

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Lifeline Australia

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Queensland
Submission**

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1 About Lifeline Australia

Lifeline Australia is a national charity providing people experiencing emotional distress with access to 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention services. We are committed to empowering people in Australia to be suicide-safe through connection, compassion and hope. In addition to 24/7 crisis support services over telephone, text and webchat, and online resources through our website, Lifeline also provides face-to-face community services through our more than 43 Centres across Australia. These services include counselling, including financial and gambling counselling; aftercare and postvention support; bereavement groups; frontline training; disaster relief; domestic violence workshops and rapid response services.

Lifeline's crisis support services are delivered largely by volunteer crisis supporters. Crisis supporters are the people who interact directly with help seekers when providing Lifeline telephone, text and webchat crisis support services.

Volunteers also help to facilitate many of Lifeline's other support services, our fundraising and our retail stores.

In Queensland, two Lifeline members – Lifeline Queensland and Lifeline Darling Downs – run 11 centres throughout the state, plus a number of retail stores and training centres. They employ 670 FTE staff and have 3,179 volunteers, including 559 crisis supporter volunteers.

A number of other services also fall under the Lifeline banner, including:

- 13YARN - the 24/7 national support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in crisis;
- DV-alert – frontline training to help workers and the public recognise, respond to and refer cases of domestic and family violence.
- 'Small Business, Big Impact: How to Support Employees Experiencing Domestic and Family Violence'
 - In 2023, DV-alert launched this podcast for small businesses to help them to better support employees experiencing domestic and family violence.
- MensLine Australia - professional 24/7 telephone counselling support for men with concerns about mental health, anger management, family violence (using and experiencing), addiction, relationship, stress and wellbeing.
- Suicide Call Back Service – a nationwide service providing 24/7 phone and online counselling to people affected by suicide

2 Introduction

Lifeline Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Queensland Parliament's Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee's Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland.

For this submission, Lifeline draws on our specific experience as a not-for-profit suicide prevention service delivered by a largely volunteer workforce. This workforce includes approximately 3,500 trained crisis supporter volunteers and around 6,000 volunteers

who support in other ways (e.g. through book fairs, in retail stores or delivering face-to-face services).

Given that much of our experience and perspective spans multiple items from the Terms of Reference, we have chosen not to address each individually but instead provide an overarching narrative about the importance of volunteers in delivering Lifeline's services in Queensland.

3 The Value of Volunteering

Since its inception in 1963, Lifeline's telephone, and now text and chat, crisis support services have been delivered largely by a workforce of highly trained and committed volunteer crisis supporters.

In Queensland, Lifeline has 559 trained crisis support volunteers who deliver a mix of volunteer (75%) and paid (25%) hours.

In addition, there are 2,620 non-crisis supporter volunteers in Queensland. These volunteers take their knowledge and awareness with them into their families, workplaces and communities. Through this they expand their impact by building awareness and resilience within communities more broadly.

There are a number of benefits to the largely volunteer-based model from organisational, societal and help seeker perspectives:

- Given the scope of Lifeline's services – each year Lifeline receives more than a million calls and more than 250,000 texts and chats – it would be prohibitively expensive to deliver a fully paid service. Lifeline's estimated cost per call of \$39 incorporates overheads such as recruitment and training of volunteers, provision of infrastructure and technology, support staff and paid hours for hard-to-fill shifts (e.g. the middle of the night) and in-shift support and supervision to ensure that crisis supporters have the backup they need to handle the most difficult calls and to debrief and be safe themselves.
- Feedback from help seekers and frontline interactions tells us that the non-clinical, volunteer-led approach is welcomed by help seekers, who appreciate that the person helping them is doing so out of a desire to help and be there for them. This is also evidenced through recent research on Lifeline's impact on help seekers' lives:
 - *"... it was the befriending interaction as an authentic, accepting, form of support that incorporates the principles of empowerment and self-determination that was seen by participants as the most important and beneficial characteristic of the service." - Callers' experience of Lifeline and its impact in their lives. Alan Roger Woodward (2023)*
- Lifeline's crisis supporters are predominantly volunteer paraprofessionals. They undergo extensive training and ongoing professional development to deliver the service to a consistently high standard. The crisis supporter training pathway meets the requirements of the National Accreditation CHCSS00113 (Crisis Support Skills Set) and consists of 43 hours of face-to-face learning, 24 hours of e-Learning and 110 hours of supervised practice.

- With volunteers providing a minimum of one four-hour shift per fortnight, staffing Lifeline's crisis support services requires a large workforce of trained volunteers.
 - By training these volunteers, Lifeline ensures that more people within local communities are educated about, aware of and comfortable talking about suicide prevention, crisis support and emotional distress. This helps to build awareness of these issues within communities, increases the visibility and awareness of support services and reduces stigma, creating more resilient communities.
- Volunteering as a crisis supporter also provides a route into employment, both within Lifeline and more broadly.
 - Volunteer crisis supporters can progress onto delivering paid-for shifts at hard-to-reach hours. Some former volunteers also become Lifeline staff in other areas of the organisation.
 - Lifeline's accredited crisis supporter training is recognised across a range of fields and can give people a first step into the wider mental health sector workforce.
 - This has been particularly notable recently among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis supporters for 13YARN, who receive a culturally appropriate version of the accredited training.
- For the people who volunteer, being such an essential part of Lifeline's service delivery is hugely rewarding. Many of Lifeline's volunteers tell us that they feel they get even more out of being a Lifeline Crisis Supporter than they give, and it improves their social lives, their emotional wellbeing, their professional skills and their connectedness to their communities.
 - More broadly, volunteering has been shown to have a positive impact on the wellbeing of volunteers, providing a sense of purpose and satisfaction and opportunities for social interaction and connection.
- From a community connectedness perspective, the value of volunteering is well established. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare states on its website that "Volunteers substantially benefit their communities through providing important services to others. They may also bring new insights to the organisations or groups for which they volunteer, increase efficiencies and improve effectiveness."
- Being largely volunteer-led, Lifeline's crisis support services are delivered cost efficiently while maintaining a high standard of care and support for people in their darkest moments. Lifeline's purpose is people-focused, we want to be there to help people whenever they need it, to help work towards an Australia free from suicide.
 - A broader societal benefit of this is that it helps to mitigate some of the wider expenses associated with suicides and suicide attempts. As stated on the website of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare:
 - "In addition to the human cost, suicide places a very real monetary burden on the Australian economy. The Productivity Commission (2019) estimated that suicide and suicide attempts cost the

Australian economy between 16 and 34 billion Australian dollars during the 2018- 2019 financial year.”

- More broadly, the economic benefits of volunteering are extensive. Volunteering Australia’s *State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024* report found that the economic value of volunteering in Queensland for the 2022-2023 year was over \$117 billion.

Feedback from Lifeline Volunteers

“I found being able to be there and listen to individuals who were struggling was incredibly rewarding - All the knowledge and experience I learnt during the course were absolutely valuable, practical and well-put-together by amazing mentors.”

“The opportunity to learn how to help save lives and connecting with people on the phone.”

“Helping and supporting people, feeling like I was a part of something, meeting new people.”

“The professional development and training that Lifeline provided. I also enjoyed making a difference and hearing the outcome of difference within my calls.”

4 Downward Trend in Volunteering

Over recent years, there has been a well-documented downward trend in volunteering across Australia. Between 2010 and 2018 ABS figures show a 20% fall in the proportion of the population who undertake formal volunteering.

During COVID, Lifeline saw a temporary increase in volunteering hours as communities came together to support each other during times of immense stress. However, this was not the case across all charities. Volunteering Australia reported that at “the peak of the pandemic in 2020, two out of three volunteers (65.9%) stopped volunteering, equating to an estimated loss of 12.2 million hours per week”.

The return to volunteering after COVID has been slow, with the pre-COVID downward trend continuing across Australia, including for Lifeline. There are a number of factors that contribute to this, including changing community expectations and priorities, financial pressures forcing people to work longer hours or take on a second job and family commitments such as grandparents taking on more childcare. Rising cost-of-living pressures have added to this.

5 Barriers to Volunteering

Lifeline's volunteers come from diverse backgrounds, genders, age groups, abilities and locations.

Barriers to volunteering can be geographical, but with 43 Centres across Australia, Lifeline reaches into communities across the country, including metro, regional and remote areas.

In addition, during COVID we developed our platforms to accommodate remote working, particularly for text and chat services. This means that people can volunteer from home, which works particularly well for rural areas, with Lifeline's text and chat volunteers including farmers and other rural workers.

For CALD groups, the same barriers to accessing services can also apply to accessing volunteering opportunities. However, this provides an opportunity for community members to deliver services within their own community groups.

For example, some Lifeline Centres deliver face-to-face community services and work with local volunteers to provide people support in their own language. This includes drop-in hubs that give people advice and social connection and visiting programs that allow people in care homes to chat to people in their mother tongue.

6 Supporting and empowering crisis supporters

Lifeline's crisis support workforce are exposed to emergency situations that can be high-risk, stressful and challenging.

Commensurate with this exposure, crisis supporters can experience functional impairment related to their helping role. Consistent with literature on other mental health professionals, there is evidence to suggest that crisis supporters' experience of psychological distress can lead to impairments in the provision of support in the absence of help-seeking or use of adaptive coping strategies.

In addition to the extensive training mentioned above, crisis supporters receive ongoing supervision to mitigate the risk of vicarious traumatisation and associated impairment, ensuring they can manage their own needs as well as the needs of help-seekers. This support is provided through both in-person supervision and a centralised in-shift support team that can be brought into calls to provide advice, support and debriefing for crisis supporters. A focus on self-care throughout training, development and communication helps to ensure that this is given appropriate priority by crisis supporters.

7 13YARN – Indigenous crisis supporter workforce

When 13YARN, the national crisis support line managed by, delivered by and delivered for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, was developed, the decision was made to pay crisis supporters, rather than rely on volunteers, to deliver the service.

The reasoning behind this was to help to address the unemployment rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which was 12% in 2021.

In 2021: a similar proportion of First Nations males and females aged 15–64 were employed (53% and 51%) a higher proportion of males than females were unemployed (8.3% compared with 6.5%). Indigenous Australians continue to be, on average, less likely to be employed, are paid less and are less likely to be in leadership roles than non-Indigenous Australians.

Factors impacting employment rates higher than the general population include lower average levels of education, training and skill (human capital); poorer health; living in areas with fewer labour market opportunities; higher levels of arrest and interactions with the criminal justice system; discrimination; and lower levels of job retention.

The decision to pay 13YARN crisis supporters not only recognises the socio-economic disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities but also the perceptions of volunteering within these communities. Specifically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples take a more informal approach to volunteering. As Volunteering Australia points out, this means volunteering that is more “fluid, local and responsive to community needs, rather than structured, targeted and regular”.

Given this, while Lifeline Australia’s submission focuses on formal volunteering, we recommend the Inquiry also considers the impact and value of informal volunteering, particularly in relation to Indigenous and other culturally diverse communities. The value of informal volunteering within families, such as with childcare arrangements between generations, should also be considered for a more complete understanding of the impact that volunteering has within Queensland.

8 Addressing the Mental Health Workforce Shortage

To ensure the sustainability of the national workforce, Lifeline centres use place-based approaches to recruit, train, coordinate and support volunteers. This includes:

- developing and maintaining relationships with local groups and organisations to attract like-minded volunteers (i.e. community groups, university partnerships);
- providing standardised training and up-skilling to ensure crisis supporter workforce has the skills and knowledge to meet needs of help-seekers;
- implementing award and recognition strategies to acknowledge contributions of the workforce;

- initiatives to create supportive and interactive environments in which relationships between volunteers are supported;
- providing support and supervision to staff to meet demand and complexity of interactions with help seekers; and
- ongoing workforce development.

Lifeline's crisis supporters come from diverse backgrounds and bring a range of personal and professional experiences to their role. One notable cohort of crisis supporters volunteer with Lifeline to develop work-relevant skills and experience in mental health and caring roles. Recent workforce surveys identified that:

- Among voice-based (13 11 14 helpline) crisis supporters, approximately 27% identify as studying counselling, social work or psychology, and over 50% identify as having a work background in the social services
- Among text-based (text and chat) crisis supporters, approximately 16% identify as studying psychology, social or community services, and 32% identify as working in healthcare or social assistance.

In addition, a number of Lifeline Centres work with universities and TAFEs so that students participating in relevant courses can train and volunteer with Lifeline as part of their required work experience.

Those career progression and training factors can be helpful both in attracting and retaining volunteers within the Lifeline network.

9 Recommended Reforms to Support Volunteering in Queensland

A range of policy and regulatory reforms could be implemented to strengthen volunteering in Queensland, including financial incentives, education initiatives, streamlined government processes, and improved volunteer management.

9.1 Financial Incentives for Volunteers

To encourage and support volunteers, the Queensland Government could introduce various tax and financial benefits (see for example External Monetary Policies for Community Volunteers, World Health Organisation), such as:

- **Vehicle Registration & Toll Concessions** – Discounts or exemptions for volunteers using personal vehicles for community services.
- **Public Transport Discounts or Free Travel Passes** – Similar to concessions for seniors and students, registered volunteers could receive free or discounted travel.
- **Superannuation Contributions** – Government contributions to the superannuation of long-term volunteers, particularly in essential sectors, to recognise and support their contributions.

9.2 Education and Awareness

Strengthening education and public awareness initiatives can foster a culture of volunteerism:

- **Incorporate Volunteering into the School Curriculum** – Teaching social responsibility, philanthropy and volunteering from a young age can encourage lifelong participation.

9.3 Government Collaboration on Volunteering Initiatives

Better coordination between local, state and federal governments can reduce administrative barriers for volunteers and organisations:

- **Streamlined Working with Children Checks** – A unified, federal-level system would eliminate the burden of requiring separate checks for each state, benefiting national non-profits. This aligns with Objective 3.1 of the *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033 (Make Volunteering a Cross-Portfolio Issue in Government)*.

9.4 Investment in Volunteer Leadership and Management

To improve volunteer experiences and organisational effectiveness, the government could:

- **Sponsor Leadership and Volunteer Management Training** – Investing in professional development for volunteer coordinators and leaders aligns with *National Strategy for Volunteering* objectives 3.2 *Build Strong Leadership and Shared Accountability* and 3.4 *Recognise the Importance of Volunteer Management*

9.5 Expanding Public Awareness and Recognition of Volunteering

While the *QLD Volunteering Strategy 2024-2032* includes volunteer recognition, it could be expanded to include:

- **Public Awareness Campaigns** – Government-led or Government-supported initiatives to educate individuals and businesses about the social, educational, and financial benefits of volunteering.
- **Alignment with National Strategy** – Enhancing awareness aligns with Objectives 2.2 and 2.3 of the *National Strategy for Volunteering* to increase participation and understanding of volunteering's role in Australian society.

9.6 Subsidies and Scholarships to Reduce Volunteering Costs

To lower financial barriers to volunteering, the Queensland Government could:

- **Expand the VET Investment Program** – Currently subsidising education, this could be broadened to support other volunteer training such as Lifeline Crisis Support training and other costs such as travel and fuel costs for volunteers. This

would support some volunteers who travel up to one to two hours each way to get to their nearest Lifeline Member Centre.

- **Introduce Volunteer Scholarships** – Providing financial support to encourage people from diverse backgrounds to engage in volunteering.

9.7 Funding Volunteer-Related Costs in Government Agreements

Government funding agreements with organisations could include provisions for:

- volunteer recruitment and promotion;
- volunteer training programs; and
- salaries for volunteer management staff.

9.8 State-Funded Volunteer Impact Navigation System

A government-funded Volunteer Impact Navigation System could:

- **Match Volunteers with High-Impact Opportunities** – Connecting individuals with roles that align with their skills, interests and availability.
- **Respond to Emerging Community Needs** – The system would update dynamically to direct volunteer efforts where they are most needed.
- **Increase Participation in Lesser-Known Causes** – Encouraging volunteers to explore opportunities beyond well-known organisations.

This would need to be well managed to prevent overwhelming local services, particularly in relation to emerging situations that might attract national interest, such as floods and bush fires.

However, by implementing these reforms, Queensland can build a stronger, more sustainable volunteer sector, increasing engagement, reducing barriers, and ensuring volunteers are supported and valued for their contributions.

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