

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission:

INQUIRY INTO VOLUNTEERING IN QUEENSLAND

Submitted on behalf of Guide Dogs Queensland

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Introduction

Guide Dogs Queensland values the opportunity to participate in the Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland. Volunteers have always been central to our organisations success and impact, playing a key role in every stage of our work. Their dedication extends across various areas, including community outreach, fundraising, administrative assistance, and advocacy, all of which are critical to our ability to successfully deliver life changing services. We welcome the Committee's focus on addressing issues that volunteering organisations are currently facing, and look forward to contributing insights and recommendations that will help shape the future of volunteering in Queensland. We strongly believe that by working together, we can build a more inclusive, connected, and resilient volunteer workforce that continues to make a lasting impact on individuals and communities across the state

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

Volunteering in Queensland continues to be a vital element of our community and identity as Queenslanders, bringing great value to volunteers, organisations, communities, and the state as a whole. Despite increasing challenges being faced, the positive impact of volunteering remains clearing and tangibly visible, with both individuals and organisations benefitting immensely from the dedication and support that volunteers bring.

Benefits for volunteers include:

- Personal fulfillment – volunteering provides a sense of purpose and meaning to individuals, and feedback from volunteers indicates that volunteering increases levels of life satisfaction and wellbeing.
- Skill development – volunteers are increasingly turning to volunteer opportunities to gain valuable experience that will enhance their professional skills and foster new career opportunities.
- Social connections – it is undeniable that volunteering provides vital opportunities to foster strong community bonds, reduce social isolation, and helps volunteers to create long lasting friendships.

For organisations volunteers are an indispensable resource that enables us to deliver critical services:

- Increased capacity – volunteers support the expanded reach of organisations, allowing them to support more people and achieve greater outcomes with our available resources.
- Cost savings that can benefit non-profit programs and operations – the support of volunteers reduces operational costs, enabling non-profits to allocate more funds toward service delivery.
- Community engagement – every volunteer for an organisation is a potential ambassador, spreading awareness of an organisation's mission and driving greater involvement from the public.

For Queensland as a state, the benefits of volunteering are immense:

- Economic contribution – the volunteer workforce makes a significant economic contribution by providing unpaid labour worth billions of dollars each year, supporting our state's economy.
- Personal health and wellbeing – an active and engaged volunteering culture plays a crucial role in contributing to the well being and mental health of volunteers, as well as supporting public health outcomes by keeping people active, engaged, and connected to the community.
- Social capital – we strengthen our social networks and promote a state wide culture of civic engagement.

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

Declining volunteer rates

As with other states in Australia and also following a global trend, Queensland has seen a decline in formal volunteering due to factors such as increased work demands, increased cost of living and financial strain, and the lingering impact of COVID-19. One of the challenges we face as a state is how we can activate and engage the community to participate in volunteering, to increase the number of volunteers available for opportunities across sectors.

Recommendation:

1. Increased opportunities for local and state government to share about the benefits of volunteering and what opportunities are available.
2. Availability of funding or platforms to launch state-wide campaigns that highlight the personal, professional, and social benefits of volunteering.

Changing volunteer preferences

Due to increased financial pressures and reduction of availability for volunteering, millennial and Gen Z volunteers are increasingly seeking flexible, skills-based, and short-term opportunities rather than long-term commitments.

Recommendation:

1. Micro-volunteering: organisations can offer more one off, project based, or flexible volunteering opportunities that can cater to the busy demands of community members.
2. Remote / Online volunteering: organisations can offer remote or online opportunities that would allow volunteers to contribute from home or other locations
3. Corporate volunteering: partnering with businesses to create more company supported volunteering opportunities that allow staff to participate within their work hours.
4. Additionally advocating for paid volunteer days for employees to become standard in employment contracts, as this would provide significant benefits to both communities and businesses, and be a win win scenario.

Ageing volunteer workforce

As documented in past inquiries, many existing volunteer opportunities rely on older Queenslanders, and this raises concerns about the sustainability of volunteering programs.

Recommendation:

1. More funding to support the development of volunteer coordinators, as this will support organisations to improve their volunteer engagement strategies and create more impactful and meaningful experiences for diverse age groups.
2. More volunteering opportunities incorporated into education. By introducing volunteer hours as part of the curriculum requirements, and adding structured volunteering program to schools, TAFEs and universities, we can promote skilled based volunteering opportunities that supports the professional development of students.
3. Promote volunteering as a pathway into careers. By highlighting the benefits of volunteering, and providing skill based volunteering across a wide range of roles and industries, we can foster stronger community networks and support volunteers to gain experience that can lead to employment opportunities.
4. Youth focused campaigning and engagement. Providing resources and support to help volunteering organisations to create engaging, social media driven campaigns that illustrate volunteering as a fun and impactful way to give back, to meet friends,

Ongoing challenges in recruitment and retention

As the balance of opportunities has shifted in favour of the volunteering workforce, and with the increased need for micro volunteering opportunities and opportunities that are appealing to younger demographics, many organisations are struggling to attract and retain volunteers.

Recommendations:

1. Government and volunteering organisations must work together to create a more flexible, inclusive, and appealing volunteer environment.

2. Simplifying volunteer application processes and creating a streamlined and cohesive onboarding experience can reduce the number of roadblocks to becoming active in volunteer roles.
3. Improve the access / visibility of volunteer roles by creating intuitive and user friendly websites and apps that allow volunteers to search for roles based on interests, availability, and location. A centralised government funded platform to advertise volunteering is key to the growth of volunteering in Queensland.
4. Introduce government funded volunteer training and certification programs, that could support professional development of volunteers for future employment.
5. Volunteering organisations and government can create meaningful incentives for public recognition, awards, and government funded volunteer benefit schemes.

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.

Existing challenges:

- Cultural & linguistic diversity - volunteers from non-English speaking backgrounds may face language barriers, increasing the difficulty to participate in volunteering opportunities. Additionally, in Australia there is a pattern across many organisations to define and view volunteering through a western-centric lens, which does not take into account the vastly different understandings of volunteering that exist across cultures.
- Gender and gender identities - volunteering applications and onboarding processes often don't take into account gender identities, and gender based stereotyping or discrimination can create a lack of inclusive spaces for people of all gender identities to feel comfortable or welcome in volunteering roles.
- Age – older generations may experience face ageism due to a lack of roles that take into account their changing physical capabilities, as well as feeling excluded as organisations increasingly digitalise processes. Younger volunteers often struggle to find opportunities that allow for flexibility, meaningful engagement, and skill development.
- Geographic Location – volunteers living in rural or remote areas often experience difficulty accessing volunteer opportunities due to distance, lack of transportation, or limited roles available locally.

Recommendations:

1. Develop inclusive recruitment materials that are multilingual and culturally sensitive.
2. Provide language support, including translation services or bilingual volunteer coordinators, to ensure volunteering opportunities more accessible to volunteers from diverse linguistic backgrounds.
3. Organise cultural competency and DEI training for both volunteers and organisations to create a more inclusive environment.

4. Encourage organisations to adopt inclusive language and policies that welcome volunteers of all gender identities.
5. Ensure we are promoting equal representation in leadership and volunteer opportunities.
6. Design volunteer roles that are age-friendly and offer lighter tasks for older generations who may be seeking meaningful community connection.
7. Create family volunteering opportunities that are inclusive of all ages.
8. Adapt volunteer roles to accommodate different abilities, including online volunteering or positions that require less physical exertion.
9. Expand remote and online volunteering opportunities, to allow more people in rural or isolated areas to participate in a broader range of roles
10. Offer state funded transportation or reimbursement for travel costs for rural volunteers, and work to develop partnerships with local organisations to create more volunteer roles within communities.

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

Effectiveness:

The effectiveness of current government support is mixed. State initiated programs have certainly increased awareness and participation in volunteering, and should receive continued support and funding to expand upon their resources and programs. I have however come across many organisations in Queensland who are not aware of the existing state funded volunteering initiatives, and would highlight visibility and reach of these initiatives as an existing challenge to their effectiveness.

For individual organisations there also remains limited state wide data availability on topics such as how volunteering can support organisational sustainability, or on effective initiatives that have increased volunteering retention across sectors. The lack of available data can slow down the development and improvement of volunteer programs, with wide knowledge gaps existing on how to effectively recruit and retain younger and more diverse volunteer groups.

Recommendations:

1. Simplify and centralise the application processes for grants and funding, making it easier for volunteer organisations, especially smaller ones or newer ones, to access support.
2. Create a centralised portal for volunteer organisations to access all available funding and resources, reducing the time spent navigating complex systems or gaining visibility of funding opportunities
3. Invest in centralised data systems that track volunteer participation, retention, and the impact of volunteering programs, as well as providing more recommendations and training based upon the data outcomes.
4. Launch initiatives specifically designed to engage underrepresented groups in volunteering, including youth, First Nations peoples, and people with disabilities.
5. Offer culturally appropriate training, resources, and support to these groups

6. Provide more visibility of existing training opportunities for volunteer managers and organisations on best practices for volunteer recruitment, retention, and management
7. Provide more visibility of the Queensland Volunteering Strategy
8. Invest in crucial infrastructure including regional volunteer hubs, to provide accessible resources, training, and coordination support for volunteers across Queensland.
9. Advocate for workplace policies that include paid volunteer leave, to encourage employees to participate in volunteer programs.

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

The 2032 Brisbane Olympic and Paralympic Games present a unique opportunity to spark a lasting and inclusive volunteering culture across Queensland. By bringing together government efforts across different sectors, volunteering can be established as an integral part of both the Games and the wider community, leaving a positive, long-term impact. We have a unique opportunity to collaborate between government and organisations to offer targeted programs that foster inclusivity, creating an engaged and sustainable volunteering culture that benefits individuals, organisations, communities, and the state.

Recommendations:

1. Use the Games to develop a strong volunteer workforce that sets a standard for future initiatives.
2. Encourage volunteer involvement in local sports clubs and grassroots activities.
3. Promote volunteering as a way to improve mental and physical health, focusing on more vulnerable groups in our community
4. Ensure inclusive volunteer opportunities for all, especially through Games initiatives.
5. Address accessibility issues by providing transport solutions, especially for those in remote areas.
6. Encourage businesses to offer paid leave for employees volunteering at the Games, by providing incentives for businesses that support employee volunteering
7. Offer volunteer roles in volunteering coordination, tourism and event management to attract skilled volunteers and contribute to professional development.

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

Supporting First Nations peoples in volunteering, especially in remote communities, is central to our cohesion as a volunteering community, and requires a culturally sensitive and inclusive strategy.

Recommendations:

1. Develop volunteering opportunities that respect cultural values and focus on areas including cultural preservation, land management, and mentorship.
2. Collaborate with First Nations organisations to incorporate their experiences and understandings, to support the creation of sustainable volunteer programs that benefit communities directly.
3. Promote volunteering as a tool for improving outcomes in education, employment, health, and community cohesion for First Nations peoples.
4. Remove barriers such as transportation, financial support, and access to resources, particularly in remote areas.
5. Provide organisations (with funded) cultural competency training to ensure they understand the unique needs, values, and protocols of First Nations communities.