

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission

The Queensland State Emergency Service Volunteer Association (QLD SESVA) Inc. provides the following submission to the Committee appointed for the Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland. The QLD SESVA is the recognised peak body within the state of Queensland (QLD) and provides advocacy for all SES Volunteers who provide their time, professional skills and services so to ensure community safety is maintained for Queensland. We focus on the delivery of the agreed SES functions, services, roles and responsibilities as determined by legislation and agreements with all QLD Local Governments who also co-jointly fund and manage SES Units in the state.

A number of reviews into the Queensland SES and Disaster Management have been undertaken over many years by Queensland Government in an attempt to identify in-part some of the core inhibitors of the QLD SES any why there is a consistent threat around volunteer recruiting and retention, funding, management, training, legislation, equipment and disempowerment of volunteers at the expense of State funded SES positions.

Queensland SES Volunteers numbers have consistently fallen since 1992 when at this time over 19,000 QLD SES volunteers were recorded as being active on the SES Nominal Role in this State. In May 2022 the QLD SESVA wrote to the then Acting Queensland Fire and Rescue Commissioner Mr Stephen SMITH, now appointed as the Commissioner for the Queensland Fire Department and officially requested the QLD SES Volunteer Nominal Roll numbers and were shocked when the official number provided by A/Commissioner Smith identified that at 2359 hours on the 15th of May 2022 at 4,968 active SES Volunteers remained in Queensland.

The Queensland SES State HQ was made aware of these falling SES numbers by the QLD SESVA and of the request of information to A/Commissioner Steve SMITH and a meeting with the then SES Assistant Commissioner highlighted a lack of strategic planning, a lack of direction from the then Queensland Fire and Emergency Service to enact the QFES Volunteerism Strategy to support both the Recruitment and Retention of Volunteer members of both the SES and Rural Fire Service Volunteers.

The QLD SES VA has undertaken significant research both intra-state and interstate to better understand what factors are contributing to falling SES recruitment and retention reasons and where the core issues are not just limited to Queensland. Upon discussion with fellow National SES Volunteer Associations it appears that QLD is by far more impacted by the challenges then other States and Territories appear.

Where the QLD SES VA has many examples of current -QLD SES volunteers and ex-SES QLD volunteers who have raised their examples of recruiting, retention, training,

volunteer treatment and disempowerment of SES volunteers by the previous QFES structure and some current QSES. The QLDSESVAs provided feedback to both QFES and QSES on how the volunteering experiences of community members joining or actively serving could be improved but it became obvious that paid staff refused to acknowledge the issues and find real or meaningful solutions to each issue raised. We now provide some brief examples of actual incidents and the recommendations and feedback by the QLD SESVA for the SES State Headquarters.

Recruitment example No. 1

The QLDSES VA has raised for almost 10 years concerns that there is no statewide SES recruitment policy or actual state strategies within Queensland and that without any performance indicators for recruiting provided back to the State Government there is no way of reporting the health status of actual SES membership numbers and QLDSESVAs compared to the requirement actual numbers needed to undertake the many different roles and responsibilities, thus a significant gap exists in Queensland and ultimately lost volunteering opportunities.

Recruitment example No 2.

The onboarding process for a prospective community member to recruit for SES is cumbersome at best without specific structure and directions once the initial contact to join the SES is made. Often local recruitment is ad hoc with some SES small groups taking anyone they can try to sign up due to a lack of volunteers without being able to adequately step out the onerous requirement for membership paperwork,

- Working with Children Blue Card application,
- Application to obtain a Unique Student Identifier,
- Medical report/form requirement if medical practitioner is needed to sign off,
- Personal requirement of the sign-off of Office 365,
- The need to have a computer and current software to perform your training at home while waiting to undertake the next stage of the recruitment training is organised.

Some SES members have reported to the QLDSESVAs that it can take them upwards of 6 months from when they start the application process to do the basic training and qualify themselves to 'fill a sandbag' or pick up a branch on a driveway and cut it with a small handsaw.

Recruitment example No.3

A previous member of the QLD SES left to relocate interstate several years ago and later joined the Victorian Ambulance Service as a casual uniformed officer. They have a current and active Working with Children Card in the state of Victoria. During a situation in Victoria in 2018 and following an attempted armed robbery by a juvenile the ex-member effected a citizen's arrest of the juvenile offender under a section 458 of the Victorian Criminal Code. There was a disagreement with responding Police as to whether there was a lawful cause to detain the alleged offender by the ex QLD SES member and he was then charged and appeared in court where the matter was heard and the presiding magistrate was confident there was no case to answer and there was a lawful reason to detain the offender at the time. The ex-member was released without further prosecution or conviction however because of the initial charge this will always be on his record.

The ex QLD SES member then returns to Queensland in 2023 to start a new position in a regional city in private enterprise and reapplies to QLD SES for membership. Due to the QLD Blue Card system flagging the arrest in Victoria but not considering the lawful defence and no conviction and no case to answer, his application to rejoin QLD was blocked by the Government process in QLD and his application has been almost 15 months in attempts to have the Blue Card process allow his application to process without any success.

During 2024 the same ex QLD SES member was awarded a Bronze Medal for Bravery in Brisbane for his attempts to save an army veteran after he was engulfed during a fire. This SES application to rejoin Queensland is still ongoing.

While the QLD SESVA have many other examples and reasons for why recruiting is fractured in the QLD SES process a wholistic and strategic approach is needed to help alleviate the problems in recruiting good people and retaining them.

Retention is of a significant challenge with the average length of service to that of a SES Volunteers now well under 4 years from the start of their service to when they actually resign. Many SES Volunteers in QLD leave with a disillusioned view on what they wanted or could offer to that of what they could actually do when in the QLD SES. Some SES Volunteers leave because of outrageous treatment with some stating that they are always 'second' to paid staff and easy targets to suspend and easier to terminate when compared to a paid public servant in the department.

Recruitment Example 1.

The QLD SESVA have had many approaches by SES Volunteers who also take on the added responsibility in the role of an SES Executive.

They may be managing the SES Group or Unit in many areas from a overall training, community engagement, SES response, activations to community activities, managing equipment, vehicles rescue boats and equipment and the very intensive paperwork.

Many SES executives have been asking for specific management training to support the need to manage what effectively has been described as managing 100 casual staff and all aspects of SES. Many of these SES volunteer executives have been burning out and many are just leaving the SES. Those still in the roles are requesting specific management training.

There is currently no training on offer to support a volunteer to support the roles and responsibilities to that of a SES volunteer executive

Recruitment Example 2.

A situation was brought to the attention of the QLDSESVA several years ago that involved a missing state government supplied BBQ that was provided to a SES Group. The first the SES members knew new that there was a problem with the missing BBQ was when they attended the SES Group and found them selves locked out. Calls were made and ultimately a SES Staff Officer attended and advised the entire SES Group of approximately 13 individual SES members that they were all 'suspended of theft' due to the alleged missing BBQ, a missing partial 4ltr tin of white paint internal paint and several items such as plastic buckets. The SES members attempted to assist with the matters but were all shut down. Some SES members were only weeks into their recruiting and had no idea why they would be suspended by the government agency.

Some weeks later the QLDSESVA asked the Deputy Commissioner of QFES to consider the matter due to the situation and agreed that the volunteers should have been offered some due diligence before a group suspension occurred. The SES Group remained shut for a number of years. The majority of SES Volunteers either resigned while some were victimised by the small community they lived in, some attempted suicide, some had to leave the area, QLD Police were asked to search SES members homes and property.

Finally after 2 years QLD SES offered an opportunity to open the SES Building for 2 hours one afternoon with a SES Regional Director to offer the 12 SES members the chance if any information could be offered or property was to be returned this 2 hour opportunity was the time. One senior SES member attended and offered to show the SES Director where the BBQ was kept, as they had now been locked out of the SES Building for 2 years. The SES Director agreed and he and the SES member walked into the rear of the shed and in a dusty corned with a vine growing around the leg was the allegedly stolen

BBQ. It was never missing in the first place and was assumed to be a different BBQ, but the treatment of SES volunteers at that time was horrific however other cases have arisen that some impacted volunteers have suggest is that of targeting SES Volunteers by overzealous paid SES staff.

With SES Volunteer numbers now at critical levels within Queensland, a significant set of options, a State Volunteerism Strategy and a 'Volunteers First' are required to ensure Volunteer Emergency Services in Queensland, specifically QLD SES Volunteers are over supported to build a strong and capable Qld Government Service capable of once again expending to provide Queenslander. With the average cost of a person Volunteering in QLD well over \$1000 per year and some would argue that SES Volunteers on some areas are paying for food and water when on long deployments of local activations we believe the cost of SES Volunteering is much higher then the state average.

QLD SES is problematic when it comes to funding. Some is from the State Government budget, some is from Local Government rates, Community and SES grants make up a portion and fundraising by SES members is also an active component for local projects. The State has in recent years opened a state donation account in an attempt to allow public donations to support critical SES projects that some volunteers within SES argue should to fully funded by the SES budget.

Finally, QSESVA is loathe to lay blame, however, there are clearly aspects of the relationship between QSES and volunteer members that is deeply flawed and essentially we collectively inhabit a broken system. Much work and consultation has occurred with QSES since the separation from QFD, yet, our observations are that many of the higher level paid staff of QSES are entirely disconnected from the needs of volunteers and the communities of Queensland. This must change for the benefit of Queensland's future.

We would appreciate the opportunity to address the Parliamentary Committee hearings.