

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Mr James Lister MP
Member for Southern Downs
Chair, Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Dear Mr Lister,

I write to make a submission to the Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee's inquiry into volunteering in Queensland.

This submission is made in my personal capacity and not as a representative of any volunteer organisation I am involved with.

For background, I have been volunteering for various groups since I was in primary school in North Queensland over 25 years ago. Organisations I have volunteered for include Lions Clubs International, Wounded Heroes, Rural Fire Service Queensland, Connecting Communities Australia, Lifeblood Australia, Stationery Aid, the Australian Lions Wellbeing Foundation, James Cook University, Queensland Young Achiever Awards, and Queensland Community Achievement Awards.

Many other submissions have highlighted the value of volunteering and the decline in volunteering. I will not focus on this in my submission. Instead, I will focus on some of the causes and what can be done to encourage more Queenslanders to volunteer.

Cause 1: Time Poor

In a modern world, most people are time poor and have competing priorities. This leaves little or no time for volunteering. When people do make time for volunteering, they often encounter organisations who prefer volunteers in regular ongoing roles with little flexibility. This makes volunteering even more challenging for time poor individuals.

Cause 2: Lack of Education

A decline in civics education in Queensland schools has negatively impacted civic engagement and participation, including volunteering. People who lack civics education might not engage in community activities or volunteer work, as they may not fully grasp the impact of their contributions.

Cause 3: Lack of Adaption

Some volunteer-based organisations have not adapted to people's expectations of volunteering. Some organisations are very rigid and have not adapted to people being time poor. This includes rigid membership and meeting attendance requirements, financial commitments, and/or inflexible involvement.

In my experience there is a disconnect between the level of commitment that volunteers prefer compared to the commitment that organisations require. Many volunteer-based organisations prefer volunteers in regular ongoing roles whereas many volunteers prefer flexibility in their volunteering. Acknowledging the challenges in providing flexible volunteering opportunities, many organisations have not adapted to people's changing requirements for volunteering.

Cause 4: Financial Commitment

The potential costs associated with volunteering can be a deterrent for some people. Financial costs for volunteering can include transportation, childcare, forgone wages, membership fees, and/or opportunity costs.

This issue has become more pronounced in recent times with the increasing cost of living.

Cause 5: Lack of Information

Whilst many volunteer-based organisations have a strong online presence, some organisations have no online presence which severely restricts their ability to attract volunteers. This is because some people are unaware of where to find specific volunteer opportunities or don't know what roles are available.

Cause 6: COVID-19

COVID-19 substantially impacted many volunteer-based organisations by severely restricting volunteer opportunities. I have seen firsthand many older volunteers not return to their pre-COVID volunteering roles mainly due to health concerns.

COVID also changed volunteers' routines which creates difficulties for volunteers to commit to regular schedules. With changing routines, there's a shift towards episodic or short-term volunteering (ref to Cause 3).

Cause 7: Fragmentation of Causes

With the growth of volunteer-based organisations that focus on specific causes (e.g. veterans, family and domestic violence, and animal welfare) this has resulted in a dilution of efforts and ineffective use of resources.

When volunteers are spread across many similar organisations, the impact of their efforts can be diluted, and organisations may struggle to allocate resources effectively when there are many competing causes. This can lead to inefficiencies and reduced effectiveness in addressing specific issues.

Cause 8: Red Tape

Linking with Cause 3, some volunteer-based organisations have excessive bureaucracy and administrative processes. This is not inviting for many people who wish to volunteer. Acknowledging there is a legitimate need for accountability, good governance, reporting, and administrative processes, a balance needs to be struck.

Cause 9: Engagement and Training

In my experience, some people do not volunteer simply because they have not been asked. Many people may not be aware of volunteer opportunities or the impact they can have. By asking people to volunteer, awareness is raised, and potential volunteers are engaged.

A direct invitation to volunteer can create a personal connection and make individuals feel valued and needed. This personal touch can significantly increase the likelihood of them volunteering.

In terms of training, some potential volunteers feel they don't have the necessary skills or experience to volunteer effectively. Although this may be true in some specialised volunteer roles, a perceived lack of skills or training is a barrier for some.

Listing causes without possible solutions is counterproductive. Therefore, I have listed below some potential solutions to increase volunteering in Queensland.

Solution 1: Flexibility

Flexibility is a key enabler for non-volunteers. To support someone who is time poor, volunteer-based organisations could consider:

1. Smaller bite sized tasks and one-off activities (e.g. a job on a roster);
2. Tasks that can be done at home (e.g. online tasks such as social media, website, newsletter);
3. Job sharing (e.g. joint coaches, team managers);
4. Project based roles and tasks;
5. Short term commitments where the project has a clear purpose and end date (e.g. special event, team photos); and
6. Meeting flexibility (e.g. holding meetings via digital channels).

The Queensland Government can support this solution by producing a toolkit or best practice guide (ref Solution 2) to help volunteer-based organisations create flexible opportunities.

Solution 2: Toolkit or Best Practice Guide

The Queensland Government can help increase volunteering in Queensland by producing a toolkit or best practice guide to help volunteer-based organisations. The document could include:

1. Ways to create flexible opportunities (ref to Solution 1);
2. Best ways to ask people to volunteer;
3. Opportunities to increase volunteer-based organisations' public profile and online presence; and
4. Best practice governance (this maybe a link to the ACNC).

Solution 3: Volunteer Leave

Many large private sector businesses have adopted volunteer leave (ranging from one day to three days) for their employees. This maybe a challenge for some Queensland Government Departments and Agencies but it should be considered where appropriate.

Volunteer leave may also assist the Queensland Government in their Employee Value Proposition.

Solution 4: Increase Civics Education

To address Cause 2, the Queensland Government may consider increasing civics education in the Queensland curriculum.

Solution 5: Nationally Recognised Training for Volunteers

As way to recognise and thank volunteers, the Queensland Government could consider offering free nationally recognised training for volunteers. This could be done through TAFE Queensland and other government training organisations. A similar initiative was in place for volunteers for the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games.

Solution 6: Insurance for Volunteer-Based Organisations

Insurance is often a financial burden for volunteer-based organisations. The Queensland Government may consider initiatives that reduce the cost burden of insurances. This could include developing a risk management and safety toolkit or best practice guide.

Solution 7: Advertising Campaign

An effective advertising campaign could boost volunteer participation by leveraging various digital and traditional marketing strategies. By highlighting the tangible impact of volunteering and ways to volunteer, an advertising campaign would support and complement existing volunteer campaigns. The campaign should also refer people to the Volunteering Queensland website where people can find volunteering opportunities.

It is encouraging to see the Queensland Parliament take an interest in volunteering. I hope the outcomes of this inquiry results in an increase in volunteering in Queensland.

If the Committee has any question or would like more information, I am willing to appear before the Committee at one of their hearings.

Kind regards



Matthew Crossley