

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission into Volunteering in Queensland

On behalf of the Sunshine Coast Agricultural Show Society, we would like to give some feedback experienced by our organisation relating to Volunteers.

1. The current state of Volunteering in Qld and the value it contributes, including benefits to volunteers, organisations, communities and the State.

Volunteering in Queensland has been in a downward spiral for some time. There are a myriad of reasons but key reasons we have noted are:-

- a general reluctance to take on responsibility,
- People are not vested in their community like they were 20 years ago or more.
- At a loss in the world of technology
- Organisations often are run by a small working group who are overworked and sadly, simply don't have the time to train others to take over the role
- An aging demographic of volunteers
- people want to be paid for work,

The community wants events to continue, but many individuals are unwilling to contribute time to help in the background. Based on our experience, volunteers often come from families where parents and grandparents have volunteered, creating a generational pattern of service.

As a Show Society, we have traditionally relied on service clubs to volunteer their time for a small donation, which they reinvest into the community. Unfortunately, these clubs are slowly declining due to an aging membership and a lack of new members. This has placed us in the position of having to outsource jobs that were once handled by these groups, and it is increasingly challenging to find assistance.

Today's volunteers often expect to be compensated for their work, and they are usually not willing to accept less than \$100 per day. From the perspective of a not-for-profit organization, we simply do not have the budget to pay volunteers. Many clubs and organizations can easily raise \$1,500 in one day by running a Bunnings BBQ, making them less interested in assisting with a three-day event show for the same money.

Covid also changes people's thinking dramatically. They seem to have decided to not interact with others or join organisations when they can stay at home at the end of the day of working from home instead.

The many benefits of volunteering include:

- The pleasure gained out of giving your time freely and helping others
- Satisfaction in doing a good day's work or simply a good deed for nothing.
- Building relationships outside of your usual circle of acquaintances
- Building professional relationships that can be profitable
- Working with others and the public
- Exposure to new skills, with the possibility of developing additional skills
- A job reference for good work
- Mental and cognitive stimulation
- As a Show Society, an invitation to return in following years.

- Playing a role in bringing an annual event to life for the bigger community.
- A reason and a purpose to get out of bed everyday.

2. *The views of volunteers, prospective volunteers and the volunteering sector on the current barriers to volunteering, including excessive legislative and regulatory burdens and other restrictions adversely limiting active volunteers*;

Volunteers are becoming increasingly rare, making it difficult to engage individuals with the necessary skill sets. While I am not aware of any excessive legislation preventing people from volunteering, there are certain restrictions regarding the use of equipment that can be limiting.

It would be beneficial to make it easier for those unable to pay off SPER debts to volunteer. There are significant challenges within the SPER Work Program. As a partner with the Queensland State Government in this program, our collaboration has proven to be difficult. Individuals are eager to work off their debts, but they must navigate several bureaucratic processes before they can begin.

Those approved to work off their debts come to us seeking employment; however, they must first provide identification, sign paperwork, submit three months' worth of bank statements for our review, and present a current letter from Centrelink. This situation places our staff in an uncomfortable position, as it involves scrutinizing individuals' personal details and spending habits on their bank statements, which feels invasive. If individuals have already been approved to work off their debts, they should only need to provide their ID and SPER number and be allowed to start working immediately. Additionally, those participating in this program are limited to a maximum of 30 hours of work per month, complicating the process further. As a result, it can take months to pay off a debt that could be settled much more quickly.

3. *The current experiences, motivations and challenges for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations and their recommendations for addressing challenges and improving the volunteering experience*;

Challenges in the volunteering world are numerous and varied. Volunteers who come into our workspace may be very willing but can often lack the necessary skills for a technology-driven environment, limiting the work they can perform. Many struggle to adapt to a structured work setting, lack transportation, or misunderstand the concept of volunteering, expecting to be paid for their time.

Some volunteers may not feel adequately challenged, leading them to leave in search of job opportunities, while others don't feel appreciated, which is an area where we must improve. Although we strive to provide the necessary training for our volunteers, we often face challenges due to a lack of experienced trainers and limited time to onboard new recruits.

We genuinely care for our volunteers, but we recognise that we sometimes fall short due to our small committee size and time constraints. Simple gestures of appreciation—such as expressing thanks, providing drinks, and offering lunch—can significantly enhance the volunteering experience. Additionally, volunteers value having their ideas heard and considered as part of a team.

One potential solution to encourage volunteering is to allow individuals receiving financial support to qualify for additional assistance if they commit to volunteering a certain number of hours each week, with verification from the recipient organization. This initiative could motivate many to volunteer, helping them build new connections, acquire new skills, and give back to the community.

An introduction to Volunteering in the school environment would also be highly beneficial. This could teach students that for them to play netball, rugby, tennis etc. someone has to score, set the course etc. It takes someone behind the scenes for them to be able to do what they do.

4. *The unique challenges experienced by people from diverse backgrounds, genders, age groups, abilities and locations, and opportunities to improve volunteering participation, accessibility and experience for these groups;*

We have reached out to immigrant associations on the Sunshine Coast, and this has proven beneficial. While many of these individuals possess valuable skills, language barriers and misinterpretations can present challenges. However, we have managed to create a successful collaboration.

We maintain a positive, long-lasting relationship with a youth disability service, and their students assist us with show setup. Additionally, we work with a local community center that provides us with some adult clients, although their numbers are limited. These people may be on drug rehabilitation, stress leave, or homeless but they help with our setup and teardown processes. To these people, they are happy to be part of our team, and appreciate a day's work and feeling part of our team. Importantly, all of these individuals from both organisations are supported and supervised, which can divert others from focusing on essential tasks.

5. *The extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support at all levels for the volunteering sector in Queensland and sustainable opportunities for improvement;*

As mentioned earlier, if the penalties program was simplified, and those people identified as being eligible to work off their debt were not obliged to bring paperwork to the place offering work, it would be easier for all.

If people have a penalty to pay off, allow them to work it off rather than having to pay might encourage more people to volunteer, even if it for a short time initially, they may continue to volunteer if the organisation treats them well.

6. *Opportunities for the Queensland Government to leverage all portfolios to support growth in volunteering across Queensland, including through hosting the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games;*

We feel that volunteering numbers will not increase unless people are offered incentives. Some modern pre-active workplaces have a Volunteer Day where staff can volunteer but still be paid as a day's work. We have a large number of people home unable to work but if they were given additional credit towards their pension, or something of value, they may be motivated to volunteer.

The upcoming generation also has different expectations; they tend to expect something in return for their participation, which reflects a broader shift in attitudes and has a dollar value attached to their time which charity organisations are unable to pay.

7. *Opportunities to increase emergency response volunteering in Queensland, including how to optimise the engagement, support and integration of volunteers assisting with natural disasters and community recovery;*

Often, these roles are highly skilled positions that are hindered by strict regulations. There is also a significant divide between paid and unpaid personnel, which presents a challenge. In emergency services, volunteers are commonly expected to provide their own uniforms and cover out-of-pocket expenses. Additionally, there is often a lack of understanding or consideration from paid staff regarding the needs of volunteers. It is important to remember that volunteers give their time freely, and more reflection is needed to improve the relationship between paid and unpaid personnel. Furthermore, the high cost of living is forcing people to remain in the workforce longer, leaving them with less time to volunteer.

8. *First Nations peoples volunteering, including in remote and discrete communities, and the role of First Nations volunteering in Closing the Gap; and*

The Show Society warmly invites First Nations people and traditional landholders to participate in our event as volunteers, bringing their culture and skills to our organization. However, the association has encountered challenging situations, including requests for payment for services and complexities related to relationships among Traditional Owners and issues of seniority within their own groups.

9. *Any other relevant matters, including academic and other diverse sources, and any relevant reports and reviews at the national level and across other states and territories.*

After attending several meetings with Volunteer Qld, I realized that the organization tends to focus more on the perspective of volunteers rather than that of the struggling organizations themselves. Having policies and procedures in place is necessary but not of much use if you can't get and retain volunteers. And, it's great to acknowledge volunteers with awards, certificates, coffee vouchers, and similar tokens, and quite necessary, the reality is that many organizations are already facing challenges and often lack the manpower, knowledge or equipment to create certificates, and financial resources to provide these kinds of recognition.

Summary of our experience:- The holistic essence of volunteering, which encompasses a deep sense of community connection and selfless giving, appears to be diminishing in today's society. More and more individuals find themselves struggling to understand the true definition of volunteering, often reducing it to mere obligation or a checkbox to tick off on a resume. This shift not only undermines the spirit of altruism that has historically driven volunteerism but also risks eroding the meaningful relationships and social bonds that arise from collective efforts aimed at improving communities.

Compounding this issue are the larger state and federal organizations that have traditionally served as champions for the volunteering movement. These institutions, which once played vital roles in fostering a culture of volunteerism through engaging campaigns and supportive resources, seem to have lost their focus. Many of them lack innovative strategies to inspire people from diverse backgrounds to offer their time, skills, and resources for the benefit of others. Without effective outreach and encouragement, the sense of community and shared responsibility that comes from volunteering is at risk of being sidelined, leaving many community needs unmet and potential volunteers feeling disillusioned. As a result, the societal impact of volunteerism is diminishing, which could have lasting consequences for communities that rely on the generosity and support of volunteers, meaningful relationships and social bonds that arise from collective efforts aimed at improving communities.

Kind regards,

[Redacted Signature]

On behalf of the Sunshine Coast Agricultural Show Society

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