

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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<b>Submitted by:</b>	Daniel Cordner
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I write my submission still wearing orange, having given several hundred hours volunteering for the Queensland State Emergency Service (SES) in the North Queensland floods. The context of my submission is around my experiences with the organisation I volunteer for, the SES, and most of my submission relates to terms of reference item 7.

SES volunteers in Queensland contribute immensely to the communities within which they operate. They assist communities to prepare for disasters, and, as I've been witness to these last 4 weeks, deal with the challenges and nightmares many face during and after a disaster. We share the workload that other paid emergency services provide, working closely with QPS, QFD Fire, QRFS, QAS and QFD swiftwater to assist people desperately in need. There's a very strong expectation from communities that SES are there when needed, that they deliver, and are quick to lash out and respond negatively when those expectations aren't met. In this, the demands and expectation isn't commensurate with the reward and recognition of SES members.

Real SES volunteer numbers continue to fall, retention is low, and for those left volunteering, the burden and responsibility is greater every year. Our member base is ever-ageing. I'll detail the main reasons I've come across why people don't volunteer for the SES (or other organisations), or why people cease volunteering below.

1. One of the major factors is the increase in the cost of living, and general busyness of people's lifestyles. People just cannot afford to give up time from their paid job to respond to SES calls or attend SES training. I have just taken 4 weeks away from my business and family to give to the community. I really have not been able to afford this, but if I did not attend, who would? My own home is flood/storm affected, yet I have not had time to address or fix this. I made a commitment to SES and will see it through, but at what cost? It isn't right that advantage is taken of volunteers community spirit and desire to help, often to the detriment of their own situation, finances, family and relationships.
2. The perception amongst the general community as to what a SES volunteer is, and needs to do, is different to the reality. Many seem to think as a SES volunteer you must attend training every week, must respond to every job, and everyone must lug sandbags or climb on a roof in the pouring rain. The truth is there are roles suitable for everyone, of all abilities and ages – be it communications and tasking operators, incident management personnel, then the more stereotype roles of chainsaw operator, flood boat operator and so on. Members can choose what they want to do in the SES, and don't need to go to training every single week. SES has an image problem, and the organisation has not done any real work to correct this. Queensland SES itself still has no one social media presence, which in this day and age is inexcusable.

3. Bureaucracy and red tape make for a less-than-desirable experience for many volunteers. On-boarding is lengthy, and often difficult – getting multiple e-systems setup, various system logins and passwords, profiles, bluecard, USI, etc. For those not computer savvy, it is a nightmare. Often the burden of the onboarding and core e-learning training is left to volunteer executive. Then there is not recognising formal qualifications such as making a nationally certified 15+ year career arborist attend a basic chainsaw course. Or demanding volunteers' login and use electronic devices and emails to do training when they have no computer skills and don't have/use a computer at home. Executive are often asked what can be done to make their volunteering experience and lives easier, yet the suggestions are not acted upon. We don't make it easy for our members, and do not cater well for the varied abilities and diverse backgrounds.
4. As an executive in the SES, I have legal responsibilities and obligations I must fulfill. Considering the legal responsibilities and needs from an executive position, and the time required to perform my role effectively being 20+ hours per week, it's unfair to ask that from someone not receiving any remuneration whatsoever.
5. For several roles in the SES, it takes many years to gain those qualifications, and a lot of time to maintain them. There are a few very highly skilled functions SES perform – such as floodboat rescue. The risk these members take, again, isn't commensurate with the recognition and reward.

Some of my recommendations or suggestions to address the above-mentioned challenges and issues are detailed below.

1. With regards to the terms of reference, item 5 – there is no real current government support in the eyes and more-so the pockets of SES volunteers. The government need to provide a means to ensure volunteers taking time away from work are remunerated appropriately when responding to disasters and actual calls for help. Many federal and state employees are afforded this with paid leave, where-as small and medium sized businesses, and self-employed members suffer through financial loss. I do feel other incentives should be provided to members to encourage participation – whether this be council rates reduction, vehicle registration rebate or other financial incentive. I feel training, community engagement, and competency maintenance should remain on the volunteers time, or receive a minimal retainer. These incentives should be based on certain minimum attendance or response hours. Obviously, no SES volunteer is in this for the money, but these incentives would ease the strain that many face day-to-day.
2. Work needs to be done to encourage more to join SES, demonstrate that there is a role for everyone that wants to join us. I feel there needs to be a presence of

Queensland SES, in much the same way there is a NSW SES and Vic SES social media presence.

3. Onboarding needs to be simplified and streamlined from the perspective of the new volunteer. This process needs to include the foundation or core modules of training. All backgrounds and abilities need to be catered for – be it the young, computer savvy teenager, or older retiree who's never used a computer or a QR code. Furthermore, SES need to recognise the skills members bring to the organisation, instead of pushing all through onerous training because it's "easier" than trying to RPL someone. And finally, ask for, and listen to the feedback from your volunteer executive. They're a wealth of information and experiences, and largely untapped.
4. The community and councils/shires demand and expect a ready to respond SES capability. To make this happen needs a lot of coordination and management by executives, and these roles absolutely should be paid for the work they do accordingly.
5. Highly specialised and skilled operators should be rewarded or remunerated for the time put into gaining and maintaining that qualification.

I thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission. I do wish I had more time to details my experiences and the challenges I see with volunteering in Queensland, but, like many volunteers, I am time poor any only submitting this in the nick of time.