

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Introduction

The Atherton Tableland Agricultural Society Inc. (ATAS) is honoured to present this submission to the Queensland Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering. ATAS is a volunteer-driven organization that hosts 6-8 community events annually, including the iconic Atherton Show. Our events, which celebrate the rich agricultural heritage of the Tablelands region, are entirely dependent on volunteer efforts.

Our society, which hosts multiple events throughout the year, including the annual Show, multiple Art & Craft Fairs, the biannual Tolga Scarecrow Festival, and annual Carols by Candlelight, relies heavily on the dedication and support of volunteers. Without their significant contributions, these events would not be affordable or feasible.

Volunteering plays a pivotal role in both social and economic aspects of our community. Research has shown that volunteering fosters social cohesion, builds community resilience, and enhances the quality of life for individuals. Economically, volunteers contribute millions of dollars' worth of labour, which supports local economies and reduces the financial burden on not-for-profit organisations.

Value of Volunteering

Volunteers are the lifeblood of our organisation, contributing immeasurably to the social and economic fabric of our community. Their efforts:

- Preserve and promote local agricultural traditions
- Foster community connections and social cohesion
- Provide inclusive and educational opportunities across the ages
- Stimulate the local economy

Current State of Volunteering

ATAS has been organising events since 1903, with the first Atherton Show held in 1904. We've observed a concerning trend of decreasing volunteer participation, mirroring the statewide decline in volunteering rates. We are, however, incredibly grateful to those who do give us their time, experience and knowledge.

Challenges and Barriers faced by our Volunteers

1. **Time Constraints:** Many of our younger volunteers are time-poor due to work and family commitments. This limits their ability to contribute consistently.



2. **Financial Costs:** The costs associated with volunteering, such as travel, training and materials, can be prohibitive, especially in the current economic climate.
3. **Work Mobility:** Frequent job changes and relocations impact the continuity of volunteer engagement.
4. **Perception and Stigma:** There is a perception that volunteering is akin to 'community service,' which can carry a stigma and deters potential volunteers.
5. **Technological Skills:** Not all volunteers possess the necessary technological skills for administrative tasks, creating a barrier to participation.
6. **Administrative Burden:** The increased administrative requirements, including blue cards, insurance, incorporation, and reporting, place a significant strain on volunteer organisations.
7. **Diverse Expectations and Toxicity:** Managing diverse expectations and addressing toxic behaviour, particularly on social media platforms, adds complexity to volunteer management.
8. **Generational Expectations:** Younger generations have different expectations regarding the return on their volunteer efforts, which affects sustainability.
9. **Multiple Commitments:** Volunteers are often connected to multiple organizations, leading to burnout and reduced effectiveness, or availability.
10. **Risk Perception:** Potential volunteers view themselves as vulnerable to prosecution if they engage in community organisations.

Recommendations

1. **Youth Engagement Programs:** Develop initiatives to attract and retain younger volunteers, possibly linking volunteering to educational recognition and certification.
2. **Advocacy and Awareness:** Advocate and advertise the value of volunteering. For example, SES volunteers are rarely referred to as volunteers, and often mentioned in the same way that paid emergency service workers are, SES failing to highlight their volunteer status.



3. **Recognition and Incentives:** Implement a statewide volunteer recognition program and consider tax incentives for active volunteers.
4. **Barrier Reduction:** Reduce barriers to volunteering, particularly in rural areas where travel and accessibility are significant challenges.
5. **Government Collaboration:** Establish links with all levels of government to reduce duplication and streamline reporting, acquitting, and applying for support.
6. **Resource Rationalisation:** Negotiate bulk agreements for professional software packages to reduce costs for not-for-profit organisations.
7. **Accessible Training:** Schedule workshops for volunteer organisations at times that are accessible to working volunteers.
8. **Awareness Campaign:** Launch advertising campaigns to dispel myths about volunteering risks and promote its benefits.

Conclusion

The Atherton Tableland Agricultural Society stands ready to contribute to the growth and sustainability of volunteering in Queensland. We believe that by addressing these challenges and implementing supportive measures, we can reverse the decline in volunteering rates and ensure the continued success of community-driven events that are crucial to regional Queensland's cultural and economic vitality.

We welcome the opportunity to provide further information as witnesses to the Inquiry.

Volunteering is the lifeblood of our community, and the Atherton Tableland Agricultural Society Inc. is committed to supporting and advocating for our volunteers. We urge the Queensland Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering to consider our recommendations to enhance the volunteer experience and ensure the sustainability of volunteer-driven events and initiatives. We would also welcome the opportunity to be invited to be a witness to the Inquiry to provide more information and detail.

Yours sincerely

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Vicki Baylis