, and funding online training programs. These initiatives will enhance visibility, attract diverse volunteers, and improve community engagement.

6. Support volunteer management administration

Provide financial support for digital onboarding systems, volunteer management software, and shared insurance schemes to reduce administrative burdens and improve coordination. Funding should also support dedicated volunteer management teams to enhance recruitment, training, and engagement, ensuring long-term volunteer retention and community impact.

7. Strengthen integration of charities in disaster response

Strengthen the integration of volunteer organisations in disaster response by improving coordination, streamlining volunteer mobilisation, formally recognising volunteer groups, and enhancing logistical support. These measures will ensure a more efficient, organised, and rapid volunteer-driven response to disasters across Queensland.

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