

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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PACT is a not-for-profit organisation that relies on the dedication of over 100 volunteers to provide vital support to victims and witnesses in Queensland. Our focus is on ensuring they receive steadfast, impartial assistance throughout the often-challenging process of giving evidence. Our mission is to empower individuals on their journey through the justice system, ensuring no one has to face it alone.

PACT has relied on volunteers since its establishment and this year, we are proud to celebrate 40 years of dedicated service in the field. We are deeply affected by the current state of volunteering in Queensland, particularly in remote and regional areas. With our extensive experience and long-standing commitment, we believe we are well equipped to provide this submission for your consideration.

1. **The Current State of Volunteering in Queensland and Its Value**

Volunteering in Queensland is a cornerstone of community resilience, fostering social inclusion, and contributing significantly to the economy and overall wellbeing of the State. Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations (VIO) provide essential services across various sectors and for PACT, volunteers play a niche role in supporting vulnerable victims of crime. We perceive that while the experience for volunteers may be personal fulfillment, skill development, or a sense of purpose; for PACT, volunteers bring invaluable resources, community connections, diverse perspectives, strengthened service delivery and community engagement. In fact, we find that PACT volunteers offer much more than just the direct services they provide but also help with bringing people and agencies together during moments of extreme emotional distress to improve the experience of the individuals affected while also providing hope and helping to rebuild community trust.

2. **Barriers to Volunteering**

PACT volunteers are recruited to help provide very specific services that are often emotionally fraught, require them to place themselves in higher risk situations, are irregular in their timing and duration and may involve years of engagement with a client and their family. Along with most other NFPs feedback from volunteers highlights key barriers, including:

- **Financial constraints:** Many volunteers are increasingly unable to afford the time or resources to participate in volunteering, as they prioritise seeking additional income to support their household needs and / or for many PACT volunteers are choosing to retire later and then focusing on enjoying retirement which means they

are joining PACT later in life and are limited in their availability. PACTs aging volunteer community means that there are other barriers to volunteering which include supporting adult children / grandchildren, personal health and lifestyle issues / choices.

- **Time constraints:** Busy schedules and competing commitments limit people's availability. For PACT, volunteering requires a level of flexibility that ensures we can be client-led, meet with the needs of the Courts and the Justice process alongside satisfying organisational training and development requirements.
- **Perceived lack of inclusivity:** Prospective volunteers from diverse backgrounds may feel excluded due to language barriers, cultural differences, or lack of accessibility. PACT recruitment also excludes many potential volunteers who may be triggered by the nature of PACT volunteer work, who may not be able to abide appropriate boundaries or who lack the emotional resilience and maturity to support vulnerable victims of crime.
- **Limited awareness:** Many people are unaware of opportunities or the benefits of volunteering. PACT's ability to recruit outside of traditional social media through volunteer 'peak bodies' is a significant limitation for PACT and our ability to connect with potentially willing volunteers.
- **Costs of volunteering:** While PACT provides some direct reimbursements and activity based payments to volunteers in recognition of expenses associated with PACT volunteering. PACT is consistently made aware of out-of-pocket expenses including travel, parking, meals, clothing, technology and other costs that potentially discourages participation.
- **Volunteer management and governance:** Many smaller NFPs including PACT find the cost of providing 'HR-like' services (Bluecards, EAPs, professional development etc), IT and technology support, OHS / risk based compliance support and other management and governance support financially limiting or means that NFPs adopt a 'risk V reward' approach potentially exposing clients, volunteers, employees and organisations to increased risks.

Addressing these barriers requires the promotion of flexible, inclusive, and cost-effective volunteering models for both volunteers and NFPs. This could include:

- encouraging large organisations to support their employees in engaging in volunteer activities during work hours while continuing to receive their regular salary.
- Centralising NFP bureaucratic supports or providing targeted supports for VIOs including volunteer assistance programs, volunteer professional development, volunteer recognition opportunities would be invaluable.
- government incentivising volunteering by offering tangible benefits like monetary rebates or discounts on utilities, essential services or cost of living expenses. This is an innovative approach to encourage more people to give their time and skills to the community.

3. The Concept

- Governments could partner with service providers, such as fuel companies, telecommunications providers, or utility companies, to create a program offering discounts or rebates for active volunteers. Examples of these incentives could include:
- **Discounted fuel prices:** Volunteers, especially those who travel to provide support (e.g., court support roles or community aid workers), could receive a percentage discount on fuel expenses.
- **Reduced phone bills or free data plans:** Volunteers who need to stay connected, coordinate with organisations, or communicate with clients could benefit from subsidised mobile services.
- **Council parking waivers:** Volunteers who need to park near courthouses, police stations or government offices would benefit from parking permits or other solutions that would reduce costs, attendance limitations based on mobility or accessibility and avoid parking fines when court / prosecution matters run outside of expected timings.
- **Reduced rates or utilities bills:** Volunteers who can demonstrate authentic commitment to their volunteering might see discounts on council related expenses or special invitations to local council recognition events or activities.

4. Implementation

- **Eligibility Criteria:** Volunteers could register with approved non-profits, community organisations, or government programs. They would log hours or activities completed to ensure accountability.
- **Partnership Agreements:** The government could negotiate agreements with major service providers, incentivising them through tax breaks or subsidies for their participation in the program.
- **Rebate Tracking:** A centralised online system could track volunteers' contributions and issue vouchers or rebates directly linked to their service records.

Benefits

- **Encouraging Volunteering:** By reducing out-of-pocket costs for volunteers, the program could encourage more people to engage in community service, especially those who might otherwise be deterred by financial constraints.
- **Broader Participation:** This approach could attract a more diverse group of volunteers, including students, retirees, and low-income individuals, who would benefit from reduced living costs while making meaningful contributions.
- **Building Stronger Communities:** More volunteers mean greater support for essential services, from court support to disaster relief, benefiting society as a whole.
- **Corporate Social Responsibility:** Service providers involved in the program would enhance their reputation and goodwill by contributing to a community-centered initiative.

Challenges

- **Program Funding:** Governments resource allocations and linkages to philanthropic and corporate social would need to allocate resources or offer incentives to service providers, which could raise budget concerns.
- **Accountability:** Tracking and verifying volunteer hours and ensuring fairness in distributing rebates could be administratively complex.
- **Equity Considerations:** Care must be taken to ensure that the program is accessible to all volunteers, regardless of socioeconomic status or location.

5. Experiences, Motivations, and Challenges

Volunteers are motivated by a variety of factors, including the desire to give back, develop skills, and build social connections. However, challenges include lack of support, burnout, and inadequate recognition for their contributions. PACT encounters difficulties in volunteer recruitment, retention, and training, as well as balancing volunteer expectations with operational needs.

Recommendations include:

- Enhancing volunteer recognition programs.
- Providing ongoing training and mental health support.
- Expanding flexible and remote volunteering options.
- Creating clearer pathways for professional development through volunteering.

6. Challenges for Diverse Groups

Certain groups face unique barriers to volunteering:

- **Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities:** Language barriers and lack of culturally appropriate roles and ability of .
- **People with disabilities:** Insufficiently accessible volunteer opportunities.
- **Youth:** Limited awareness of opportunities that align with their interests and career aspirations. Limitation of time.
- **Seniors:** Health concerns and mobility issues.
- **Rural and remote residents:** Limited availability of local opportunities. Travel associated with volunteering

To improve participation, organisations can offer targeted outreach, tailored roles, and ensure accessibility through technology. Providing opportunities to maximise the sharing of volunteers across VIOs.

7. Government Support for the Volunteering Sector

Existing support from the government for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations is acknowledged but could be enhanced by:

- Removing or providing support to volunteer involving organisations to minimise 'red-tape' and governance requirements for the management of volunteers



- Streamlining grant application processes for volunteer-involving organisations.
- Increasing funding for training, mental health resources, and recognition programs.
- Promoting partnerships across sectors to align volunteer efforts with community needs.
- Promoting volunteering opportunities across government agencies and public service unions especially targeting retiring professionals (eg. Teachers, nurses, police etc)

8. Leveraging Government Portfolios and the Brisbane 2032 Games

The Queensland Government has a unique opportunity to promote volunteering through interdepartmental collaboration and leveraging the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. These initiatives can:

- Raise awareness of volunteering's value.
- Provide training and leadership opportunities.
- Leave a legacy of a stronger volunteering culture across the State.

9. First Nations Volunteering

First Nations volunteers play a critical role in supporting their communities and advancing Closing the Gap initiatives. However, challenges such as resource limitations and geographical isolation persist. Addressing these requires:

- Culturally safe volunteer programs.
- Support for local leadership initiatives.
- Investment in community-driven solutions tailored to specific needs.

10. Additional Considerations

National and interstate reports underline the need for consistent volunteer management frameworks, data collection, and cross-sector partnerships. Learning from best practices across Australia, Queensland can:

- Develop a unified volunteering strategy.
- Increase collaboration with academic institutions to measure volunteering outcomes.
- Use technology to enhance recruitment, training, and reporting.

