

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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## Submission to Queensland Government's Inquiry into Volunteering

Thank you for the opportunity to provide insight into volunteering challenges in Queensland. I've had experience both as a volunteer and from a Disaster Management perspective, of navigating how volunteers can be utilised to support our communities during times of need.

A bit about me. I volunteer for many groups within my community, in particular for the Gayndah State School P&C as their secretary and the Gayndah Orange Festival as their Stall Coordinator.

I work as a Disaster Management Officer for North Burnett Regional Council. Please note, this submission is not on behalf of NBRC. It draws upon my 11 years working in Disaster Management and from university study around community-led resilience and the challenges of guiding and supporting community to be actively involved in the prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

Unfortunately, I didn't find out about the inquiry till late so have provided brief notes only. I hope my insights can assist in shaping a better structure for volunteering into the future.

Vicki Callanan

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

Volunteering numbers for P&C have significantly decreased since COVID. Before the pandemic, parents would enter the school grounds to pick up their children from classrooms. This provided the P&C with an opportunity to engage with parents, gather ideas, request assistance for events, and create a sense of community as parents came together to support the school and its students.

However, COVID changed this dynamic, with parents now picking up and dropping off their children at the gate. As a result, the once-bustling schoolyard, where parents could casually chat and connect with teachers, has become quieter. This shift has caused school communities to feel more disconnected, severely affecting volunteer participation in school events. The informal relationships and opportunities to ask for help from parents are no longer as readily available.

Without volunteers to support P&C fundraising efforts, smaller events and initiatives have become more difficult to organise, resulting in fewer resources being directed toward improving the school environment. This reduction in community involvement also limits the opportunity to instil the value of volunteerism in the next generation.

Additionally, the financial crisis has further impacted people's ability to volunteer. With most families having two working parents, many struggle to find the time to contribute.

**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.**

Emergency Service Volunteers – In my line of work, I frequently engage with both the Queensland Rural Fire Service and the State Emergency Service. Unfortunately, we have seen a significant decline in volunteers from these groups, primarily due to the excessive requirements for membership and ongoing training. Many of these volunteers have spent their lives working on the land and hold qualifications or certificates from recognised training organisations that are not recognised by the volunteer agencies.

For example, flood boat operators require extensive training, which, in rural areas, often means traveling long distances to complete the necessary courses. This has led to a shortage of operators in some regional areas. While specialised training in flood boat operation is undoubtedly important, many of these volunteers already possess boat licenses, so the amount of required study could be reduced to acknowledge their existing expertise.

Another issue is the chainsaw operator training. Many volunteers have been using chainsaws their entire lives and already hold certifications from outside the emergency services. However, requiring them to complete specific training provided by emergency services has led some to resign from their roles. While refresher training is essential to maintain skills, recognising formal qualifications from other sectors could help ensure that experienced volunteers are retained and continue to contribute.

**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.**

Currently, emergency service volunteer groups are primarily made up of older generations, which can create challenges for attracting younger people who are eager to bring new life to what is often presented as a traditional, “old-school” way of doing things. To engage the younger generation, it’s important to showcase the variety of roles volunteers undertake and highlight areas that might appeal to them. For example, promoting flood boat operations, drone technology in disaster response, high-altitude climbing, and road crash rescue can spark more interest in volunteering.

The onboarding process for new volunteers also needs to be faster and more efficient. For instance, many volunteers sign up but find themselves still waiting a year later to complete the basic training necessary to begin working. The North Coast region ran a pilot program where volunteers underwent three weekends of training to complete the public safety certificate. During this program, the SES covered meals, accommodation, and travel expenses, showing their appreciation and respect for the volunteers. This approach ensured volunteers were ready to work in the field within a few months, instead of remaining unqualified for a year.

There is also a significant opportunity to involve senior high school students in earning their public safety certificate. This can provide youth, particularly those at risk of engaging in crime, with productive activities inside and outside of school hours while earning a valuable qualification. This certification not only looks impressive on their resume but also allows them to join an SES Unit wherever they go. Even if they don’t volunteer immediately, it gives them insight into volunteerism, which could encourage them to get involved in the future.

**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.**

A significant amount of work has been done in the area of spontaneous and non-traditional volunteering, with many documents providing useful frameworks for how spontaneous volunteers could be effectively utilized. However, none of these solutions address how liability and insurance for these volunteers are managed. Local governments prioritise protecting lives first, followed by property, but there is a need for clearer guidance on how they can better leverage the support from community groups, NGOs, and individuals. Many councils hesitate to engage spontaneous volunteers due to the uncertainty around liability. More efforts are needed to help councils safely and efficiently tap into this volunteer resource. Without formal structures in place, volunteer efforts may evolve organically but could lack coordination, leading to duplication of efforts and unsafe practices.

While Volunteering Queensland is designated in the State Disaster Management Plan as a resource for recruiting and referring spontaneous volunteers, further work is required to ensure local community groups can effectively access and utilise this service, particularly in rural areas where community groups and NGOs are minimal and over extended.

Providing local governments with funding to hire Community Resilience Officers would empower them, especially smaller and under-resourced councils, to better engage with their communities. This would create opportunities to guide volunteerism and enhance community preparedness across all phases of disaster management. The current cycle of funding for Community Recovery and Resilience Officers for just two years, only to remove the resource afterward, creates a disconnect between local governments and their communities.

Continuous support would allow local governments to more effectively develop long-term disaster volunteerism strategies and instil these practices in communities before disasters occur. This would ultimately help communities be better prepared and recover more effectively when they experience disasters.

Due to time constraints, I've included some insights from an assignment I completed on community-led resilience and how we might better utilise volunteers in disaster Preparedness, Prevention, Response, and Recovery (PPRR). This is an area I'm eager to explore further and develop within our community in the future.

## **Extracts from Assignment on Community-Led Resilience**

Please note, this has been unedited due to time restraints. The assignment was focused on nominating an organisation where an improvement could be implemented. I utilised North Burnett Regional Council, however, this same concept could be adopted by many different agencies or local government across Queensland.

Community-led Resilience has become a contemporary topic in the Emergency and Disaster Management Industry and is widely researched and reported throughout Australia. Although it goes by various names, the core concept remains the same, the notion of communities actively engaging in their own disaster preparedness, response, and recovery, building disaster resilience from the ground up (Rawsthorne et al, 2023). Each community is unique and community-led resilience leverages their distinct knowledge, skills, connections, and resources to their betterment (Australian Red Cross, n.d.).

As disasters continue to become more frequent and traditional volunteerism declines (Hadmer, 2017), supporting our communities through disaster events continues to be challenging. With limited emergency personnel and resources, communities are ideally positioned to support each other as they have the best understanding of their risks, vulnerable population, and environment (AIDR, 2018). Supporting the development of community-led resilience before an event gives those effected a sense of ownership and control over their response (AIDR, 2018). Growing evidence shows that communities actively involved in their recovery and resilience building, recover more effectively from disaster events (Leadbeater, 2013). The sense of belonging which evolves from community-led resilience provides significant psychological benefits to those impacted (Hashimoto et al, 2018).

Community-led resilience is the grassroots concept which sees communities actively engaging in their own preparedness, response, and recovery (Rawsthorne et al., 2023). Each community's unique knowledge, skills, and connections are invaluable and is utilised for their collective wellbeing (Australian Red Cross, n.d.). As disasters continue to challenge our ability to respond, empowering communities to support each other can ensure more effective and holistic disaster resilience. The benefits of community-led emphasises its critical role in creating more resilient and self-reliant communities (Hashimoto et al., 2018).

### **One Recommendation to Improve a Policy**

The North Burnett Local Disaster Management Plan (LDMP) contains town support plans. These plans are designed to guide town specific response to disaster events (NBRC, 2016b). The support plans touch on the concept of existing community groups and organisation, who have no prior disaster management roles, expanding to assist during a disaster event (McLennan et al, 2017). Although the initiative is noted, there is no further documentation on how non-traditional volunteers are engaged.

To capitalise on the benefits of community-led resilience it is recommended that a Disaster Management Volunteer Policy be created to formalise the principals and guidelines of how and when volunteers interact with disaster management arrangements.

This policy should address topics such as:

- Identification of volunteer types - such as spontaneous volunteers, extended, and emergent volunteer groups (McLennan, 2017).
- Predefined roles and actions - this will help coordinate support in a structured way ensuring volunteers are utilised to their potential and to reduce duplication of actions (Australian Government, 2010).
- Identification of risks and mitigation options – nominating tasks and undertaking a risk assessment of roles which volunteers undertake. This will assist with the allocation of volunteer resources during an event (Saaroni, 2015).

- Legal and insurance issues – by planning how and when volunteers are engaged, Council can plan and implement mitigation strategies to reduce the likelihood of legal and insurance matters surrounding the utilisation of volunteers (Australian Government, 2012).
- Interaction – identify how non-traditional volunteers interact with emergency management organisations will ensure all LDMG members understand how non-traditional volunteers can be utilised during an event (McLennan, 2017).

### **One Recommendation to Improve an Area of Practice**

North Burnett Regional Council predominately adopts a non-engagement orientation towards community interactions (Johnston et al, 2022). This is reflected in the LDMP Disaster Education and Awareness Sub Plan (NBRC, 2016a). Shifting this area of practice towards a community-agency partnership style (Johnston et al, 2022) of engagement would improve relationships, knowledge sharing, and trust outside of disaster response, giving community-led initiatives the best chance of success.

Council is well positioned to draw from established programs and enhance engagement practices by implementing insights gained from these initiatives.

Notable examples include the Red Cross's Community-led Resilience Teams (Australian Red Cross, n.d.) and the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal's Disaster Resilient: Future Ready program (Howard et al, 2020). Both projects identify community leaders to guide the programs and work to strengthen community connections. These connections promote positive psychosocial benefits, making the community more cohesive and resilient outside of and during disaster events.

The success of a Disaster Management Volunteer Policy relies on stakeholders being involved in its development, creating a sense of ownership and responsibility. Changing engagement practices will significantly contribute to this policy's success.

### **One Recommendation for Future Possible Research**

Community-led resilience programs are largely supported by post-disaster funding (QRA). The downside to this is once the funding program ends, community must maintain the program without expert assistance.

In the absence of disasters, complacency can set in, challenging the sustainability of community-led resilience programs. There is significant research on successful programs, however, when expert assistance withdraws, what factors contribute to successful programs continuing to thrive and others not?

Further research is needed to answer the question – What makes long term community-led disaster resilience programs successful without the intervention of emergency service agencies or frequent disaster events?

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