

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission – Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

Office of the Inspector-General of Emergency Management

Disaster management in Queensland is a shared responsibility requiring all agencies, partners, stakeholders and members of the community to collaboratively work together to reduce the impacts resulting from disasters. Queensland's disaster management system relies on volunteers who are highly valued. Volunteers provide an important surge capacity which can be quickly activated when needed. Volunteerism significantly strengthens the resilience of Queensland communities.

Formal and informal volunteers (including spontaneous) occur through a range of organisational arrangements. The systems which attract and support the volunteer workforce sit on a spectrum from ad hoc (self organised) through to coordinated by not for profit organisations and government. The recent North Queensland floods showed the dedication of volunteers in helping local residents during the most challenging circumstances in partnership with emergency services personnel. Volunteers often work tirelessly to ensure residents are safe even when their own homes and businesses are impacted.

According to the *State of the Climate Report 2024* changes in weather and climate extremes exacerbate existing pressures on the health and wellbeing of our communities. The pace of changes to weather and climate is increasing and includes compounding events where multiple hazards occur together or in a close sequence which intensifies their impact. The *Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding* and *Independent Review of National Natural Disaster Governance Arrangements* found Australia's disaster arrangements and frameworks have not evolved at the same rate as the changing nature of disasters. Both reviews highlight the need to change how preparing for and responding to disasters is considered.

Greater demands are placed on the volunteer workforce as disaster events become more frequent, severe and prolonged. The 2020 Royal Commission into National Disaster Arrangements found that supporting and sustaining an effective volunteer workforce is vital. Appropriate support is required including training and ensuring appropriate safety standards and equipment for their health and wellbeing. The Royal Commission noted state and territory governments should continue to support, recognize and incentivise employers who release employees to serve as fire and emergency service volunteers.

The significant impact of disasters highlights the importance of Queensland's emergency service agencies performing optimally. The sustainability of emergency service delivery in Queensland was considered through a series of reviews including the *Review into Volunteer Marine Rescue Organisations in Queensland* and the *SES Review "Sustaining the SES – Partnering for Change"* which highlighted key issues about capability and barriers to retaining and attracting volunteers. The reviews culminated in the '*Independent review of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services*' and the '*Review of Queensland's Disaster Management Arrangements*' by the Office of the Inspector-General of Emergency Management. The reviews recommended reforms to modernise service delivery arrangements, simplify operational structures and focus resources.

The *Standard for Disaster Management in Queensland* (the Standard) establishes the outcomes to be achieved for all entities involved in disaster management. The Standard aligns to international and national disaster management doctrine including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Under the Standard, capability integration involves entities building their capabilities together in a way that complements existing capability within the community. This requires a shared understanding of what can be achieved by sharing and managing resources appropriately. Effective resource planning includes how Queensland's volunteer workforce can be used and integrated into disaster management activities.

Opportunities exist to optimise the role of volunteers in disaster resilience and risk reduction activities. Volunteers are well placed to promote and embed shared responsibility and strengthen resilience when communities are not in crisis. A sustainable and well-integrated volunteer workforce is well prepared by having the appropriate resources, training and equipment to support disaster operations while simultaneously reducing disaster risk. Although the role of formalised volunteers within emergency service organisations is well understood particularly in responding to emergencies, greater awareness and support for their role in disaster resilience and risk reduction would be beneficial.

Volunteers currently assist with community education and information about the risks associated with hazards such as severe weather, cyclone, flooding and bushfire. Their education role could be augmented to provide a greater reach to vulnerable members of Queensland's communities. Volunteers are well placed to increase awareness of hazards and risks and promote the shared responsibility of individuals in disaster management. Developing a sustainable volunteer workforce would strengthen Queensland's disaster risk reduction and better support the use of local knowledge and community led initiatives.

Opportunities also exist for incentives to be identified to attract and retain volunteers. Examples include development of pathways for volunteers receiving nationally accredited qualifications which can benefit all parties. *Report 2: Queensland's Disaster Management Arrangements Review* identifies a range of opportunities to build capability such as professional development through accreditation, vocational and education training and tertiary qualifications. Nationally accredited training and qualifications gives volunteers the opportunity to enhance their skills and have their experience recognised.

Queensland needs the necessary plans, resources and capabilities to deal with increasingly extreme and complex disaster operations. Effective planning enables efficient coordination of volunteers and resource sharing. Volunteers need to be well equipped and be included in disaster management exercises to inform capability development and support the continuous improvement of interoperability.

In order to keep Queensland communities safe from future disasters it is critical to invest in supporting volunteers in disaster management to retain existing volunteers, attract new volunteers, enhance their skills and acknowledge their worth to their communities and the state.