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# SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERS FROM CRISIS TO RESILIENCE

**2022 – 2023 State Budget Submission**  
Volunteering Queensland

# Contact

This submission was prepared by Zac Reimers, Policy and Advocacy Lead, in consultation with other Volunteering Queensland staff, board and key stakeholders. For any questions about the budget submission, please contact:

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## Who we are

Volunteering Queensland is the state's peak body for advancing and promoting volunteering. With 300 member organisations and a wider network of thousands more, we represent hundreds of thousands of volunteers that support and enhance the lives of all Queenslanders. Beyond our direct network, we advocate for the rights and wellbeing of all volunteers in Queensland, numbering over three million. Our broad scope of work sees us collaborating with all levels of government, state and interstate networks, organisations and individuals through training, research, advocacy, resources, advice, consultancies and capacity-building projects.

We value our partnership with the Queensland Government on a range of programs, including initiatives to support best practice volunteer management and the capacity of volunteer involving organisations. These include Care Army, the Neighbourhood and Care Army Connect Workers Initiative, digital inclusion programs and disaster volunteer management services. Building upon this partnership, we are advocating for the needs of Queensland's volunteers and volunteer enabling organisations to be included in the upcoming state budget.

## Why Queensland's volunteers should be supported

Our state's volunteers create enormous benefits and opportunities. The State of Volunteering in Queensland 2021 Report found that the economic value of volunteering in Queensland was \$84 billion in 2020 alone. This represents the value of volunteers' time, the resources required to enable volunteer participation, and the productivity benefits from the skills and experiences gained while volunteering. This measurement does not include benefits to the wellbeing of volunteers and recipients of volunteer services – which, if measured, would increase the known value of volunteering substantially. Weighed against costs, it was found that volunteer activity in Queensland provides a \$4.10 return for every dollar of value invested.

The COVID-19 pandemic and recent disaster events have highlighted the value of volunteering beyond the financial. During periods of unprecedented loneliness, isolation, loss and hardship, the benefits of volunteering to one's social, mental and physical health were made clear. A study from the Australian National University found that "*volunteers had a higher level of life satisfaction prior to COVID-19 than non-volunteers*" and that those who were unable to volunteer suffered "*a larger decrease in life satisfaction, equivalent to a reduction in income of \$216 per week*".

In addition to personal benefits, volunteering has obvious, tangible benefits for volunteer involving organisations and clients of volunteer services. Indeed, Queensland implicitly relies on its volunteers to fulfil an important role in the workforce across multiple sectors. The State of Volunteering in Queensland 2021 Report found that over two million Queenslanders volunteered their time through organisations in 2020 – including 500,000 who volunteered with government departments and agencies.

Volunteers, through their generous donation of time and effort, provide services that are essential to the social fabric that makes for cohesive, inclusive communities. Any gap in service delivery can increase the burden on government and the public service. In a 2019 study of the benefits of volunteering to the public sector, Ivonchik writes *“one of the main advantages of citizen involvement in public service delivery is related to subsequent cost savings”* and *“volunteer involvement is indeed significantly and negatively associated with the level of spending and the number of paid employees, with the number of services unaffected”*. The inverse is also true – diminished volunteer involvement is associated with increased spending by governments to deliver equivalent services.

Volunteer involving organisations in Queensland have faced repeated challenges: flood, fire, cyclones, drought and pandemic - in addition to existing issues of resourcing, recruitment and retention. Many have closed or been left under-capacity and in a vulnerable position. Any future decline in formal volunteering participation or the capacity of volunteer involving organisations will markedly increase the costs faced by government. The volunteering sector efficiently converts government and philanthropic resources into benefits and savings that are enjoyed by the state as a whole. This is particularly true in high-touch intervention and care services, such as those supporting rough sleepers, people at risk of homelessness, victims of domestic violence, people with disability, seniors in aged care, those needing support with mental health services and the socially isolated. Additionally, many celebratory aspects of Queensland life would be compromised with a collapse in formal volunteering: community sport and recreation, cultural events, environment and conservation groups, mentoring, hobbyist groups and the arts are all made sustainable by a significant contribution from volunteers.

During times of ‘peace’, the input costs and output benefits of volunteers may be less apparent; however, during times of crisis it is self-evident that volunteering is not free. Organising volunteers and ensuring that their participation is safe, secure and successful requires adequate and ongoing investment of resources, energy and expertise. With this support, the talent, time and goodwill of volunteers can be maximised for the benefit of communities and the state.

Volunteering is filled with inspirational deeds, stories of people lifting each other, communities banding together through a common purpose, triumph over adversity, and hope for the future. Those who engage with volunteers have the opportunity to deepen their sense of connection and belonging. Volunteers deliver outcomes that governments sometimes can’t and need support with – building strong, connected, capable communities.

The benefits of volunteering touch the lives of every Queenslander and the entire ecosystem of our state. The volunteering movement is a force for good. It lifts individuals, communities and our environment out of challenging circumstances into a healthier, happier future. The State of Volunteering in Queensland 2021 Report found that over 60% of Queensland volunteers use their donated time to directly help individuals. Adequate and ongoing investment in volunteering provides the state with opportunities harness this outpouring of goodwill and ensure a brighter future for Queensland communities.

## Recommendations

Volunteering Queensland recommends that the Queensland Government invests in and partners with the volunteering sector to capitalise on emerging needs and opportunities. In particular, to safeguard and futureproof volunteers and volunteer involving organisations to leverage the benefits of volunteering for all Queenslanders. To best support the state's volunteers, Volunteering Queensland is advocating for the upcoming state budget to include:

- 1.** Immediate relief for volunteer involving organisations impacted by the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, including grants, resources and a youth volunteering initiative
- 2.** Core funding to enhance engagement and outcomes for two programs vital to Queensland's resilience: Emergency Volunteering Community Response to Extreme Weather (EV CREW) and Care Army
- 3.** A broader, more collaborative approach to volunteer sector support: coordinated engagement of volunteer support organisations and funding to investigate accessible insurance options
- 4.** Unlocking the potential of volunteering to address social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

## Recommendation 1

Immediate relief for volunteer involving organisations impacted by the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, including grants, resources and a youth volunteering initiative

### Overview

- More than 99.5% of COVID-19 cases in Queensland have been acquired since 17 December 2021 following the outbreak of the highly contagious Omicron variant.
- Volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) are facing a series of unprecedented and existential threats in the form of reduced team size, uncertain workplace protections, increased demand for services and rising costs to engage volunteers safely.
- Before the current wave of COVID-19, VIOs already reported that funding, recruitment and retention were critical issues. The current environment has heightened the consequences of additional resources not being widely available to the sector.
- Many volunteers and VIOs face new and rising costs for COVID-19 adaptation, insurance, testing of volunteers and clients, personal protective equipment and technology - all while having drastically reduced opportunities to raise funds.
- Queensland is experiencing serious signs of a collapse in formal volunteering, especially in community services, delivery of meals and essentials, aged care, local sport and volunteering in crisis and disaster.
- Before VIOs can engage in long term transformation, urgent relief is needed to help address immediate threats facing organisations and their volunteer workforces.
- Youth volunteers have been identified as an especially resilient cohort during COVID-19 and their specific barriers and motivations have been researched recently.

### Background and need

From December 2021 to present, the state has been gripped by a new wave of the Coronavirus pandemic. The onset of the highly contagious Omicron variant and a dramatic rise in interstate travel have resulted in many Queensland workplaces becoming high exposure environments.

As of 17 December 2021, the cumulative total of known COVID-19 cases in Queensland was 2,227. Since that time, the total number of cases has risen hundreds of times over, with infections since December representing close to 100% of cases within the state. Exposure and transmission among volunteers is expected to have followed similar patterns.

In Volunteering Queensland's most recent sector survey (conducted from December 2021 to February 2022), volunteer involving organisations were asked if there have been any impacts on the number of volunteers in their team. Two-thirds of surveyed organisations said they had seen a concerning reduction in volunteers, with the vast majority of those specifically identifying COVID-19 as a reason.

There has not been substantive research on volunteer participation in Queensland since the most recent wave of Coronavirus. However, with levels of transmission reaching that of other states and territories, inferences can be made from recent studies on the impacts of COVID-19 on volunteers, their wellbeing and the decline in the volunteer workforce. The most recent Pulse of the For-Purpose Sector research, published by the Centre for Social Impact in November 2021, found that *“volunteering has dropped significantly since the pandemic began, with approximately two thirds of volunteers stopping their volunteering activities”* and *“with reduced giving and reduced volunteering, some (likely smaller for-purpose) organisations may be at risk of closure”*.

This finding agrees with similar research published by The ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods in 2020, which found that *“there has been a very large fall in volunteering activity due to COVID-19, with almost two-thirds (65.9%) of volunteers saying [...] they have stopped volunteering or other unpaid work as a precaution to minimise COVID-19 transmission”*.

With two-thirds of formal volunteers withdrawing during peak periods of transmission in other states and territories, and two-thirds of recently-surveyed volunteer involving organisations in Queensland reporting they have worrying decreases in volunteer numbers, it is clear that outbreaks of COVID-19 are associated with a sharp decline in volunteer participation within organisations.

It is hoped that the pandemic will reach peak transmission and that Queensland will see a reduction in COVID-19 cases over time. However, even if COVID-19 was eliminated immediately, the damage has been done. There are severe implications for the volunteer workforce – in particular, among those volunteers that withdraw and do not return, or among youth that would normally enter their first structured volunteer roles during this time and have not been presented the opportunity. This has had a compounding impact, as youth volunteers have been identified as being more resilient during peak periods of the pandemic.

Further, volunteer involving organisations have invested considerable time and energy adapting to COVID-19, leaving them less able to fulfil their core mission.

*“I volunteer for my local soccer club. COVID-19 has created a much greater workload for community volunteers in terms of writing COVID safety plans, reorganising training schedules, enforcing spectator restrictions, writing comms, providing refunds, [and] cancelling fundraiser and presentation events. This has meant I have less spare time.”*

*“I am involved in two local community groups and the workload has been substantial. It seems more and more work is expected of volunteers as local governments and councils work less at the local level. It is rewarding to contribute to the community but the ever increasing workload is stressful.”*

*Responses submitted to The ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods*

Groups that engage in face-to-face services have also borne increased costs of rapid antigen tests, protective equipment and other items needed to adapt. These negative impacts have been experienced on top of perennial volunteering sector issues of funding, recruitment, retention and resourcing for best practice volunteer management.

COVID-19 has left volunteer involving organisations – whose services have been relied on now more than ever – on the backfoot. Targeted investment is needed to help volunteer involving organisations recover from their losses, develop resilience strategies for the future, embrace technology and increase their engagement with other demographics of volunteers.

### Objectives

- Prevent further reduction of capacity among VIOs and the services they provide to communities across Queensland.
- Help VIOs financially recover from recent increases in expenses and prepare for the future costs required to safeguard volunteers.
- Build capacity among VIOs to adapt and remain productive, present and safe in a climate of ongoing Coronavirus exposure.
- Invite and support youth volunteers to participate formally in the sector – especially those that have not been exposed to regular volunteering pathways due to COVID-19.

### Recommended investment

Volunteering Queensland recommends that the Queensland Government provides immediate relief for volunteer involving organisations impacted by the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, including grants, resources and a youth volunteering initiative.

- New funding to establish the Volunteering Adaptation and Resilience grants. Successful applicants could receive funding to adapt to COVID-safe practices, re-engage lapsed volunteers, redesign policies and procedures, upgrade their VIO with new technology and remote volunteering, purchase tests and protective equipment, or provide COVID-safety training to their team.  
\$2 million in one-off grant funding for volunteer involving organisations, inclusive of Volunteering Queensland's incurred costs for development, promotion, management and delivery of the grant process.
- Commissioning Volunteering Queensland to create dedicated resources and training specific to the current Queensland COVID-19 environment and its impacts, provided free to the volunteering sector.  
\$150,000 to fund a suite of resources, online tools and free training in their use.
- A campaign to engage and recruit youth volunteers into formal volunteering opportunities, based on the latest research into the specific motivations and barriers of youth in the volunteering sector.  
\$300,000 to design, promote and execute a state-wide campaign to engage and sustain youth volunteering with Queensland volunteer involving organisations.

## Recommendation 2

Core funding to enhance engagement and outcomes for two programs vital to Queensland's resilience: Emergency Volunteering Community Response to Extreme Weather (EV CREW) and Care Army

### Overview

- Programs that improve resilience against disasters and pandemics are strongest when regionally coordinated, locally led and supported with state resources.
- Volunteering Queensland administers two important programs that build local capability and enhance community resilience in disasters and pandemics:
  - EV CREW, Australia's leading emergency volunteering recruitment, management and deployment system.
  - Care Army, providing support to vulnerable Queenslanders and those impacted by COVID-19.
- Although EV CREW and Care Army provide invaluable services, many volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) and Local Government Areas (LGAs) face the same barriers when engaging with these programs at times of crisis: rapidly recruiting, onboarding and managing volunteers is hardest when volunteers are needed most.
- These programs work best when VIOs and LGAs have been engaged and supported before disasters or pandemics strike. Specific projects allow for local capability and capacity building, such as:
  - The Community Champions/Volunteer Leaders initiative, which has been successfully delivered and embedded into three LGAs
  - The Volunteer Organisations Active in Disaster (VOAD) initiative, which identifies, strengthens and leverages local capability to create a community-led approach to recovery.
  - The Neighbourhood and Care Army Connect Worker Initiative, identifying volunteer workforce needs and building local volunteer participation rates.

However, these programs are limited in duration, created through one-off funding and tied to specific localities.

- Resources are required to provide centralised outreach, engagement and capacity building services for VIOs and LGAs. This engagement would take learnings from existing projects and help groups prepare for crisis and subsequent recovery.
- Dedicated support is also required for innovation, maintenance and development of associated digital platforms in order to continue and optimise core operations.
- An opportunity exists to more strongly align EV CREW and Care Army to state human and social recovery arrangements and provide ongoing core operational funding that maximises the value of these programs to VIOs, LGAs and Queenslanders in need.

## Background and need

Local volunteering is what enables communities to be strong, connected and resilient, especially at times of disaster. Through floods, storms and fire, volunteers have worked together to help Australia's most disaster-prone state prepare for, respond to, and recover from extreme weather events.

Queensland is uniquely positioned to deliver frontline volunteer participation in disasters, pandemics and other emergencies due to Volunteering Queensland's development and delivery of the EV CREW and Care Army programs, in partnership with the Queensland Government. Through EV CREW, Volunteering Queensland regularly collaborates with LGAs and relevant volunteer organisations to build capacity and provide expert advice on spontaneous emergency volunteering. This program:

- Provides a comprehensive database and management system that supports the pre-registration, management and activation of prospective emergency volunteers.
- Places volunteers with LGAs, government agencies and other volunteer involving organisations requesting volunteer assistance.
- Provides advice, training, coordination and other support to LGAs, government agencies and organisations to assist them in identifying and building local capability. This allows them to engage volunteers before and during disaster, and to encourage the transition into regular volunteering roles during times of 'peace'.
- Enables the development of resources, management plans and services to support capability building, resilience, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

The catastrophic floods of February and March 2022 have highlighted the essential role of EV CREW. Volunteering Queensland activated tens of thousands of volunteers across six LGAs and was in communication with seven others, providing advice, resources and standing by for potential mobilisation. During and after the floods, Queenslanders turned out to support their communities and lend a hand. This took many forms, from highly-structured volunteer participation within emergency services, through to coordinated volunteer assistance through VIOs, and informal help provided by neighbours, colleagues and friends.

EV CREW occupies an essential space within this spectrum of volunteer assistance at times of disaster, providing a centralised platform for registration, identification and safe, coordinated mobilisation of volunteers. Its value has been highlighted by royal commissions, other states and territories, and even the federal government of the USA.

"State and territory governments should improve arrangements for the coordination of spontaneous volunteers in relief and recovery from natural disasters, for example by adopting the Emergency Volunteering CREW model used in Queensland."

Draft Propositions from the  
Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

## VOLUNTEERING QUEENSLAND 2021-2022 STATE BUDGET SUBMISSION

Volunteering Queensland has years of experience supporting spontaneous disaster volunteering across Queensland. EV CREW has been activated more than 160 times since its foundation in 2008 and this has provided much insight into the best strategic direction for the future. A key learning from EV CREW is that if LGAs have not adequately prepared for the involvement of both formal and informal volunteers before disaster strikes, they may be required to develop critical responses in the midst of a crisis. This introduces the risk of duplicated efforts, unsafe practices, inefficient recovery operations and additional harm to affected communities.

Put simply, LGAs and organisations that are under-prepared and under-resourced are least able to access support when they need it most. In many cases, this has also been true of another vital volunteering resilience program: Care Army. Through Volunteering Queensland, volunteer involving organisations impacted by the pandemic and other stressors have been able to request assistance from Queenslanders who have pre-registered as Care Army volunteers.

The same bottleneck has been identified in both programs: during times of greatest negative impact, the potential capacity of EV CREW and Care Army volunteers can remain untapped if organisations and LGAs do not have the training, expertise or resources to rapidly take this valuable workforce on. This was described during a public hearing as part of the recent inquiry into social isolation and loneliness, with a representative of a neighbourhood centre saying:

“Sometimes [the pandemic] meant that volunteers who had been doing jobs for years were no longer prepared to come in and do them, but other people were prepared to volunteer. People from the Care Army were prepared to come in, but they needed people to help them to come into the jobs. We do need that professional work. When you see people doing it really well, it just sings.”

Roger Marshall  
President of Logan East Community Neighbourhood Centre

Fortunately, the appropriate means of support to address this bottleneck has been identified: dedicated and centralised operational funding is needed to proactively engage volunteer involving organisations, LGAs and other leaders across the state before disasters strike. With EV CREW and Care Army databases having the same digital system, support can be provided efficiently through one aligned stream. This results in benefits for Queenslanders whose local leadership hasn't yet engaged these programs, but could with additional outreach and guidance.

Within Care Army, the Queensland Government has demonstrated support for the sector by engaging Volunteering Queensland to deliver the Neighbourhood and Care Army Connect Initiative (NCAC). This program places 15 Care Army Connect Workers within neighbourhood and community centres across the state. Likewise, within EV CREW, the National Disaster Resilience Program and the Queensland Reconstruction Authority have previously funded Volunteering Queensland to deliver a VOAD (Volunteer Organisations Active in Disaster) pilot in regional Rockhampton.

There are commonalities between NCAC and VOAD. Both are capacity-building programs that seek to enhance resilience and recovery through locally-led volunteer participation. Both programs are focused on specific geographic areas and have a set time period for their delivery. While these programs are extremely valuable, there is an inherent limitation in their scope and a gap remains. To maximise the value of existing EV CREW and Care Army infrastructure, both programs need centralised, dedicated support that can identify and engage suitable stakeholders anywhere in Queensland. In particular, areas that do not benefit from already having a neighbourhood and community centre.

This recommendation would build upon existing EV CREW and Care Army arrangements, as well as positive outcomes from NCAC and VOAD, to assist communities across the state in becoming more connected, prepared and resilient. To further this alignment, both programs could be engaged through the Human and Social Functional Recovery Group and Community Recovery team within state government.

Volunteers are a key resource for surge capacity during emergencies. Volunteering Queensland is well-positioned to ensure they are engaged effectively, safely and at times when impacted communities need and want them. Just as volunteer involving organisations and governments are supported by EV CREW and Care Army, these programs also require dedicated support to maintain Queensland's advantage in the face of adversity.

### Objectives

- Recruit and manage volunteers to enhance the state's recovery in the event of natural disasters, pandemics, extreme weather and other emergencies.
- Secure core funding that enables Queensland communities to continue benefitting from the rapid mobilisation of volunteers in disaster (EV CREW) and pandemics (Care Army). These services and their underlying technology are currently vulnerable to future, unforeseen budgetary changes.
- Align EV CREW and Care Army into a complementary suite of initiatives through the human and social recovery arrangements, providing additional clarity and efficiency in the programs' purposes, processes and outcomes.
- Maximise the value of EV CREW and Care Army by engaging, training and co-designing solutions with VIOs and LGAs before future crises, to improve volunteering outcomes during and after their next adverse event.

## Recommended investment

Volunteering Queensland recommends that the Queensland Government provides core funding to enhance engagement and outcomes for two programs vital to Queensland's resilience: Emergency Volunteering Community Response to Extreme Weather (EV CREW) and Care Army.

- A commitment for dedicated operational funding and development of the EV CREW and Care Army programs, improving service delivery, sustainability and outcomes. Core funding and alignment of disaster and crises volunteering services may be best achieved through the human and social recovery arrangements.  
\$250,000 per year for five years, funding dedicated IT personnel, associated licences and development work.
- Resourcing Volunteering Queensland to recruit dedicated EV CREW and Care Army staff responsible to increase collaboration and preparedness with LGAs and VIOs across the state. This team would provide tailored training, resources, processes, and advice that reflect the unique geography, capabilities and needs of client VIOs and LGAs.  
\$250,000 per year for five years to provide dedicated officers for engagement, administrative support and resource development for LGAs and VIOs.

## Recommendation 3

A broader, more collaborative approach to volunteer sector support: coordinated engagement of volunteer support organisations and funding to investigate accessible insurance options

### Overview

- A network of Commonwealth Government funded Volunteer Resource Centres (VRCs) provide volunteer matching services, training, networking, resources and other forms of support for their local communities. The majority of Queensland VRCs are active in regional hubs across the state.
- Most VRCs rely on federal funding to remain operational and provide volunteer support services in their local area. This stream of funding will cease in June 2022. All VRCs that solely relied on previous Commonwealth Government funding will lose capacity and capability to assist local volunteers. Others will close altogether, losing valuable community assets.
- VRCs have accumulated social infrastructure and possess sound knowledge of the volunteering solutions within their region. When a VRC closes, decades of investment in volunteering support are lost, leaving gaps in regional areas of high need.
- Volunteer sector support can be found in other forms: volunteering peak bodies, Neighbourhood and Community Centres, specialist VIOs, corporate partnerships and locally led coalitions, such as VOADs (Volunteer Organisations Active in Disaster).
- Alignment of on-the-ground services between different types of volunteer support organisations is rare, even when links are shared through similar state government funding arrangements or membership of the same networks. Efficiencies and insights can be gained from a coordinated government approach to volunteer support services, harnessing the unique value that each offers.
- Another form of volunteer sector support that presents a barrier to VIOs is their ability to purchase adequate volunteer insurance. VIOs frequently cite a lack of finances, expertise and time needed to navigate this complex industry and purchase an appropriate product that complies with best practice.
- A program provided or subsidised by the Queensland Government for volunteer insurance program would mitigate risk, build capacity and participation rates, allow for more efficient spending and improve confidence for the sector.

### Background and need

Volunteer involving organisations face a number of ongoing challenges. One challenge is understanding and successfully navigating the legal, risk and insurance requirements to appropriately engage and retain volunteers. In addition to the knowledge required, the cost and conditions of volunteer insurance can be prohibitive, restrictive and can exacerbate existing financial and safety risks. *'Risk, insurance and legal issues'* was identified as an

increasingly important issue for volunteer involving organisations in the State of Queensland. Volunteering in Queensland 2021 Report.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted significant misunderstandings and misinformation regarding volunteer insurance, leading to volunteers being unnecessarily stood down at a time of need. The pandemic environment has heightened the existing confusion about insurance for volunteers, leaving many volunteers questioning the protections afforded to them as a critical - albeit unpaid - workforce.

Volunteering Queensland conducted a survey of volunteer involving organisations in late 2020, during the ongoing response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. In this survey, one in four volunteer involving organisations selected insurance, risk, and associated legal issues as a 'main challenge' for their group. Many organisations highlighted insurance and its prohibitive cost in additional comments, including:

"Insurance [is] the biggest single cost to our club."

"Volunteer insurance is an issue that needs to be addressed so that volunteers are not out of pocket."

"They should be covered by a no fault volunteer insurance scheme funded by Government"

The Queensland Government is ideally positioned to work with the volunteering sector to enhance existing strategies regarding volunteer insurance and help address associated concerns held by the sector. The volunteering sector would benefit from the state government, in partnership with Volunteering Queensland, undertaking a feasibility study into a state funded or subsidised volunteer insurance scheme. This study could examine precedents in this area and the current landscape – providing a clear base of information for volunteer involving organisations. It could also explore viable options for future insurance access and provision. This may include building off existing WorkSafe and WorkCover platforms – a unique opportunity available at the state level to provide affordable, comprehensive, trusted volunteer insurance to protect Queenslanders who generously give their time each year.

An additional challenge for the volunteering sector is the changing landscape of local volunteer support services. These services can be provided by a range of organisations: Volunteering Queensland as the peak body, Volunteer Resource Centres and Hubs, Neighbourhood and Community Centres with a comprehensive knowledge about volunteering, for-profit consultants, and leadership within volunteer involving organisations themselves. Long-term, significant stakeholders in the delivery of volunteer support services are local Volunteer Resource Centres (VRCs). VRCs assist with a range of services including volunteer recruitment, referral, training, and knowledge sharing across local networks. VRCs operate in both urban and regional areas, using local insight and connections as a core component of their work. Across Queensland, local VRCs are the only organisations in their areas whose mission is solely focused on increasing and improving volunteering outcomes.

Cessation of the previous Commonwealth Government funding program will drastically increase the likelihood of most Queensland VRCs closing, or otherwise suspending the work they do to enable volunteer participation in their local communities. Indeed, one Queensland

VRC has already closed, and another will close its doors on 30 June 2022. Whilst the closure and reduced service capacity of VRCs will be detrimental to the communities they serve, this drastic change carries benefits and opportunities for the Queensland Government. Queensland VRCs have collaborated to co-design a proposal for effective, sustainable volunteer support services. This proposal has been published separately to this document.

There is currently an exciting opportunity to align volunteer investment for the growth of this critical workforce with Queensland Government priorities. Priorities such as creating a resilient Queensland, the future direction of our communities, and the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Presently, structured alignment of on-the-ground services between different types of volunteer support organisations is rare, even when links are shared through similar state government funding arrangements or membership of the same networks. Impact, efficiencies, insights and higher return on investment can be gained from a coordinated government approach to volunteer support services. A model that adequately funds and aligns key organisations and agencies that play a role in supporting and strengthening volunteering. This can address chronic volunteer support service gaps and harness the unique value that each organisation delivers to its community and the state.

At this time of transition – and with volunteers being essential to action on disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and social isolation and loneliness – Queensland would greatly benefit from a strategy for volunteering in the state. As the state peak body for volunteering, Volunteering Queensland is well-positioned to lead this work supporting the state government to explore options, co-designing a strategy with the Queensland volunteering sector and delivering an impactful strategy. This could also provide a valuable tangible outcome for the existing knowledge and networks found within the Queensland Volunteering Action Partnership.

So many volunteer involving organisations rely on expert knowledge and support to engage volunteers and deliver their mission. The form of volunteer support services in Queensland is changing and the state government has a crucial opportunity to consolidate this into a strategy that empowers volunteering for the future.

### Objectives

- Promote, increase and enable volunteer participation in Queensland through locally led forms of volunteer sector support.
- Build capacity of volunteer involving organisations by improving their volunteer recruitment and retention outcomes.
- Coordinate key volunteer support services through an aligned, efficient approach that results in collaboration and fewer wasted resources, provides evidence-based research and data collection, and develops and enables a strong, vital, sustainable volunteer workforce. This will ensure that new investment in place-based volunteer support accounts for and build on existing support services and prioritises under-serviced areas of highest need.

- Identify which areas of Queensland have the highest need for volunteer support services by consolidating relevant state government data collection and conducting new research that maps volunteering supply and demand across the state.
- Prevent the state's network of place based VRCs from suspending general recruitment and volunteer matching services, thereby retaining the economic and social benefits they provide to their local communities in regional and urban areas.
- Reduce the burden and knowledge barrier that currently exist for volunteer involving organisations seeking suitable volunteer insurance to protect their teams. Removing these overheads provides more resources for volunteer involving organisations to achieve their aims, providing additional benefits to the community.
- Mitigate risk by reducing the number of volunteers that engage in uninsured activities, lowering the chances of physical, financial and reputational in the volunteer sector and to the people and causes it supports.

## Recommended investment

Volunteering Queensland recommends that the Queensland Government engages in a broader, more collaborative approach to volunteer sector support: coordinated engagement of volunteer support organisations and funding to investigate accessible insurance options.

- Supporting the state's existing network of Volunteer Resource Centres (VRCs) to continue their work enabling volunteer participation in their regions. A separate proposal will be presented to the Queensland Government that outlines a potential model for support and engagement of volunteer support services to help achieve state government priorities.  
*Level of recommended investment to be described in the proposal.*
- Development of a state volunteering strategy. This would focus on identifying latent opportunities and efficiencies, combining compatible datasets for more accurate data collection, promoting collaboration between key groups and avoiding duplicating services. A strategy would be developed in collaboration with the Queensland Volunteering Action Partnership and co-designed with the Queensland volunteering sector.  
*\$300,000 over two years to perform an environment scan, assess the needs and motivations of volunteers, current and emerging trends of contemporary volunteering in all its forms, assess the benefits and needs of different volunteer support services, assess the value and impact of technology, align data and develop a strategy.*  
*\$110,000 of additional funding (plus co-funded contributions from partners) for research that maps the supply and demand of volunteering across the state, to inform the volunteer support strategy and maximise the value of future investments.*
- To safeguard our workforce and provide confidence to the sector, Volunteering Queensland proposes a partnership with Queensland Government to undertake a feasibility study into a state-wide volunteer insurance scheme funded or subsidised by the state government. This study would explore successful models used in other sectors, other states and territories of Australia and internationally, as well as their potential application to Queensland's unique landscape.  
*\$180,000 commitment for Volunteering Queensland to commission and liaise with an external, independent organisation for a feasibility study into volunteer insurance.*

## Recommendation 4

### Unlocking the potential of volunteering to address social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

#### Overview

- Social isolation and loneliness have significant effects on health and wellbeing. An estimated two million adults experience loneliness on a weekly basis in Queensland. With the additional impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, addressing this issue has been identified as a priority for the wellbeing of the state.
- Multiple studies have confirmed that volunteering provides unique benefits to individuals, enhances the ability of organisations to deliver services to vulnerable groups, and has a positive impact on the social wellbeing of the volunteers themselves. During times of pandemic, volunteers who were able to continue in their roles reported markedly better life satisfaction and wellbeing.
- Social prescribing programs – using a link worker to prescribe engaging activities to vulnerable people – are a potential means of addressing social isolation and loneliness. Commonly prescribed activities include volunteering with an organisation, or becoming a client of a volunteer involving organisation (VIO).
- Any government solution to social isolation and loneliness relies on a strong underlying formal volunteering sector. Volunteers are essential for visitor schemes, counselling, sports, cultural events and health services – among others.
- Year-on-year studies describe formal volunteering as being in decline. During peaks of the Coronavirus pandemic, many VIOs have reduced teams, put their volunteering on hiatus or ceased operations entirely. Also, many volunteers have not returned to their former organisations and roles.
- VIOs that participate in programs designed to alleviate social isolation and loneliness will require specialised training, capacity to host volunteers or clients with high needs, additional time and resources.
- There is an opportunity to improve outreach, inclusion and accessibility within volunteering for people experiencing or at risk of isolation and loneliness.
- A lack of capacity among VIOs was identified as a major barrier in addressing social isolation and loneliness in the United Kingdom. Queensland VIOs are currently experiencing a significant shortfall of volunteers, rapidly increasing demand, rising costs and a lack of resources for basic operations.

#### Background and need

Social isolation and loneliness have significant effects on the health and wellbeing of many Queenslanders. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare describes social isolation as *“the state of having minimal contact with others”*, while loneliness is *“a subjective state of negative feelings about having a lower level of social contact than desired”*.

Social isolation and loneliness can be caused by a range of stressors, including the loss of a loved one, unemployment, living alone, separating from a partner, or fragmentation within a community. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a compounding effect, especially during the peak periods of social distancing and lockdowns. This has resulted in increased demand for mental health services that assist the isolated and lonely.

A wide variety of organisations provide support for the socially isolated and, for many, volunteer participation is at the core of their operation. Within not-for-profit health workforces, the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission reports that Queensland has the highest proportion of formal volunteers relative to paid staff in Australia. Nationally, this workforce has approximately one volunteer for each paid staff member. Our state engages over 50% more volunteers per paid staff member, with a volunteer-to-employee ratio exceeding 1.5 : 1. Queensland not-for-profits identifying as *'mental health and crisis intervention'* services are almost entirely reliant on formal volunteering, with a ratio of 9.4 : 1. That is, over 90% of people within these organisations are volunteering their time.

Without additional support, Queensland organisations that help the socially isolated may lose the benefits afforded by their volunteer teams. A reduction in formal volunteering increases the risk to vulnerable groups when organisations lose capacity and capability, resulting in services being cut. When volunteers aren't adequately supported, they become a transient workforce lacking coherent management and commitment. Unfortunately, lack of volunteer participation can also be a consequence of social isolation in a community, creating a negative cycle.

For the volunteer, participating in volunteering has a wealth of benefits. These include social connection, established routines, increased physical activity, gains in skills and knowledge, and a sense of purpose, belonging and accomplishment. A study of adults in the USA found that volunteering to help others *"was significantly predictive of better mental health, physical health, life satisfaction, and social well-being, as well as fewer depressive symptoms"*.

While volunteering, like exercise and healthy eating, has formidable benefits to one's physical and mental wellbeing, this has not been promoted through a dedicated marketing or educational campaign – unlike the other health choices mentioned. According to subject matter experts from the University of Queensland, this is a missed opportunity, with Dr Alex Haslam saying: *"Although research shows that lack of social integration and support are the most important determinants of mortality, we found that people tend to see them as among the least important [...] These results suggest that education has a role to play in increasing awareness, in the same way that we have seen very successful campaigns to quit smoking, exercise more, and have a healthy diet"*.

In addition to personal benefits for the volunteer, volunteering can have unique benefits for clients of volunteer-enabled services – benefits that paid staff can't always replicate. The University of Liverpool conducted a study in January 2021 of aged care services, examining the social impacts of programs delivered by paid staff, volunteers, or a blend of the two. The study found that the increased feelings of belonging and community offered by volunteers led to observable social health outcomes, noting that *"older people attending blended and voluntary services were over twice as likely to experience a reduction in De Jong Loneliness score from baseline and their final follow-up"*.

In short, volunteering has powerful social benefits for the volunteer, for clients of volunteer services, for organisations working to mitigate isolation and loneliness, and for communities at large. There is no question of *if* volunteers can be involved in addressing social isolation, only *how* they will be involved – and if they will receive adequate support to do so.

Recently, there has been interest in a ‘*social prescribing*’ model. Under this model, there is a formal referral pathway from a medical professional to a link worker, and on to a community group or volunteer involving organisation. People experiencing social isolation and loneliness may also be referred to the program by friends and community groups, or someone may self-refer. In many cases, patients are prescribed volunteering activity with local groups. Formal volunteering activity is a necessary part of the program, with link workers collaborating with volunteer involving organisations to find appropriate placements.

Social prescribing has been explored in Queensland (for example, through the *Ways to Wellness* project), but it has not yet been widely delivered. However, this model has been employed in the United Kingdom since the 1990s, with a more significant rollout in the last decade. With similar volunteering sectors and publicly funded health systems, lessons can be learned from the challenges and limitations faced by the delivery of social prescribing in the United Kingdom.

Findings from the United Kingdom are consistent: a lack of general resourcing and capacity building for the volunteer sector severely limit the delivery and benefits of social prescribing. A social prescribing model relies on a vibrant, sustainable, well-resourced volunteering sector to accommodate the needs of volunteers and clients who are linked to a service. Investment, training and consultation need to occur in the volunteering sector before social prescribing can be delivered on a large scale. According to one report:

“The speed of the NHS link worker rollout, combined with the fact that it has been led by new bodies with broad responsibilities and, sometimes, few connections to the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector or other local actors, has proved challenging.”

“Funding is the main concern across the VCSE sector. We know that the poorest and most excluded communities with the worst health outcomes also have the lowest levels of formal VCSE activity. **For social prescribing to deliver its promise**, especially in terms of population health management and tackling health inequality, **the NHS needs to ensure that the VCSE sector receives the funding it needs to meet increased demand**, coordinate support and build community, especially for those most under-represented and most at risk.”

Rolling Out Social Prescribing report  
National Voices

Another group surveyed volunteer involving organisations that participate in social prescribing models, asking about their most significant funding challenges. They identified:

1. Lack of equity in the relationship between the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector and commissioners of social prescribing (the public bodies who plan, procure, deliver and evaluate services for local residents)
2. The need for long-term funding arrangements to enable consistent, reliable service provision
3. The need for core funding for activity providers
4. Lack of money moving across sectors; most specifically towards activities that take place after referral by a link worker
5. Using a range of approaches to generating income to enable activities to be available to a wider group of people than just those who were referred through social prescribing

The ongoing challenges of funding, resourcing and capacity are familiar to volunteer involving organisations in Queensland. Especially with the recent impacts of natural disasters and the Coronavirus pandemic, the foundations of the volunteering sector need to be reinforced before they are asked to take on additional load within the community. Further, many volunteer involving organisations would require reimbursement for costs incurred through participating in social prescribing, in order to continue their involvement sustainably.

“Some Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations are expected to provide activities for those referred to them, without additional commissioning to cover the costs. This appears inequitable as a tariff would typically be paid if referral were to another NHS/health provider. Frequently these are small organisations and practitioners.”

“Our recommendations to ensure a future for social prescribing:

1. Any organisations or services that take referrals from social prescribing link workers must receive financial investment for this
2. Long-term (e.g. five years) core funding for the provision of activities and services in response to referrals must enable appropriate payment for providers of all sizes”

Enabling the potential of social prescribing report  
The Conservation Volunteers

An opportunity exists to harness the powerful benefits of volunteering and work towards addressing social isolation and loneliness – if adequate support is provided. Without strengthening the foundations of the volunteering sector, and providing ongoing support, government and community partnerships to address social isolation will experience the same limitations as observed in the United Kingdom.

## Objectives

- Leverage the unique benefits of volunteering to help address social isolation and loneliness in Queensland.
- Investigate how volunteering can be made more accessible and inclusive to those experiencing or at risk of social isolation and loneliness.
- Ensure the viability of VIOs that will be participating in government solutions for social isolation and loneliness, learning from past experiences in other jurisdictions.
- Promote the benefits of volunteering to one's mental and physical wellbeing.

## Recommended investment

To best leverage the value of volunteering, Volunteering Queensland recommends that the Queensland Government invests in the sector to help address social isolation and loneliness.

- Funding for a widespread campaign to promote the benefits of volunteering, aimed at improving awareness, participation in volunteering and health and wellbeing.  
\$1.5 million for Queensland Government to create and broadcast a 12 – 18 month state-wide media campaign encouraging participation in volunteering
- Consultation and co-design of resources, training and other means of enhancing inclusion and accessibility within volunteering for those experiencing or at risk of social isolation and loneliness. This would be developed as a partnership between subject matter experts in volunteering, mental health, loneliness and relevant outreach programs.  
\$600,000 per year for two years to establish a partnership, develop resources and training, engage VIOs and report on outcomes.
- Funding for VIOs that participate in Queensland Government programs to help alleviate the negative impacts of social isolation and loneliness. This will be targeted at securing the viability of VIOs for the duration of the program, as well as allowing them to access required training and build capacity to host clients and new volunteers.  
Varying costs depending on VIO and program, focusing on supporting under-resourced, volunteer run VIOs. Suggested investment of \$25,000 for up to 100 organisations to reimburse expenses, ensure viability and build capacity.