

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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### **The Queensland Volunteering Inquiry: Submission**

Support Groups Queensland welcomes the parliamentary inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. The effort of all levels of government and the whole community is needed to advance the support and participation of volunteers in Queensland.

#### **About Support Groups Queensland**

We are a small health promotion charity that supports people to join, to start and to run peer support groups. Support groups are concerned with an enormous range of health conditions. We have three staff and work with over one thousand support groups across Queensland. Most groups are led by volunteers. Volunteers lead the groups, set up the room, welcome new members, provide activities, signpost to health providers, host Zoom meetings, check in with members outside the group, listen, cater and provide tissues. This list is just a few roles of everything that they do.

Unlike health and other system interactions, our volunteers in support groups have long term engagement with people. They are volunteers who not only help others but volunteer while navigating their own complex health journey. They are contacted regularly after hours and on weekends.

Peer support groups provide ongoing health benefits in four ways, according to the research evidence. They build social connections, provide new information, build increased capacity to manage a health concern and assist people to advocate for themselves outside of the group.

Our volunteers within Support Groups Queensland and the volunteer-led groups that we support and/or auspice have generally volunteered for many years. We also engage with many new volunteers who act to start a group and fill in a missing space in their community.

Unlike many organisations who report a decline in volunteers, we have increased the number of volunteers connected to us. While it can be difficult to source volunteers in some areas, we seek to connect volunteers to issues that they feel passionate about and to engage volunteers in ways that use all of the skills developed through their diverse life experiences. People are often motivated to volunteer with support groups because they don't want other people to experience the lack of support that they experienced through their own health journey.

1. The current state of volunteering in Queensland and the value it contributes, including benefits to volunteers, organisations, communities and the State;

One of the most valuable benefits of the work of our volunteers and many other kinds of volunteers do is to support people outside of 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. They are shift workers beyond compare. While we all hope to have family and friends that can support us, many people do not have this.

*“I was out at a support group and assisting a new person to register their info. I asked who their emergency contact was. They said they had no-one.”*

Another important benefit of volunteering is that they increase community connections. They connect people to people. They have time to talk, more time than service providers. One evaluation question we ask people is how many people did you know when you came and how many people did you know when you left. Without volunteers, this growth in connection would not take place.

2. The views of volunteers, prospective volunteers and the volunteering sector on the current barriers to volunteering, including excessive legislative and regulatory burdens and other restrictions adversely limiting active volunteers;

A major red tape issue in volunteering is the uncoordinated and multiple processes of screening checks: Blue card system, police check and NDIS worker screening. One accreditation process to work with any vulnerable person should be adopted – whether that’s young people or others with vulnerabilities. This should be streamlined, free and available to people at the point when they start to consider volunteering.

3. The current experiences, motivations and challenges for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations and their recommendations for addressing challenges and improving the volunteering experience;

In our experience, many volunteers are paying for a lot of their costs - training, travel, copying, phones, IT, and sometimes paying for others as well. This is particularly happening in small, unfunded organisations.

*“Our group volunteer with a ute collects cans and goes to Containers for Change and these donations are used to fund our group’s activities. All that time and petrol, we need him to keep us going.”*

We recommend a voucher system like FairPlay so that some assistance to volunteers becomes available through community organisations.

In some cases, volunteering can lead to employment when the volunteer is supported to develop skills, initiative and confidence. However, there is limited government support for organisations to have Volunteer Managers. This is a large Human Resources role, often viewed as an “overhead” when it is essential for a volunteer team.

*“We included Volunteer Management as a budget line item in our grant. It was just a small grant. The grantor asked for more detail about the wages rate and about the hours involved. Finally, after some backwards and forwards, they agreed this was a direct project cost.”*

4. The unique challenges experienced by people from diverse backgrounds, genders, age groups, abilities and locations, and opportunities to improve volunteering participation, accessibility and experience for these groups;

Mainstream organisations can find it difficult to support volunteers that have special needs. Where volunteers have limited English or mobility or other vulnerabilities, still many ways to make a meaningful contribution but their potential is overlooked. There can also be extra time and cost in the set-up which can stretch volunteer managers who only have limited resources.

*“I want to volunteer but what can a blind man do?” (direct quote from a group member)*

Many community organisations work from older premises where universal design principles are difficult to implement. Transport options can also be limited, which then limits the volunteer to attending when they can get transport support. The 50c fares in Brisbane are a start, but only cover a small area of Queensland. Many regional groups report difficulties in arranging accessible transport and finding enough transport volunteers.

**“Our group leader can’t drive, so they use some of their own support worker hours to come to the group. It’s not that close so it’s four hours!”**

5. The extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support at all levels for the volunteering sector in Queensland and sustainable opportunities for improvement;

Support Groups Queensland has received small funding grants to support volunteers from all levels of government. The Gambling Community Benefit Fund has assisted with some projects, but volunteer support should be given overt and higher priority in its funding rounds.

In some cases, government tendering processes have shown a limited understanding and lack of support for volunteer models of service provision. In fact, volunteer models are one of the only models that will lead to a project continuing beyond its funding life.

Volunteering needs to be an encouraged community value from school through to corporate and community settings and into retirement. People need a history of their volunteering life, built in a sustainable way. Often awards and pins fail to recognise the full amount of volunteering that a person has done and is separated by organisation. We also find that on many occasions people don’t consider their efforts as volunteering, it’s just something that they do.

*“I was given a twenty year pin. Nice, but I’m over forty years of volunteering now.”*

6. Opportunities for the Queensland Government to leverage all portfolios to support growth in volunteering across Queensland, including through hosting the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

One of the greatest opportunities of the Games is to promote the language diversity of many Queenslanders. Immigrants and refugees to Australia speak many languages and their expertise in their own language is overlooked in our society. This requires investment and coaching in volunteers to build a stronger interpreter workforce and Recognition of Prior Learning processes for non-English speakers.

7. Opportunities to increase emergency response volunteering in Queensland, including how to optimise the engagement, support and integration of volunteers assisting with natural disasters and community recovery;

One key recommendation we have is promote and distribute the preparedness tool of QDN. When communities can recognise and plan for those who might need more help, it will lessen the strain of a crisis. <https://qdn.org.au/resources/pcep-workbook/>

The underlying community networks of volunteers are already on the ground. They are well placed to advise on community needs and where emergency resources are needed most. Unfortunately they are often not engaged early enough and they have received limited support to develop any plans and resources. This was most visible to Support Groups Queensland during the pandemic, when many multicultural leaders – who are usually volunteers- recorded audio and video to get accurate information to their people. We coached multiple group leaders through Zoom and used our Zoom account for multiple purposes across this time. We helped groups to set up phone trees and check-ins. Fortunately our work was supported by Queensland Health, as many group volunteers had very limited resources.

8. First Nations peoples volunteering, including in remote and discrete communities, and the role of First Nations volunteering in Closing the Gap; and

While we have connections to First Nations groups, we are not an indigenous organisation. Our comments are based on how non-indigenous services can be volunteer allies with First Nations people.

Within First Nations communities, volunteering can be less formal and may be part of ongoing connection to others in the community. Government strategy needs to be grounded in the recognition that First Nations people contribute to family groups that are large and inter-connected. Non-indigenous people may never engage with a neighbour or aunty unless they have a formal recognised role. First Nations people are likely to be engaged in roles that in other communities would be undertaken by volunteers or by services. The strengths of First Nation approaches should be widely adopted by the whole community.

In formal volunteering roles, it is critical that First Nations people can participate in an environment free from discrimination, yet there is often limited human rights based and cultural safety training of non-Indigenous volunteers and workers. Volunteers in general need more support to engage in a trauma informed way with First Nations people as colleagues and as clients. There are good foundation resources like <https://www.theseedlinggroup.org/> and <https://healingfoundation.org.au/heal-together/> that already exist and could be more widely distributed. While younger Australians have had some school curriculum, older Australians (who make up an estimated 60 percent of the volunteer workforce) never received any education at all in First Nations culture. In fact, they received misinformation.

Also, considering the history of Stolen Wages, it is important that volunteering is not a strategy in cases where paid roles and paid engagement are more appropriate for First Nations advisors, participants and leaders.

9. Any other relevant matters, including academic and other diverse sources, and any relevant reports and reviews at the national level and across other states and territories.

We would welcome the opportunity to present in person to the Inquiry.

*The Support Groups Queensland Team*