

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submitted by:	<div></div>
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I am a current, active volunteer of the Queensland State Emergency Service. In two and a half years I have amassed nearly 500 hours of service in activations, community engagement and training.

I joined the SES as I was in awe of the types of activities and activations that I had seen publicised on various media channels for volunteers to immerse themselves in. I was excited to become part of an organisation that exists to help communities during times of need.

As with most organisations however, it has become apparent that those that do the hard work are not appreciated or valued by the higher-ranking members of staff.

My enthusiasm for SES has slowly diminished over the last year due to the ongoing issues in the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] with the removal of [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] [REDACTED], and the compounding effects that are being felt by volunteers throughout the [REDACTED]. The removal of these staff members, and the appointment of two Area Controllers to Acting Regional Director in the first 6 months of their leave, has resulted in a general lack of care for the volunteers in the [REDACTED], a non-existent training schedule for most of 2024, and an overflow of the toxic culture from regional paid staff to the volunteers.

We as volunteers have been bearing the brunt of the ego and incompetence issues in Regional office for a long time. Issues include stores requisitions taking months to be actioned by Area Controllers, leaving volunteers without the necessary equipment for operational capability; training courses being cancelled at late notice due to a lack of competent trainers; and last-minute notice of Regional courses, giving volunteers little notice for expressing interest. Training seems to only exist for new members, with little consideration for existing members wanting to upskill. Very little focus is put on retention of skilled, qualified members in lieu of attracting new volunteers. Volunteers are leaving in droves because of these issues – just look at the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] SES groups and how they have been treated by Regional office. Additionally, people are promoted into roles they are not qualified for and receive no support from Regional office, leaving them to further degrade the opinions of volunteers of the organisation as a whole.

I do not have an opinion on whether the two people are fit to return to the Regional office; however this has been dragging on for nearly a year. There must be a resolution to allow the reconstruction of an efficient training program that allows volunteers to do what they do best – help their communities. Until such a time, the volunteers are just expected to keep putting up with the behaviour of paid staff, while there seems to be no consequences for poor performance, lack of accountability and dishonesty for those that have brass on their shoulders. Some paid staff seem to have personal vendettas against volunteers and appear to withhold necessary equipment purely out of spite and laziness.

Training within the [REDACTED] has stalled significantly over the last year, leading to several members of the region officially leaving the organisation, or simply deciding not to turn up anymore as they're no longer getting any benefit. Some courses get cancelled at short notice due to a lack of competent trainers, while some are run regardless of how incompetent the trainer is. This can result in people gaining qualifications in specialised activities such as flood boat operations and chainsaw when they are not competent, yet trainers will sign people off without adequately ensuring the trainee is adept at the task at hand. At times, it feels like some trainers simply just tick people off as qualified so they don't have to deal with them again and our Regional office can claim another person qualified in that skill. Someone will get hurt or killed if this carries

on and incompetent people are given qualifications in areas where they lack the necessary, and often life-saving, skills.

Volunteers in general don't feel appreciated, and when the training is subpar or non-existent, it reinforces that feeling for volunteers. We are not getting adequate training, yet we are expected to put our hand up for jobs and community events. We get deployed for activations that turn out to be non-existent and have taken time off work for. This then results in our employers being reluctant to let us go in the future.

Regional office does not communicate well with the volunteers. As a community member, I follow my chain of command through my group leader when I have needed to raise items or issues. However, this rule does not seem to exist for some of the staff in Regional office, who will email volunteers directly about opportunities rather than going through that volunteer's group leader as they should do. This creates a disharmony between group level and the Regional office.

When I have been interacting with some of the paid staff on several occasions, derogatory comments have been made about other staff that are not only completely inappropriate, but highlight the toxic culture within the office that the staff are so comfortable being involved in. This toxicity filters down to the volunteers and is a form of bullying.

Volunteers are the backbone of the Queensland State Emergency Service, as is the case for all volunteering organisations in Queensland. Yet we are often treated as an afterthought by lazy, incompetent, high ranking paid staff who seem to care only about their pay check and not ensuring operational capabilities of the volunteers who serve the community.

The general state of volunteering in Queensland, and the disengagement of volunteers, needs to be addressed promptly to ensure this valuable workforce is bolstered by enthusiastic, passionate staff who are keenly aware of how valuable their volunteers are. The people at the top level of these organisations need to be held accountable for the behaviour of the staff under them, and realise that without us volunteers, they wouldn't have a job.