

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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| <b>Submitted by:</b>       | Polonia Polish Association of Qld Inc trading as The Polish Club Milton |
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## **Submission from “Polonia” Polish Association of Queensland Inc, trading as The Polish Club Milton into the Queensland Government Inquiry into Volunteering**

### **Brief summary of Polonia/The Polish Club Milton**

“Polonia” Polish Association of Queensland Inc (**Polonia**) is the premier cultural association for the Polish community in Queensland. Polonia is a non-profit incorporated association with over 1,300 members, of which approximately 600 are financial. Polonia operates The Polish Club Milton, which serves as a ‘cultural hub for all things Polish’ and encompasses a restaurant, bar, events hall, library, and museum and archive.

By serving as a cultural hub, we provide a central location for the Polish community of South East Queensland to gather and connect with culture, speak their language, and to observe Polish customs, traditions and national days of importance. We also provide a venue and various opportunities for the wider Australian community to be able to experience and learn about Polish culture, history and traditions, and thus promote cross-cultural understanding and respect. Our Management Committee conducts cross-cultural liaison and represents the Polish community in multicultural forums and events, as well as engaging with government stakeholders. We provide social support services for the Polish community and provide employment opportunities for refugees and newly arrived migrants. We provide additional services to the Polish community, including serving as a base for Consular passport services and a voting location for Polish and EU elections.

For more information, please see [www.polonia.org.au](http://www.polonia.org.au) and our Facebook and Instagram pages (@PolishClubMilton).

### **Volunteers at Polonia**

We rely heavily on volunteers to staff our activities – around 30 regular volunteers supplement a paid staff of 8 (approximately 4 FTEs). ‘Regular’ means those who volunteer at least once per month, although most volunteer at least once per week. We have one, and until recently two, individuals who volunteer in the operations on a full-time basis.

Most of our volunteers are aged over 60, and many are second generation migrants (ie children of original migrants who arrived in Australia after WWII). They have fully assimilated into the Australian way of life and often have Australian spouses, who they also involve in volunteering activities at the Club. Some of them have a family history of involvement in the Club. Some have been volunteering at the Club, on and off, since the 1970s.

Our Management Committee (comprised of 8 persons) are all volunteers; they are responsible for both running the Club and overseeing its operations, alongside a paid Administrator. It is the President, and until recently former Secretary, who volunteer full-time in running the Club.



Our volunteers are involved in the following activities: providing assistance in hospitality operations (maitre'd, bar service, waitressing, order taking, purchasing), assistance with kitchen operations (cook, kitchen hand, dishwasher, cleaning), maintenance and repairs, gardening, events staff (eg for our monthly Market Day and venue hire activities), cultural workshops, and administrative activities (eg membership processing, mail outs). We also have teams of volunteers who coordinate and run the Polonia Museum and Archives, the Library and Poetry Lovers Group, and our Polish Seniors Group. Our volunteers are very reliable, with rarely a missed shift.

We do not have a formal volunteer recruitment or management program. We make calls for volunteers in person to person outreach, member communications, and occasionally on social media. Our Administrator coordinates our volunteers, using mainly email, phone and Facebook messenger. We maintain voluntary workers insurance cover for our volunteer pool, which most recently cost \$1,686 (annual fee) - a sum we consider reasonable.

### **Issues encountered by Polonia in recruiting, engaging and retaining Volunteers**

While all volunteer-driven organisations face recruitment and retention challenges, ethnic and cultural groups encounter unique barriers related to cultural expectations, language and organisational characteristics.

- Unlike other non-profits/charities, which often attract a broad volunteer base, ethnic and cultural organisations like Polonia tend to rely heavily on individuals from specific backgrounds, thus drastically limiting our volunteer pool. Our volunteers are drawn entirely from our membership - we struggle to attract volunteers from the broader community who have no connection to Poland or Polish culture. This may be because people outside our specific ethno-cultural group may feel that they are not welcome to volunteer, even though we are certainly open to broader participation.

Complicating this is the fact that many Poles who arrived in Australia from the 1980s onwards are not involved in volunteering, as structured volunteering is not culturally familiar to them (difference in cultural norms) – there are other ways to ‘give back’ mostly associated with family and religious duties. Also, they regard some of the tasks that our volunteers undertake as ‘socially inferior’ or ‘not men’s work’ and struggle to understand how for example, a very experienced business executive or lawyer could undertake bar work, washing dishes, or cleaning on a voluntary basis. Newer migrants from Poland may face socioeconomic challenges, such as working multiple jobs and taking language classes, which leave them with limited time for volunteering. Furthermore, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (**CALD**) communities can spend more time on family care giving (particularly of older relatives) rather than having them in nursing homes or similar facilities, and so have less time available for volunteering.

The above factors all limit our ability to recruit from within the Polish migrant community to meet our volunteering needs. The majority of our volunteers are a mix of



Polish background with majority lived experience in Australia – eg second generation migrants, or those arrived in Australia as small children and have grown up here. They volunteer to enhance their connection to Polish culture, and often to honour their family and predecessors.

While ability to speak Polish is a desirable characteristic in our volunteers, it is by no means essential. In fact, most of our volunteers are more comfortable speaking in English and there are some who speak only English.

There is a perception that people from CALD backgrounds volunteer within their own community rather than in the wider community but our experience does not reflect this with many of our volunteers volunteering in a variety of organisations outside the Polish community including animal welfare, bush care, local parish, and disability support services.

- While larger non-profits/charities may have well-established volunteer training and engagement programs, we operate with far fewer resources and staff, making volunteer management and retention far more difficult. We do not have a robust, structured volunteer management program with standards, policies, procedures, inductions, reviews, access to resources, etc. Furthermore, funding and resource constraints mean we cannot offer our volunteers paid training and development opportunities, something that can be an attractive incentive for volunteers. It would be of significant help if government offered some volunteering-specific funding and skills development support to help us build our capabilities in this area.
- Like other non-profits and charities, we are burdened by heavy regulation and ‘red tape’ which is seeing an increasing raft of rules and regulations (and related compliance) impact on the volunteer space, for example in the area of certifications, licensing, workplace health and safety, and risk management. Additional regulation and compliance requirements mean roles are becoming more complex and sophisticated, requiring specialised knowledge and training – this means that many people who have the time and willingness to volunteer are unwilling to take them on, cognisant of the additional responsibilities and scared of potential repercussions/legal liability if something were to go wrong.

Most of our volunteers are older (60+) and see these additional steps and requirements as ‘all too hard’; some are sceptical of over-regulation by government, especially those who arrived in Australia as refugees from Communist Poland. Many are not well versed in technology and so undertaking these activities online (eg filling out forms and doing training courses or certifications like RSA, food safety, blue card, etc) poses a real barrier. However, we suffer an additional complicating factor in the form of language – it is very difficult for those of our volunteers who have limited English language skills to complete the necessary paperwork and/or training.



Of particular concern to us is the increasing regulation and insurance requirements around activities involving children. As an ethno-cultural Club, it is critical to our sustainability and ability to continue our culture, for us to involve younger generations in our activities. To do this, we need to offer appropriate events and activities targeted to the needs and interests of these groups – eg playgroups for mothers with young children, children’s performances and parties, family days, sports for kids. We have had feedback from young families that the parents would volunteer for the Club in activities in which they could involve their children – otherwise, arranging for childcare is too expensive and adds another complicating factor. However, the insurance requirements and related costs (especially as it relates to sexual molestation and related cover) to properly insure the Club for activities involving patrons aged under 21 are absolutely prohibitive – as a result we do not offer these activities, which drastically affects our ability to engage younger generations.

- To assist us in engaging younger generations in volunteering it would be immensely helpful if government could work with the private and non-profit sectors to formally recognise volunteering as a pathway to employment. Many employers still disregard experience gained during volunteering, considering it lesser than paid employment – “if it’s not paid employment, it doesn’t count”.

Ethno-cultural organisations like Polonia could play an important role in smooth settlement and economic integration of newly arrived migrants through volunteering. Australian employers tend to fixate on local experience and lack of that local experience is a well-recognised barrier to new migrants finding work upon arrival in Australia. If volunteer work particularly in skilled trades/professions, could be regarded as “local experience” for the sake of skills recognition and employment prospects that would incentivise more newly arrived migrants/first time job seekers (especially young professionals) to volunteer, especially while they are waiting for accreditation of their overseas skills and qualifications. Volunteering would also provide them with an opportunity to develop their English language skills and immerse them in Australian workplace culture and norms – providing essential know-how for future job success.