

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee
Parliament House
George Street,
Brisbane Qld 4000

By email: lgsbcsc@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Committee Members,

Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission into this important inquiry into volunteering in Queensland.

About Graham House Community Centre

Graham House Community Centre is the local Neighbourhood Centre in Murgon which is at the northern end of the South Burnett region. As a neighbourhood centre we cover the area from Wooroolin, Wondai, Murgon, Cherbourg, Preston, Durong and Boondooma.

Graham House supports over 20,000 visitors a year, with about 75 people volunteering through our Centre each week. In 2024, we contributed over \$3,300,000 in community value with \$2,700,000 of that being through volunteer contributions of their time and expertise.

Our vision is to be able to support our community in many more ways. We can only achieve this by increasing the number of volunteers we attract and retaining them.

This submission provides information on volunteering in Queensland and recommendations to overcome barriers faced. It is informed by our experience and data gathered from our activities.

The Role and Value of Volunteers in our Neighbourhood Centre

Our Neighbourhood Centre has 75-80 volunteers each week.

Their roles include:

- Driving clients to medical and social appointments (50 volunteers)
- Operating our thrift shop (12 volunteers)
- Managing our community garden (6 volunteers)
- Serving on our management Board (7 volunteers)
- Assisting in our social enterprise (3 volunteers)
- Groundsman (1)
- Administration (1)

Without our wonderful volunteers, we could not offer any of these services. With the exception of our Transport service, all of the above programs are funded by Graham House.

The South Burnett has virtually no public transport and limited medical services. Many people in our community rely on Graham House's transport service to be able to access local services as well as specialists who are mostly in Sunshine Coast and Toowoomba which are 220 km from some towns in our region or Brisbane which is 300 kms.

We run a fleet of 16 vehicles, including a wheelchair accessible bus. All our drivers are volunteers as our funding is not sufficient to pay for drivers. Many of our clients also need extra support as their mobility is limited. Our drivers must be highly skilled and compassionate in order to meet our clients' needs.

Barriers to recruitment of volunteers

The top three barriers we face in regards to recruitment of volunteers are:

- Limited time to be able to advertise and recruit volunteers. Our paid staff are funded to perform their administrative roles and do not have the time to devote to recruitment campaigns. We know high-quality, targeted promotions are effective because we receive a lot of interest in volunteering when we have been able to do recruitment drives. However, we need to be able to do much more promotion.
- The nature of volunteering is such that the volunteers offer their time within the parameters of their lifestyle and their own health needs. They are no longer able to, or interested in working in paid roles because they want the flexibility to do limited hours, take extended periods of time off when desired and take time off at short notice. Many people are reluctant to volunteer because it is seen as a commitment they no longer want.
- Most of our volunteers are older. Without capacity to attract younger volunteers through a targeted recruitment process, we are unable to diversify our volunteer base.

Barriers to retention and management of volunteers

The top three barriers we face in regards to retention of volunteers are:

- Supporting and managing volunteers is a specialised skill. Volunteers do not stay with an organization when they feel their time and expertise are not valued or when their time is wasted due to poor organization, inadequate resources and lack of communication.
- Many younger volunteers cannot afford to be without paid work for very long. They are actively seeking paid employment and the skills they gain through volunteering with Graham House has enabled many to successfully obtain employment. We are very pleased to support our volunteers in this way as we believe that work is vital for younger people's self-esteem as well as financial needs. However, we are aware that this makes retention of our volunteer pool difficult.
- Older volunteers often find their own health declining or their responsibilities to other family members increase. Understandably, they then have to leave or reduce the hours they contribute. Sometimes their circumstances change abruptly and this has a significant impact on our service delivery.

Recommendations to Strengthen Volunteer Engagement and Impact in Neighbourhood Centres

To ensure the sustainability of volunteering in Neighbourhood Centres, the following recommendations are proposed as being most urgent and likely to have the most obvious benefits, particularly for Graham House Community Centre :

1. Funding for a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator.

In our opinion, the ability to recruit, retain and manage volunteers effectively is only achievable by having someone whose time and responsibility is devoted to our volunteer workforce.

Experience has shown that we can successfully recruit and retain sufficient numbers of volunteers to effectively operate our services and programs when we are able to devote time to recruitment and support.

A funded Volunteer Coordinator would need to be based in our centre so that they are familiar with our programs, our needs, our community and target market for volunteering.

The number of hours funded for such a role would need to be adequate to manage the size of the volunteer pool required. Graham House would like to expand the range of programs we offer but this is only possible if we have more suitably experienced volunteers. And it is not possible to attract and retain more volunteers under our current model of incorporating volunteer coordination into existing roles.

2: Establish a Cost-of-Volunteering Reimbursement Fund

Graham House ensures that our volunteers are not out-of-pocket for any expenses related to actual service delivery such as fuel, vehicle repairs, road tolls and hospital parking fees for our transport service.

However, we are not able to adequately reimburse volunteers for the cost of travelling to work or meals when they are working longer than 4 hours. A trip to Brisbane with a client attending a medical appointment can entail a 10-12 hour day. The volunteer is able to have a break from driving but meals and refreshments are also necessary to mitigate fatigue. Also, some of our volunteers travel up to an hour from their homes to come to our centre for their shift.

While Graham House self-funds some reimbursement, this is still a considerable cost to the volunteer. Offering adequate reimbursement would undoubtedly make volunteering possible and more attractive for many people.

3. Invest in Regional Place-Based Volunteering Hubs

Graham House has a 35-year history of employing volunteers in a range of roles. We are aware that there are other organizations in our region who could also benefit from volunteers but do not have the time or expertise in recruiting and managing volunteers. The need for volunteers in community-based organizations as well as other services is growing and is likely to continue to grow given the current state of Australia's economy.

In our experience, a Volunteer Hub based in the South Burnett would greatly enhance the capacity of many organizations to invest in the well-being of our community.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide our submission.

If you have any questions, please contact:

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CEO

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Yours sincerely,

Christelle Withers-Mayne

CEO