

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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# Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering: Leveraging the skills, strengths and expertise of veterans and their families

February 2025



**RSL**  
Queensland

## Introduction

The Return and Services League of Queensland (RSL Queensland) is the largest ex-service organisation in Queensland, enabling veterans and their families to live with dignity and respect through care, commemoration and camaraderie. This vital work could not happen without the thousands of passionate volunteers across the 10 RSL Districts and 230 Sub Branches located throughout metropolitan, regional and rural Queensland.

RSL Queensland is a member-led organisation supported by the organisation's central and regional representatives providing structure, strategy and operational support at a State, District and Sub Branch level. Volunteers provide the necessary functional day-to-day support to Sub Branches including focusing on direct community engagement, local events and hands-on support.

Veterans and their families comprise the majority of RSL Queensland's volunteers. In 2023, volunteers contributed more than 558,725 volunteer hours to the organisation and this submission is informed by that volunteer experience.



## 1. The value of veteran volunteers to the Queensland economy

The 2021 Census found that people who had served in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) were more likely to have volunteered in the previous 12 months (21%) than those who had never served in the ADF (19%)<sup>1</sup>.

Queensland is home to 30 per cent (163,112) of current and former serving ADF members<sup>2</sup>. Two of Australia's three Army combat brigades are located in the state, including Australia's largest Army base Lavarack Barracks in Townsville and the Army Aviation Centre in Oakey. RAAF Base Amberley is the largest military airbase in the country, HMAS Cairns is a key naval site and the ADF's premier training facility is located at Shoalwater Bay in Central Queensland.

Veterans bring unique skills, capabilities and experience because of their time in the ADF that benefit our Queensland communities. For example, we often see these veteran strengths benefitting responses to natural disasters and large-scale events.

Volunteers are integral to the delivery of RSL Queensland's services and supports. In 2023, across the statewide network of Districts and Sub Branches our volunteer workforce helped to:

- enable veterans and their families to access a range of programs and services including wellbeing programs, employment, financial support and DVA compensation advice and advocacy
- deliver whole-of-community activities to commemorate ANZAC Day, Remembrance Day and other commemorative events
- provide social connection and camaraderie to veterans and their families throughout metropolitan, regional and rural Queensland
- provide support to local communities during crisis events and in times of natural disasters.

While RSL Queensland cannot currently provide a financial figure that accurately represents the total dollar value of the contribution made by our volunteers we know that:

- RSL Queensland volunteers contributed more than 558,725 volunteer hours in 2023
- if each of those volunteer hours was remunerated at the current national minimum wage (\$24.10 per hour<sup>3</sup>) the cost for 2023 would be almost \$13.5 million.

Further, while we also cannot, at present, accurately measure the social impact of our volunteers we understand that it far exceeds the financial equivalent of their volunteer hours.

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<sup>1</sup> [Australian Defence Force service | Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) accessed 25 February 2025

<sup>2</sup> [Service with the Australian Defence Force: Census, 2021 | Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) accessed 25 February 2025

<sup>3</sup> [Minimum wages - Fair Work Ombudsman](#) accessed 25 February 2025

## 2. The experiences, motivations and challenges of veteran volunteers

Feedback from volunteers across RSL Queensland identifies that their motivation to volunteer is often centred around their desire to help others, and to connect, learn and socialise with veterans and families who share similar lived experience of ADF service and transition to civilian life.

*The **benefits** reported by RSL Queensland volunteers include:*

- a sense of fulfilment (providing the support that I might need one day)
- a sense of satisfaction (providing support to veterans who have served our country)
- a reduction in feelings of isolation and loneliness
- a sense of belonging for self and family through socialising and making connections
- a sense of purpose (giving back to the community)
- a reason to keep physically and mentally active

*The **challenges** reported by RSL Queensland volunteers are likely the same as those experienced by other volunteer cohorts, and include:*

- a lack of time to volunteer (particularly with the younger veteran community who may be working full time and/or have family commitments)
- a lack of awareness of the need for volunteers and what is involved
- a lack of understanding how their skills can be transferred to volunteer roles
- a perception that volunteering with RSL Queensland is for older veterans
- periods of ill health

*The **organisational challenges** that RSL Queensland faces in sustaining a volunteer workforce include:*

- meeting volunteers' expectations and timeframes
- attracting volunteers to meet activity demands
- competition for quality volunteers, particularly in rural areas
- volunteer fatigue
- an ageing volunteer workforce
- providing consistent onboarding and recruitment channels across the network of Sub Branches
- the cost to the organisation to appropriately support a volunteer workforce
- the cost to the volunteers themselves



### 3. Government action to strengthen the volunteer workforce

RSL Queensland recognises it has a responsibility to take action to reduce barriers, change perceptions and shape a new conversation around volunteering with the organisation. This work is progressing through the development of a revised RSL Queensland Volunteering Framework.

The Committee is asked to consider the following areas in which RSL Queensland suggests the Queensland Government can take action to remove other barriers to volunteering to make it easier for Queensland veterans to volunteer.

#### **(i) Leveraging the skills, strengths and expertise of veteran volunteers**

RSL Queensland continues to call for a Queensland Veterans' Strategy as a whole-of-government approach to bring together the many initiatives that are already in place across the state to support veterans and their families. The Strategy can create a robust framework to leverage the skills, strengths and expertise of the veteran community for the benefit of all Queenslanders.

RSL Queensland has identified that a number of structural and operational elements are already in place to inform and enable the development and delivery of a Queensland Veterans' Strategy. These include Premier Crisafulli's leadership as Minister for Veterans, the Queensland Office for Veterans, the Queensland Veterans' Council, the Queensland Veterans' Portal, an active and state-wide ex-service organisation (ESO) community, and most importantly a vibrant and skilled veteran and veteran volunteer population.

In recognising the diverse and deployable skills of veteran volunteers to respond to and plan for large scale community events, RSL Queensland has undertaken preliminary work to consider how the proposed Queensland Veterans' Strategy can include an intentional approach to include veterans and veteran volunteers in key elements of planning and delivering the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

**Call to Action 1:** The Committee to recommend the Queensland Government develops and appropriately funds a Queensland Veterans' Strategy, including a focus on volunteering, in consultation with veterans and their families, and the organisations that support them.

#### **(ii) Reduce volunteering costs**

The Queensland Volunteering Strategy 2024-2032 identifies that the average cost of expenses per hour volunteered is \$15.57, with organisations meeting approximately one quarter of the costs and volunteers meeting the other three quarters<sup>4</sup>.

Feedback from RSL Queensland volunteers includes the impact of cost-of-living pressures on an individual's ability to contribute their time. Recognising that many of the contributing factors are not

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<sup>4</sup> [Queensland Volunteering Strategy 2024-2032](#) accessed 25 February 2025



the responsibility of the Queensland Government this submission identifies two areas that can be addressed at a state level:

#### **Costs to volunteers**

- The permanent 50 cent fares across the Translink network are valued by veteran volunteers and primarily benefit those who live and volunteer in the major metropolitan areas of the state. Just under half of Queensland's veteran population live in regional and rural areas and many do not have access to public transport networks that service their local needs; private transport is their only option to enable them to travel to volunteering activities. The sustained high cost of fuel prevents many veterans from volunteering and impacts on other activities.

#### **Cost to organisations**

- Some Local Governments and Councils across the state charge not-for-profit organisations that facilitate volunteer led whole-of-community events, such as ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day commemorations, for traffic planning, road closures and other measures associated with public events. These increasing costs are unsustainable for many community based not-for-profits and volunteer-led organisations.

**Call to Action 2:** The Committee to consider what mechanisms are available to the Queensland Government to reduce costs for volunteers. The Committee to recommend that the Queensland Government works with Local Governments and Councils to remove the charges associated with volunteer led whole-of-community commemorative events, including ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day.

#### **(iii) Leverage and lift the profile of volunteering**

While RSL Queensland supports initiatives to formally recognise volunteers through awards, we suggest the Committee can usefully consider how the Queensland Government can annually report on the economic contribution of volunteers to help Queenslanders more easily understand the value of volunteering to the state.

The Queensland Volunteering Strategy identifies the value of volunteering to the Queensland economy at \$117.8 billion and a return of \$4.70 for every \$1 invested in volunteering<sup>5</sup>. Further, there may be scope to extend future understanding of the value of volunteers in specific roles, for example the value of veteran volunteers and others who enable communities to recover from crisis events.

In addition to economic and financial reporting, RSL Queensland suggest that storytelling is a powerful means to raise the profile of volunteering. RSL Queensland is aware that storytelling and sharing personal narratives is an effective approach in communicating with culturally diverse communities and hard-to-reach populations, and uses this approach to share the experiences and achievements of veteran volunteers across online platforms and in-person settings. Personal narratives help others understand what volunteering with the organisation looks like, how it works,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid



how it helps others and how a volunteer role can benefit the volunteer themselves. Examples of RSL Volunteer Stories are included at Appendix 1 (p.9).

**Call to Action 3:** The Committee to recommend that the Queensland Government: Provide an annual public report about the economic contribution of volunteers as a dollar amount; and work with Volunteering Queensland and other organisations to expand the opportunities and benefits of volunteering in rural and regional Queensland and to promote the stories of volunteers across the state to show Queenslanders what volunteering could look like for them.

#### **(iv) Invest in the health of volunteers**

In addition to the feedback provided to RSL Queensland from veteran volunteers about the benefits of volunteering (p.4), the Queensland Volunteering Strategy identifies that increased wellbeing attributable to volunteering is +4.4 percentage points.

RSL Queensland suggests that while volunteering increases wellbeing, people need to be well-enough to volunteer. Delivery of the Queensland Government's commitment to improve access to healthcare for all Queenslanders is a vital enabler to strengthening volunteering in Queensland.

Noting that veterans are more likely to volunteer than those who have never served in the ADF<sup>6</sup>, RSL Queensland advocates that the health of the veteran population is important to the future of volunteering in the State. We are aware that veterans and their families can experience additional barriers to access primary and specialist healthcare in Queensland which do not appear to be experienced by those who have never served. While a survey of RSL Queensland members across the state identified that some of the barriers are the responsibility of the Federal Government, a number of other barriers can be removed by the Queensland Government – primarily by raising veteran literacy across Queensland Health and the State's healthcare workforce.

Additionally, the Queensland Government can help to raise health literacy among Queensland's veteran population. The Veterans' Health and Wellbeing Grant program currently provides funding to Gallipoli Medical Research to conduct research to identify gaps in health literacy and address them through targeted educational tools designed specifically for veterans, including the development of content for a Health Literacy Education Model delivered through RSL Queensland's RSL Be:Well online learning platform<sup>7</sup>.

**Call to Action 4:** The Committee to acknowledge in the inquiry report that the Queensland Government meeting its commitment to improve healthcare for all Queenslanders is a critical enabler to volunteering. The Committee to recommend that the Queensland Government funds specific action to improve access to healthcare for veterans and their families, to improve veteran literacy across Queensland's healthcare system and to further invest in action and research to increase the health literacy of veterans in recognition of the particular contribution veterans make to volunteering.

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<sup>6</sup> [Australian Defence Force service | Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) accessed 25 February 2025

<sup>7</sup> [RSL Queensland | Research](#) accessed 11 February 2025



#### **4. Concluding remarks**

Veterans bring a diverse range of skills and strengths to our communities and workplaces which are not necessarily developed in civilian settings. Their lived experience of service and commitment to service endures as they transition from the ADF into those civilian settings, which positions veterans as a particularly qualified cohort within Queensland's volunteer workforce.

RSL Queensland advocates that investing in the veteran community is a sound investment for the future of volunteering in Queensland and that it makes good sense in planning for the Brisbane 2032 Olympics and Paralympics.

RSL Queensland welcomes the Committee's consideration of the information provided in this submission and is ready to speak further about opportunities to enable the veteran volunteer workforce to help grow the contribution of volunteers across the state.

## Appendix 1: RSL Queensland veteran volunteer stories

### GOLD COAST VETERAN RECOGNISED FOR HIS DEDICATION THIS NATIONAL VOLUNTEER WEEK

22 May 2024

<https://www.rslqld.org/news/latest-news/gold-coast-veteran-recognised-during-national-volunteer-week>

After serving in the Army for 21 years from 1980 to 2001 in Corps of Signals (RA Sigs), Darren Sapwell continues to give back to veterans and his community through his volunteer work at Mudgeeraba-Robina RSL Sub Branch.

Darren became a wellbeing and compensation advocate in 2018, and then took on the role of Sub Branch Secretary and [Gold Coast District](#) Vice President of Welfare in 2023. Darren's work focuses on providing information, assistance or professional options to help veterans and their families have the best outcomes after service.



"I come into the Sub Branch daily and my work can range from helping a veteran understand important documentation or Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) claims and benefits, to providing temporary accommodation to a veteran experiencing homelessness," Darren says.

He also makes hospital visits, meets with veterans for a chat, witnesses documents as a qualified Justice of the Peace, and coordinates assistance for veterans seeking help with everyday tasks such as moving, assembling furniture, mailing documents or scanning resumes.

"It's great to see positive results for veterans and to see them in a better place than they were before," Darren says.

"I do it for the veterans and feel satisfied to assist any way I can. The reward of being able to help people is enough for me to keep doing it."

After discharging from the Army, Darren dealt with several injuries that affected work and daily life. A fellow veteran suggested he visit an advocate – an experience which inspired his own journey.

"When I discharged from service, I didn't know a lot about compensation and benefits. I knew I was eligible for some DVA claims for my back and knee injuries, but at the time I didn't think I needed it," Darren says.

"When I realised I did, an advocate really helped me through the process, which made me think I could do this for others too."

He went through DVA's Advocacy Training and Development Program, which enabled him to excel personally and improved what his Sub Branch could offer to veterans.

"When I transferred to the Sub Branch last year they didn't have many volunteers in the welfare and compensation space. I started mentoring other individuals to become advocates, not just



in [Mudgeeraba-Robina](#) but other Sub Branches around the Gold Coast too,” Darren says.

“Some of the individuals I’m mentoring needed support just a few years ago and now they want to become advocates themselves. That has been great to see.”

Darren recently implemented monthly morning teas for veterans and war widows to gather and socialise. So far, the response has been great, but Darren doesn’t want to stop there.

“We are hoping to raise enough funds to introduce bus trips for veterans. It will be an opportunity for them to get together and enjoy a fun activity out in the community,” Darren says.

“It’s been great helping out in this space and I want to thank the Gold Coast District and RSL Queensland for their support and assistance with the programs we offer.”

## **RAVENSHOE RESIDENT ENCOURAGES GIVING BACK THROUGH VOLUNTEERING**

23 May 2024

<https://www.rslqld.org/news/latest-news/ravenshoe-resident-encourages-giving-back-through-volunteering>

Working full-time doesn’t stop Jodie Bocking from dedicating time to her community. The Ravenshoe local has been volunteering for Ravenshoe RSL Sub Branch for the past 10 years.

Sub Branch members appreciate her generosity and time, and the organisation describes her as bright and outgoing, saying her convivial personality is admired by all.

Beginning as the last President of the Ravenshoe Citizens’ Auxiliary, then transitioning to a non-League Director on the Sub Branch Board, Jodie says her multiple volunteer responsibilities over the years have been gratifying.



“It feels effortless and I enjoy it, seeing how much individuals appreciate and benefit from the support is just very rewarding,” Jodie says.

“I really encourage individuals to volunteer for the RSL, especially younger people, because they will help support the next generation of veterans. Not only is it enjoyable, but you are giving back to people who have given so much to us.”

## **FROM GREAT IDEAS TO COFFEE CHATS WITH VETERANS**

Jodie contributes to discussions around purchases and other important decisions at monthly Sub Branch meetings.

“I have put forward different ideas – such as implementing a new catering fridge, lighting and renovations to the kitchen – which have all been voted in and implemented by the Sub Branch,” Jodie explains.

“I also expressed thoughts around increasing safety and risk assessment, especially as members continue to age. Small things like handrails go a long way.”





Jodie stays busy with weekly coffee chats with veterans and helps the Sub Branch with catering for community events and wakes for members and non-members.

Her work doesn't stop there. Throughout the year, Jodie supports commemorative ceremonies by selling merchandise and raffle tickets, which helps the Sub Branch host its services.

On the day of a commemoration, Jodie assists with catering, hands out poppies and reads a poem during the service if needed.



"I began volunteering for the Sub Branch because I was looking for ways to help out in the community and I believe the organisation does great work for our local veterans," Jodie says.

"I also have a personal connection to the organisation. My Grandfather served in World War II and another one of my relatives served in the Vietnam War."

#### **JODIE'S VOLUNTEER PROJECT: NEVER FORGET WWII SITES**

In addition to her normal duties, Jodie has been working on an ongoing project with the Sub Branch for the past year called Never Forget WWII Sites.

"Myself and Kelvin Groves, a veteran and Sub Branch member, initiated the idea last year. We wanted to create a map to highlight all the WWII military activity in the area," Jodie explains.

"There are several WWII military sites in and around Ravenshoe and we want to showcase them for the community and tourists to learn more about war history in the town."

After discovering that the project would be too large to manage on their own, the pair approached a company to start the process of creating a mobile app which will include a detailed map and the history of each site. From there, QR codes will be installed at each site so visitors can conveniently connect to the app and learn from their phones.

"It's been in the works for over a year, but I can't wait to see the project come together – it's very exciting. We have created a written proposal with the goal of receiving some government funding to help support the project," Jodie says.

Jodie is also grateful for support from RSL Far Northern District and the community. Ravenshoe Council, members of parliament and Queensland National Parks have also submitted letters to the government in an effort to progress the project along.

At 52 years old, Jodie looks forward to volunteering with the Sub Branch for years to come. Her efforts have been celebrated in 2024, with Ravenshoe RSL Sub Branch awarding her an Australia Day Medallion for resolute and outstanding service.