

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Blue Card Requirements for Emergency Services Volunteers Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on the parliamentary committee inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. Volunteers are crucial in rural, regional and remote areas such as Cook Shire, and have a role in nearly every aspect of the community – sport, art, culture, history and, importantly, emergency services – offering their time and skills to give back to the community. However I am personally seeing these numbers dwindle. That's why we need to do everything we can to maintain the volunteers we have – as well as encourage new volunteers to the fold. One change I believe will make a big impact on volunteer numbers in the emergency services area – saving lives and protecting property – is in regard to Blue Card requirements. I call on Queensland Government to amend the Working with Children, (Risk Management and Screening) Act 2000 (Qld) to abolish the requirements for ALL emergency services volunteers to hold Blue Cards while performing services as part of their employment. A Blue Card is a crime prevention, risk management and monitoring system for people working with children, similar to the Working with Children Check in other states. All paid and volunteer firefighters and Rural Fire Brigade members, including brigade support members, have needed a Blue Card since 31 March 2020 or they had to leave the organisation. The services have lost a significant number of vital volunteers since the introduction of the change. In Cook Shire many Rural Fire Brigades have been disadvantaged, such as Coen, Laura, Marton, and Poison Creek. The Laura RFB, in particular, has not been able to use Indigenous volunteers because they didn't want to apply for a Blue Card or were ineligible. Currently there is just one (1) member of the Laura RFB, which poses a significant risk when attending fires as a single officer. Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade members are operational staff and, unlike police, doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists, teachers and paramedics, are not exempt from the requirement to hold a Blue Card while doing general work at a hospital, school or providing a service as part of their employment. Some rural firefighters have found it offensive and have chosen not to apply for a Blue Card after 25+ years of service. The Blue Card legislation could be relaxed to allow firefighters to be exempt from the requirement to obtain a Blue Card (like Police, Health and Qld Ambulance Service) while they are performing their duty as a firefighter. Those who undertake community engagement activities could still be subject to the current requirements. The risk of having poorly staffed volunteer Rural Fire Brigades must outweigh the extremely low risk of a Brigade member interacting with a minor in the normal course of their volunteer role. This risk is accepted in almost every other business or there would be a universal requirement for workers to hold Blue Cards. The current system appears to discriminate between emergency services in that Qld Fire Officers and Volunteers are not afforded the same opportunity as Health Workers, Ambulance and Police. QFD Volunteers and Staff are often called to assist with road trauma incidents – along with Police and Ambulance - in addition to fighting fires in extreme conditions to preserve life and property. Equal opportunity should be afforded to all who put their lives at risk to support life saving functions. In summary, I believe the current Blue Card requirements are a significant barrier preventing more Cook Shire residents, as well as residents throughout Queensland, from volunteering. Case study ABC news posted Wed 13 May 2020, Ken Cross, a volunteer of 40 years with the Chatsworth Rural Fire Brigade north of Gympie, had not applied for a Blue Card and was not sure if he would. "I don't see it as a necessity", he said. "I'm just a bit disappointed. Our brigade is 70 next year and I just thought I might have been able to contribute something towards the 70 Year anniversary".