

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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INQUIRY INTO VOLUNTEERING IN QUEENSLAND

SUBMISSION TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT, SMALL BUSINESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE COMMITTEE

via: qldparlcomm.snapforms.com.au/form/inquiry-into-volunteering-in-queensland

Submissions due 28 Feb 2025

Dear Committee members,

I am writing to provide a submission to the Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee regarding the Inquiry into Volunteering. As the Federal Member for Flynn, I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion on the role and sustainability of volunteering in our communities.

Growing up in the small country town of Taroom, I know firsthand that without community action, volunteering, and old-fashioned mateship, many of the services and events we take for granted simply wouldn't exist. In small rural towns, when something needs to be done, it's often the community that steps up to make it happen. Whether it's fighting bushfires, running local sports clubs, or fundraising to keep essential services operating, volunteers are the backbone of regional Australia.

I have been a dedicated Rural Fire Brigade volunteer for many years and have held various volunteer positions throughout my life, including serving as the fundraising coordinator for the Taroom Kindergarten. These experiences have given me a deep appreciation for the selflessness and commitment of our volunteers, as well as the growing challenges they face.

Volunteering is a cornerstone of our local communities. It has historically provided an invaluable service, from emergency response teams in natural disasters to everyday community building through local clubs and social groups. However, the challenges faced by volunteers and volunteer organisations in Queensland are significant. These challenges, particularly the declining participation in volunteering, present an urgent need for strategic intervention at all levels of government to support and strengthen our volunteer ecosystem.

The Decline in Volunteer Participation

A significant concern raised across Queensland is the steady decline in the uptake of volunteering, particularly in small to medium-sized organisations. This trend is increasingly evident as life becomes busier and families, where both parents are now required to work, face time constraints that limit their ability to contribute to community causes. What was once a generational tradition in volunteering is now at risk. Many families, especially those in rural and regional areas, are struggling to find the time to dedicate to volunteering, and without the participation of younger generations, there is a real concern that our communities may lose a vital service.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the ageing population in Queensland, especially in areas like Flynn, relies on volunteering as a way of life. Many of the volunteers who have dedicated years to organisations like Meals on Wheels, Rural Fire Brigades and Show Societies are now retiring, and there are fewer younger people to take their place. Without intervention and the provision of incentives, Queensland faces the very real possibility of a void in volunteer-based services.

Barriers to Volunteering and Ways to Improve Participation

The barriers to volunteering are multifaceted. Beyond time constraints, excessive regulatory requirements often serve as deterrents for prospective volunteers, as do the pressures and expectations associated with taking on volunteer roles. The fear of being overloaded with responsibilities, often wearing multiple hats for various groups, can discourage individuals from volunteering altogether.

One key observation from organisations in the region, including those involved in volunteer-based rescue services, is that they are overburdened by administrative and regulatory barriers, making it difficult to attract and retain volunteers. Moreover, many volunteers feel they have no option but to take on several roles, which can quickly lead to burnout.

To address this, it is essential to create environments that are supportive of volunteers, where they are not pressured by unrealistic expectations. We also need to improve the management of volunteer roles to ensure that individuals can make a meaningful contribution without feeling overwhelmed.

Celebrating and Supporting Innovative Volunteer Models

One shining example of how volunteer organisations can thrive is *Not for Profit House* in Gladstone. Their innovative approach to volunteer management, by acting as a central hub that is the one stop shop for community organisations and volunteers – a safe haven to get structured, evidence based, data driven support to recruit and sustain volunteers. They have taken an innovative approach to sector development through a report card monitoring the health of the sector and identifying and measuring investment. They also match local organisations with skilled volunteers through various bespoke projects targeting specific cohorts of people, which has been highly successful. This model deserves recognition and further support from the state government. It should be seen as a potential pilot for expansion to other communities across Queensland. Without increased support, organisations like NFP House may struggle to continue their vital work, leaving a gap that could have serious consequences for local communities.

State and federal governments should also explore the possibility of partnering with local industries to create structured volunteering programs. This would allow businesses to meet their community obligations by offering employees the opportunity to dedicate a certain number of hours per year to volunteer efforts. These programs would benefit both the business sector and local volunteer organisations, especially where employees can apply their specific skill sets to assist volunteer-run initiatives. Furthermore, large businesses and industries should be encouraged to adopt models similar to those already in place by state and federal governments, where employee leave options are provided for emergency service work. By incorporating such provisions, businesses would not only demonstrate their commitment to supporting their communities but also promote a culture of volunteerism within their workforce. This collaborative approach would strengthen both the corporate sector and our local communities, ensuring a sustainable and resilient volunteer ecosystem across the state.

Engaging Young People in Volunteering

Another promising avenue for increasing volunteer participation is encouraging school students to get involved in volunteer work. Not only does this provide a valuable opportunity to build vital work skills, but it also fosters a sense of community responsibility. Private schools have taken significant steps in this direction, actively incorporating volunteering into their curriculum. For instance, in some schools, as part of their Christian Studies program, senior students are required to complete mandatory volunteering hours and submit assignment work investigating the benefits of volunteering. This initiative helps students connect with their community and understand the impact of their contribution.

However, current red tape surrounding student work experience and volunteer programs during school hours makes it nearly impossible for many young people to gain this practical experience. It is essential for the Queensland government to streamline these processes, making it easier for students to engage in volunteer work as part of their education. Encouraging this kind of involvement not only supports volunteer organisations but also helps develop a future generation of dedicated, responsible citizens.

Limitations on grant opportunities

A significant limitation many small to medium non-profit organisations face is the lack of funding available for operational costs. While these organisations

provide invaluable services to their communities, they often struggle to keep up with rising costs for essential services such as insurance, phone and internet charges, electricity, and fuel.

For businesses, these increases are typically passed on to customers by raising the price of their products or services. Unfortunately, for many community groups, this isn't an option without compromising the very reason they exist in the first place. Moving Moments in Biloela is a great example of this challenge. Since 2021, they have provided vital services to combat social isolation and loneliness among vulnerable older adults, offering accessible social, educational, and inter-generational activities. This program, beloved by the community, has been sustained solely through one-off grants, but these funding opportunities have now expired, leaving the program at risk of extinction. While fundraising can help, it can only go so far, and for many grant opportunities, operational costs are not eligible for funding. What good is a new building, tractor, or fridge if the organisation cannot continue to afford the day-to-day expenses required to keep it running? There are only so many Bunnings sausage sizzles a group can organise! It would be incredibly beneficial to see more grants opened up to cover operational expenses and be more inclusive and accessible for organisations like Moving Moments, helping them continue their essential work without the constant worry of securing short-term funding.

Leveraging Work for the Dole Programs

Work for the dole programs, once an effective avenue for getting job seekers involved in the community, have seen a significant decline. It is critical that these programs be revitalised to encourage individuals receiving government support, such as those on JobSeeker, to volunteer. Although it may be challenging to manage individuals on work-for-dole schemes, funding community groups to coordinate group-based volunteer efforts could help resolve this issue.

The Role of Volunteering in Our Communities

Volunteers are the backbone of our society. They provide essential services, connect communities, and offer opportunities for individuals to contribute to causes that are larger than themselves. A community that does not foster volunteering cannot truly be considered a community; it is through the act of giving that we build strong, resilient, and compassionate societies.

Conclusion

The importance of volunteering cannot be overstated. It is fundamental to the functioning of our communities, and without adequate support, we risk the collapse of essential volunteer-driven services. Addressing the barriers to volunteering, providing appropriate incentives, and fostering innovation in volunteer management will ensure that Queensland communities continue to thrive. The role of volunteers in Queensland is indispensable, and the Queensland government must work towards creating a sustainable, accessible, and rewarding volunteering ecosystem for all.

I urge the Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland to consider these challenges and opportunities as part of its recommendations for increasing participation, improving opportunities, and strengthening our volunteer workforce.

In closing, I would like to congratulate the LNP State Government on its proactive approach to recognising the volunteer crisis and taking crucial and immediate steps forward by holding this inquiry and appointing a Minister for Volunteering. These actions demonstrate a commitment to addressing the challenges faced by the volunteering sector in Queensland. I am hopeful that this inquiry will prove fruitful in determining the next steps forward for regional volunteering and how it can best be supported moving forward.

Yours sincerely,



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Federal Member for Flynn

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