

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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INTRODUCTION

I have volunteered since the age of 16 in a wide variety of organisations – often serving on the executive.

I have been a volunteer member of a rural fire brigade for 19 years. I am a veteran of the 2011 floods and the black summer fires. I was the first female officer in my brigade in its 50 year history. I am an experienced firefighter, having attended rural fires, fatal road crashes and fatal medical emergencies. I had one of the highest turnout records in my brigade. I have also attained many Queensland Fire Department (QFD) qualifications.

In my local rural fire brigade I served as a volunteer Treasurer for 10 years with a key achievement of raising \$110,000 to build a rural fire station. I also project-managed the whole build.

I was 3rd Officer for 2 years and then 2nd Officer. I was a qualified Volunteer Community Educator (VCE) for 10 years and a Public Information Officer (PIO).

Over the past 19 years I have been fortunate to have worked alongside some very experienced firefighters and decent people from around the region. However, my overall experience has been negative with lasting impacts. I realise that not all brigades have the same negative impacts on their members.

I would not recommend volunteering for the Queensland Fire Department as I feel that they have failed on multiple occasions to keep me safe – both physically and mentally. I acknowledge that not everyone that volunteers for QFD has had such negative experiences as myself, but this is my personal experience.

I have endured years of bullying and chauvinism. I have found the whole experience to be very adversarial. This has had a great impact on my mental health, and I am still receiving counselling.

Some of the things that have been said to me:

- “Women are ok, but they shouldn’t be on a fireground” – brigade officer
- “Being an officer isn’t about qualifications; it’s a popularity contest” – brigade member
- “You can get a drunk dog from the pub on a Saturday night to be an officer” – QFD Manager
- “Your letter (of complaint) is with a solicitor in (town name) right now” – QFD Manager
- “The higher you go the bigger the target on you” – QFD Manager

I have also:

- been physically threatened and verbally abused by several male members.
- been defamed in writing – a letter was circulated amongst my peers, with the intent to reach a wider audience at a fire debriefing in the region.
- had brigade members incited to hate me.
- been publicly humiliated in several brigade meetings.
- had undermining and insidious backstabbing against me for years where my character traits have been turned into negatives – strength of character becomes ‘strong personality’ as a derogatory term. Mentoring new members on a fireground becomes ‘micro-managing’.
- had passive aggressive behaviour towards me from a new member with no respect to my many years of service and extensive experience.
- been failed on a course and the correct follow-up that an RTO (registered training organisation) should follow wasn’t provided to me.

As an emerging female leader within QFD the only support and mentoring I have received was from my First Officer. I have never received any support or mentoring from the Group Officer, QFD staff or QFD Managers. I often felt their attitude towards me was very negative.

EMOTIONAL SAFETY AND MENTAL WELLBEING

The final straw

In November 2023 a brigade meeting was held to remove a member from a position. During this meeting I felt that a QFD Manager failed to ensure my safety and that of the First Officer, by allowing certain members to publicly humiliate and defame us. Even though “point of order” was called twice by myself, the Manager as Chairman denied my request which allowed the behaviour to continue. At no time do I recall the Manager intervening or trying to prevent the bullying. In fact, he tried to read out a letter that I had already advised him (by email) contained defamation of me.

Shortly after this meeting due to the prolonged and ongoing conflict within the brigade, and our perception of the Manager’s failure to intervene, the following senior members resigned their positions:

- First Officer/Training Officer – 8 years in the role
- Second Officer (myself)
- Third Officer
- Chairman
- Treasurer

This mass resignation of the whole brigade leadership team didn’t trigger any communication to us from 3 levels of QFD Management, there was no investigation, no welfare checks on us, and no offer of conflict resolution.

Since then, the 4th Officer has also resigned, in total almost half the brigade left. The people who left the brigade were the experienced members, they were the hardest working members who regularly attended fires and other activities. Five joined another brigade and 6 left the service altogether.

The Elephant in the Room

November 2023 wasn't the first time that we felt Members had been encouraged to publicly bully us. In 2021 a special meeting had been called by a QFD Manager to address brigade conflict. The repeated use of the phrase "the elephant in the room" felt like a direct invitation for people to have a 'pile on' towards the brigade management. Several members took the opportunity to make odd accusations that left everyone else bemused. It was a confronting and unsafe situation to be in.

Brigade Politics

Brigade politics has a direct negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of members. Brigade Politics also has had negative outcomes for corporate governance. For example, the new Chairman is moving motions rather than remaining impartial – particularly the motion to remove the ex First Officer from the brigade. I feel that Member safety on the fireground has been compromised as the brigade now has Officers only newly qualified with minimum skills, and no understanding of Queensland fire laws and procedures.

Having committee positions and officer positions that require a majority vote leads to politics. I feel that politics should have no place in choosing the best candidate for a role.

Metrics for this brigade showed that:

30% of members attended fires (generally the same people all the time)

30% of members attended truck and station checks (generally those that attended fires)

77% of members attended meetings – I feel that this shows a higher degree of interest in the politics rather than firefighting

Members who hadn't attended in years, or had only attended 1 fire in their whole time with the brigade would turn up to meetings to form voting blocks.

Some members were opinionated in their criticism of myself, the First Officer and other executive, but we had hardly worked with them as they had rarely turned up for a fires or other activities. The members that we worked with on a regular basis, who knew us well, had no such issues.

Members that had performance counselling for various reasons appeared to bear grudges. Some of the reasons included: assault on a fireground, attempting to take a vehicle to another region without the First Officer's permission and turning out to a major fire in another area when the First Officer was still on route to the Station (those members caused \$1000 worth of damage to the truck later that night).

Are Committees Required Moving Forward?

With all the conflict around committees, is there a need for them? Permanent and Auxiliary stations function without committees.

Surely the focus should be on the core business of firefighting and community education, not the small-town politics of committees. Some community members in our area no longer trust this brigade and are considering setting up their own unofficial group.

Is there still a need for a treasurer with the new financial arrangements with QFD? Brigade funds are now held by QFD, and all reconciliations, GST and auditing is now conducted by the Department.

Trust

Firefighting can be dangerous. As volunteers we are exposed to unpleasant working conditions and carcinogens. Yet the biggest danger to my health and wellbeing has come from other brigade members and QFD Management.

I have witnessed and experienced the following very negative behaviours from brigade members and QFD management.

- A Manager admitting to a personal and financial relationship with a brigade member – after we had been complaining to that Manager about that member for over 6 months, and the disclosure was only made after I had witnessed a business transaction on QFD property. This led to my lack of trust in that Manager.
- The back dating of a Member's start date – by 30 years – this allowed them to receive a medal that there is no proof of them having earned. If you had no volunteer number and no uniform and no one saw you volunteering, then how did you earn the medal regardless of your name on minutes from last century before the formation of QFES.
- When the brigade executive were under attack from a new member, there were multiple attempts to receive professional guidance and support from QFD in relation to correct HR procedures and conflict resolution. QFD Kedron staff never engaged but pushed it back onto local managers who we felt were too involved in the situation and didn't have appropriate legal knowledge. I felt that the brigade executive never received proper support.

COMMITMENT TO VOLUNTEERING

It is estimated that there are 30,000 rural fire fighters in Queensland. From my experience, only about one third of volunteers are active in brigades. This means that the State only has around 10,000 active firefighting volunteers. Of those some will be inexperienced and only some will have the ability to lead. I believe the Rural Fire Service volunteer capacity within the State is not as good as the estimates. I know there are volunteers that don't show up and commit to their roles. When a member of the community dials 000 they are expecting help in their time of need.

Volunteer Commitment

To improve attendance a Volunteering Contract could be introduced with the following requirements:

75% attendance to all fires/other call out

75% attendance at training and station checks

My personal experience has been that the workers are not the people instigating conflict within a brigade. Removing the political vehicle of committees and elections, having independently appointed Officers and ensuring volunteers have to turn up to the job on a regular basis will give QFD a whole new culture and a more dependable volunteer workforce.

Metrics

I have kept extensive records and measures of performance within this brigade.

I have felt that managers side with individuals or small groups without checking any facts.

Our track record:

- The brigade only missed one turnout in over 8 years (we were overseas at the time).
- The brigade regularly turned out 6 to 10 members – filling all the brigade vehicles
- The brigade regularly turned out of the station for a job in 11 to 14 minutes
- We rarely went to second alarm
- During 2019 the brigade crewed the regional water tanker 24/7 for 8 days straight, in rotating hot changeover shifts (they were amazing!)
- We regularly had up to 78% attendance at meetings, up to 78% attendance at training and up to 50% attendance at truck and station checks
- We recruited 33 members in 8 years
- There was a high number of women recruited - 9 of the 33 new members (or 27%).
- The First Officer/Training Officer put most of those members successfully through their FMS (firefighter minimum skills).
- Notice of meeting was always given 2 weeks prior
- Agenda items were always called for 2 weeks prior – giving plenty of opportunity for input

- A calendar was also distributed with all dates for the year so members could plan ahead
- There was a high level of engagement with members, and their ideas were actively canvassed
- All gear and equipment were constantly checked
- The station and station grounds were immaculately maintained
- There was a high level of engagement with the community and the brigade was respected

By any standards this was a high functioning brigade. That was why we were so disappointed when we felt that QFD wasn't remaining neutral in what became a factional conflict.

Now, we regularly observe the brigade struggling to turn out, usually it is the same 2 people, sometimes taking up to 40 minutes to respond and quite often going to 3rd alarm.

Lack of Respect

- My husband was a brigade member for 19 years, during which time he had been Chairman for 2 years, Secretary for 2 years and First Officer for 8 years - that's a total of 12 years in a brigade leadership role, and a huge amount of experience. He was also a highly respected Auxiliary Firefighter with 8 years' experience. In his professional life he supervised a work force of 35 (with 11 different nationalities) for a Global Corporation and held many formal qualifications including a post graduate certificate.
- I was a brigade member for 19 years and a VCE and Treasurer for 10 years. I have extensive administration and corporate governance experience with community groups, Government and global companies. As a director of my own company, I work with clients around the world. I hold an Applied Science Degree and a Masters of Business Administration (MBA)
- We never felt respected for our hard work, knowledge and experience. There was a constant feeling that we were being undermined to QFD Management. We felt that QFD Management never developed a good, trustworthy working relationship with us. We feel that there were undisclosed conflicts of interest that caused bias towards us.
- Often, we felt we had more knowledge and experience of certain issues or procedures than QFD staff and Managers, we had certainly seen a rolling parade of QFD staff from the Commissioner down.
- As a professional woman in the organisation, I felt a distinct lack of respect and felt that I was often patronised and treated like the little woman in the background rather than as a leader. I fought back for years, but they wore me down in the end.

The Complaint Process

In my experience, the QFD complaint process does not adequately protect the complainant. I have no confidence in QFD to handle complaints, it is a standing joke amongst brigades that the carpet at Kedron has lots of lumps where everything has been brushed under the carpet.

It is possible for Managers to conduct a Freedom of Information on complaints against them and then try and work out who made the complaint.

I personally was threatened with litigation for complaining about a manager's behaviour towards me.

QFD has been aware of the bullying of my husband and myself, and they have never reached out.

PHYSICAL SAFETY

Risk Matrix

Being a rural firefighter has a possible outcome of severe injury or death, yet you can be a brigade officer with no qualifications under the current system.

Manager Training and Experience

I have witnessed inexperienced Managers running big fires, making poor decisions that could have gone badly. I have found the standard of local first officers and general firefighters to also vary greatly, and your safety on the day depends on who is in charge.

Lessen the risk

QFD should ensure more proactive management training, including overseas deployments (particularly for Managers) to broaden knowledge and experience.

First Officers have never had any advanced training, human resource training or conflict resolution training.

I believe the organisation hasn't invested properly in the development of their staff and volunteers.

Appointment of Officers

This should be conducted by an independent external HR company.

Currently brigade and QFD politics plays too large a role in the appointment of officers. The roles are often seen as a status symbol and there is negative political lobbying for roles. Appointing people on merit ensures greater diversity as it takes out bias.

I had to stand aside for a male member to become a 2nd Officer, I then did that role for 2 years without the rank, because that person never showed up.

As the second highest qualified person in the brigade, I witnessed members voting for men with little or no qualifications rather than support me.

I have witnessed current brigade Officers with only the basic minimum skills training struggling to operate the radios or other equipment effectively. They also didn't know Queensland law or QFD protocols at the time of appointment. Some have never sat in the left-hand seat of the fire truck and taken command and control of a fire appliance and crew, let alone run a big fire with multiple agencies. This puts themselves and the community at risk.

These Officers who are barely qualified are now training new recruits and taking inexperienced members on the fireground. When new people join, there is an expectation that the Officers are very experienced. There is a legal duty of care to look after inexperienced members at an incident.

Lessen the risk

Use an independent external HR recruitment agency for officer appointments. I have witnessed a QFD Manager with a self-declared personal and business relationship with a brigade member forming opinions not based on facts or metrics.

The comment from the QFD Manager was, "I would give (brigade member's name) their crew leader tomorrow because of their experience". Fact Check: That member had only attended 14 jobs in 10 years and had completed no formal QFD training, they were given a qualification in a 'tick and flick'. How can you be experienced when you have no on-the-job experience and no proper training?

Criteria to become an officer should include qualifications, types of experience, number of jobs attended, and the actual activities undertaken at those jobs. Practical competencies should also be demonstrated. Length of service does not always equal actual experience as there are many long-term members that never show up.

Develop QPD Criteria to be an Officer:

Being an Officer is an important role with many obligations.

- Make the minimum qualification Crew Leader
Reason: If you are going to be in charge of a \$250,000 piece of Government equipment and the lives of up to 5 other people, you should know what you are doing
- Make the minimum time in the brigade 5 years
Reason: this gives you time to be mentored by your peers, learn the QFD procedures and rules and build team relationships with your peers
- Set minimum experience – attendance at 75% of all brigade turnouts over the past 5 years
Reason: every fire is different and you need exposure to as many different scenarios as possible.
- Complete Divisional Commander Training
Reason: so you know how to run large fires
- Officer Training – has never been provided by QFD, but it is clearly needed

Health Issues

Currently health issues are only by self-notification on the application form. While there is an obligation to self-notify new emerging issues, there is no enforcement.

Health problems could pose a liability on the fireground to the volunteer and their fellow crew members. Having to cease fire fighting to attend to a medical episode could have wider consequences for the community being impacted by fire.

There are known members with the following health issues on the fireground:

- Heart issues including pacemakers
- Previous strokes
- Diabetes
- Back, hip and knee issues
- PTSD – particularly caused by previous fires

Lessen the risk

Members should have an independent initial medical and a yearly declaration from an independent doctor that the person is still fit to continue their fire duties.

Over the age of 70, annual medicals to ensure the safety and well-being of the member and to limit negative impacts on their fellow crew members.

Fitness

Rural firefighting is physically demanding, usually conducted in extreme heat and on rough terrain.

There are currently some very unfit volunteers with medical issues that are a liability on a fireground because they can't carry out the required tasks. Fireground tasks can involve carrying a 20 litre backpack of water up and down hills, putting in rake hoe lines, and dragging heavy hoses.

Lessen the risk

An annual medical with fitness challenge test.

Age

Permanent and auxiliary fire fighters are terminated at 65 years old, 5 years short of the official retirement age of 70, yet rural firefighters can be well into their 80s.

Paid fire fighters work as part of a well-trained professional team, generally in a contained location such as a road crash or structural fire. Elderly rural firefighters with undisclosed health issues are working in hot smokey conditions in often very intense and dynamically challenging situations in rugged, remote locations. With older volunteers there is also an issue with hearing impairment and cognitive decline, which puts the onus on the Officer in charge to be more vigilant for that person.

Lessen the risk

Consider an annual medical with fitness challenge test.

Consider an age limit for active duty.

Operational Driving

Rural fires are generally fought in remote offroad locations in rugged terrain. Currently anyone with a truck license can legally drive an 8 tonne vehicle with 6 people and a shifting load of water when they have no experience with off road 4x4 driving.

There have been recent instances of new brigade members with no qualifications and little to no PPE driving appliances on a fire ground.

Volunteer truck drivers often only drive a truck when on a call out, once or twice a year, so their skills are rusty. It is concerning to see these drivers, that lack experience, driving in busy public settings as part of community engagement.

Lessen the risk

All drivers of all QFD vehicles should have a minimum qualification of FMS (fire fighter minimum skills). There is no such thing as just a truck driver, if you are on an active fireground you should have full PPE and be well versed in radio communications, pumps, drafting, fire behaviour and burn over procedures. Firegrounds are dynamic environments, and all volunteers should be prepared for negative outcomes – as happened just last year with the burn over in another region.

QFD should provide all drivers with operational 4-wheel drive courses before they commence driving on the fireground.

Drivers should be responsible for maintaining their skills on a regular basis.

PPE

I have observed a poor culture of wearing personal protective equipment by some QFD members and some brigades.

FACT CHECK

I have kept an extensive photo journal, brigade minutes, brigade turnout records, diary notes and other brigade metrics that verify points made in this submission.

THE FUTURE

QFD has been making changes and hopefully they will continue the opportunity to move the Department forward into a modern workplace. This document attempts to offer insights into the impact that current QFD policies have on health and safety and to offer some constructive ideas as a conversation towards a better future.

After enduring such prolonged negative behaviour, I am no longer interested in volunteering. I feel like I have been in some sort of abusive relationship that I have finally escaped.

My husband has joined the SES. The culture is very different, it is more professional, and more safety orientated. There is a high commitment to training and competency before being allowed to attend tasking.

IN CONCLUSION

QFD has lost 11 dedicated, experienced volunteers due to brigade conflict and the inability to provide a safe, enjoyable volunteer work environment.

We worked hard to provide the brigade members, QFD and the community with a Rural Fire Station.

We worked hard to recruit and train new members. We took diversity and inclusion seriously.

We worked hard to make sure that the members had the best equipment and training and that they enjoyed their volunteer experience.

We worked hard to make sure we brought members home safely after every job.

We were also volunteers and we felt that no one was checking in on us to see if we were adequately trained and enjoying our own experience.

While there were some volunteering highlights, overall, my time with QFD was a disappointing, harmful and negative experience.

DISCLAIMER

This document is intended to explain my own volunteering experience with QFD.

This document does not seek to explain why behaviours occurred, only how those behaviours made me feel. I am not privy to the motivation of other people.

This document does not seek to make accusations but only to report instances as they were perceived by me at the time and on later reflection.