

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission to the Queensland Parliament's Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

On behalf of Woodfordia Inc (www.woodfordia.org), we welcome the opportunity to provide this submission and highlight the essential role volunteers play in our organisation and the challenges we face in sustaining this vital workforce. Woodfordia Inc is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation best known for producing the annual Woodford Folk Festival, one of Australia's largest and most iconic cultural events. In addition to the festival, our volunteers are deeply engaged in ongoing land care and environmental initiatives, helping us maintain and regenerate the beautiful 500-acre parkland that serves as our home.

Our organisation thrives because of the passion, dedication, and hard work of thousands of volunteers, without whom our events and environmental work simply would not be possible. However, in recent years, and especially since the pandemic, we have faced increasing challenges in volunteer recruitment and management. We wish to address four key issues in this submission:

1. Cost of Living/Economic and Transportation Challenges

As a regional organisation without access to public transport, Woodfordia faces significant economic barriers to volunteer recruitment. Many of our volunteers must cover the cost of private transport, often traveling long distances and incurring expenses such as fuel, accommodation, and time off work. With the current cost of living crisis, these economic pressures have made it increasingly difficult for people to commit their time and resources to volunteering, despite their enthusiasm and willingness. This presents a critical barrier not only to our own organisation but to the broader volunteering sector in regional Queensland.

It is a fact that volunteering costs money, in the need to travel to volunteer, and the costs incurred while volunteering. During the Woodford Folk Festival, which is a 6-day event and has a volunteer workforce of nearly 2500, volunteers, in the post-festival survey, raised the need to be provided with food or discounts to purchase food from our stallholders as one of their top requests, showing the cost of feeding oneself as a barrier to volunteering.

We believe that addressing this issue requires targeted support, such as transport subsidies, fuel vouchers, or funding for volunteer travel or food-related expenses incurred while volunteering, to alleviate the economic burden on volunteers and make opportunities more accessible.

2. Mental Health Support and Training for Volunteer Managers

While it is well established that volunteering improves mental health by reducing loneliness and fostering a sense of community and purpose, it is also true that many volunteers bring their own mental health challenges with them to their volunteering roles. Volunteer managers, often working with limited resources and training, are increasingly required to support individuals experiencing mental health issues.

We currently employ volunteers to provide mental health support to their fellow volunteers both during the Build period and during the Festival itself. There is a team of 18 volunteers with this as their mission.

We see this as both a challenge and an opportunity. Ensuring volunteer managers are equipped with the skills to recognise, support, and appropriately respond to mental health needs would greatly enhance the volunteer experience and the sustainability of our programs. We strongly advocate for increased opportunities and financial assistance for Mental Health First Aid training tailored specifically for volunteer coordinators and managers.

3. Administrative Costs and Technology for Volunteer Management

Managing a large volunteer workforce requires robust systems and tools to ensure efficiency, communication, and a positive volunteer experience. However, the increasing need to adopt and maintain up-to-date technology for recruitment, training, scheduling, and engagement poses a significant financial and administrative burden on organisations like ours.

With limited resources, keeping up with technological advancements often falls by the wayside, leading to inefficiencies and missed opportunities to enhance the volunteer experience. We urge greater support and investment in volunteer management systems and technology to reduce administrative overhead and improve the effectiveness of volunteer coordination.

4. Support for Episodic Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) We also see a significant need for support from Volunteering Queensland to address the specific needs of Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) that rely on episodic volunteers—those who engage in short-term, event-based, or seasonal roles. The barriers and opportunities faced by these organisations differ from those of community service and long-term volunteer organisations, and more research is needed to understand and address these unique challenges.

This research could be especially valuable in informing strategies for the recruitment and management of volunteers for major events, such as the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Brisbane. Developing a clear framework for supporting episodic volunteering would not only benefit large-scale events but also enhance the capacity of cultural and environmental organisations like Woodfordia.

Conclusion Woodfordia Inc's success is built on the tireless efforts of our volunteers, and we remain committed to providing them with a meaningful, rewarding experience. Addressing the economic, mental health, and administrative challenges outlined above is crucial to sustaining and growing our volunteer community.

We thank the Committee for considering this submission and welcome any opportunity to discuss these issues further or contribute to the development of policies that support the volunteering sector in Queensland.

Sincerely,

Karen McBride
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