

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland – Response from OzHarvest QLD 6th March 2025

The terms of reference call upon the committee to inquire into and report on:

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

Last year, our volunteers contributed 26,634 hours in QLD. If we had to pay this as wages, it would have cost us \$1,122,090 (according to Queensland Volunteering's calculator). We see that the benefit of having volunteers in our organisation is mutual. We need their support to facilitate our programs, and we know our volunteers feel happy that they have made a positive impact at the end of every shift. 90% of our workforce are volunteers, and in our national survey last year, 83% of respondents were extremely happy with their volunteer experience.

However, an international trend is that there are increased pressures on volunteers that is reducing participation rates. Commonly cited issues include the need to seek paid employment due to the rising cost of living, the need to provide childcare so family members can work, and that volunteering itself can incur costs (eg travel, buying consumables that facilitate volunteering, etc).

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;

In our recent survey of volunteering, the two biggest things preventing volunteering were: Other commitments on volunteers' time and volunteer roles that did not match skills and interests.

Below are barriers we commonly see discussed:

- Travel cost. As the cost of petrol increases, it becomes increasingly difficult for volunteers to get to their volunteering. Improved public transport networks in Brisbane, Townsville and Gold Coast would be beneficial. Similarly, a simple way for volunteers to claim back petrol costs spent travelling to volunteer on tax returns would help.

- Police checks. While we can offer a discounted check to volunteers, the ~\$30 cost can still pose a barrier.

- Blue Cards & training for leads on working with young people. The cost for our staff to get Blue Cards, and finding free, fit for purpose training for leads when working with youth, to run youth volunteering opportunities severely reduces our capacity to make volunteering available for young people. While Blue Cards are free for volunteers, what about the staff and charity organisations that have to pay the full cost to engage young people? We have chosen to restrict our youth volunteer program as a result.

- Encouraging businesses to allow their staff to volunteer as part of corporate giving initiatives would be great! Many people mid-career don't have time to volunteer but have great skills. If more businesses supported their workers to give back to the community, that would have flow-on positive impacts. This is provided that volunteers are given flexibility to work in with the needs of charity-involving organisations (for example, we can't facilitate group volunteering, and have training requirements prior to volunteer commencement necessitating a month's lead time). Skilled volunteering support of 2 hours per week for 20 weeks (for example) would be more "bang for buck" than one-off volunteering days as it means we can properly utilise the expertise of those individuals on meaningful projects.

- Currently, we are seeing more and more volunteers speak of competing claims to their money and time which prevents their ability to volunteer. Childcare and paid employment are most commonly mentioned.

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

While it is improving, there is a sector-wide misconception related to volunteering that volunteering is free and just happens. In reality, an effective volunteer program requires organisational buy-in and investment. Recognising the work of volunteer coordinators/managers is key to this. Organisations must provide resources for staffing, training (for volunteer managers, other agency staff, and volunteers), technology, space, support, recognition, background checks, liability insurance, etc. Furthermore, the volunteering work must be meaningful, impactful and respected. Volunteering Australia has done a great job in promoting this in their strategy. Funding and resources in this area would be helpful.

Championing volunteers needs to start at the top level of management with strategy and budget allocations. Although diverting money from “front-line” delivery to volunteer management, recognition and rewards could seem like a loss, volunteers return this investment to amplify our core work. Government advocacy for this with NFP managers would tie in with the foundation Volunteering Australia has laid out.

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;

As young people have been particularly impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, it is unsurprising that we don't see as many people between the ages of 18 and 30 volunteering. When choosing between paid employment and volunteering, they choose paid employment. The majority of our volunteers are between the ages of 50 and 70 and are retired.

Our volunteer pool is 71% female in QLD. We would love to see more men involved.

QLD is a very big state. It can be very hard for us to connect and include our more regional/far north volunteer crews as transport costs are high. Digital connection is what we fall back on, but that only goes so far, especially when our work is hands-on. Simple things like making sure uniforms are stocked, updated processes are relevant and explained, social time is facilitated is all harder given the distance. We can't afford to hire staff in all locations and there doesn't seem to be grants/funding available to facilitate travel costs for 'head office' staff to engage with volunteer crews that are operating remotely. Asking volunteers to travel to us is also challenging given that they are donating their time to us for free, so minimising disruption for them is also important.

Supporting volunteers with disabilities can be challenging as we are not experts in disability. It has been a learning process to work out how best to assess volunteer's abilities and needs, and there was not as many resources available to learn how to support volunteers with disability as there are resources on how to volunteer FOR people with disability. A big barrier to volunteers with disability is our risk/compliance obligations and ensuring the safety of volunteers with disability, noting we are not a disability support service ourselves, so our team is not trained & resourced accordingly,

and also that the nature of our work is in person & quite physical. If a volunteer with disabilities could get additional insurance & safety support from the government or their support services, that would be a great help, as we have internal hesitance to take on volunteers with disability because we are not experts in that field and are worried about our ability to keep all involved safe, and our insurance obligations, while still undertaking the core of our BAU work with charity resourcing.

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

At the moment we don't rely on Government support for maintaining our volunteers. Thankfully, we had a grant a few years to establish the role of volunteer coordinator, which made a big difference. Since then, our volunteer programs are funded from our national budget.

We would like to recognise the fabulous work Far North Queensland Volunteers does. They consistently supply us with quality volunteers and are a real resource for the region, especially as we have limited staff on the ground in FNQ.

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 would love to see all the surplus food produced from catering the Olympics be rescued! Our volunteers can assist in the collection of surplus food, and in advising how food can be provided in low waste ways.

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;

The more we can avoid doing this reactively the better. Volunteers require safety training, access to communications systems and also need to be checked for suitability. In the chaos of a disaster, the more that is already in place the better. This way, important steps are not skipped to get more hands doing the work. In disaster prone areas, recruitment and planning for disaster responses can be carried out as a matter of course by local councils if funding is available. Local residents at the disaster site will want to be involved and have the commitment and local knowledge required, so planning out consultation pathways will be helpful.

Our organisation is not set up for emergency relief, however, we are looking to build a program we can roll out for 6-12 months post-disaster to support rebuilding.

Government support for taking the community through the stages of recovery from the emergency to the subsequent rebuilding issues is helpful. If we had funding, we would put together a standard strategy that we could deliver as required. Currently, we do this work reactively which puts strain on our operations state-wide as resources are reallocated to the disaster site. Our Cyclone response for FNQ has become a lot more streamlined over the years but we would still like to reduce the amount we "rebuild the wheel" in disasters, which comes from working reactively on a small budget.

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

OzHarvest strongly supports the Uluru statement from the heart and encourages the state government to meaningfully engage in truth telling and healing.

Volunteering, especially when presented in a very formal and structured way, may not feel inclusive to many diverse communities. However, the community support and connections we see in First Nations communities is its own form of volunteering.

OzHarvest sees the value of First Nations volunteering to own and direct decisions being made about First Nations communities.

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.

Submitting this while waiting for Cyclone Alfred to hit newly impresses us with the impact climate change will have on our communities. People pull together in disasters and it is times like this that we see volunteering shine. But our communities and emergency volunteers deserve decisive action to address the climate crisis.