



**volunteering**  
queensland

Submission to the Community  
Safety and Legal Affairs  
Committee regarding the  
Disaster Management and other  
legislation Amendment Bill 2024

15 March 2024

## Who We Are

Volunteering Queensland (VQ) is the state's peak body for advancing and promoting volunteering. A core part of our work is assisting Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) to engage, manage and retain a strong, effective volunteer workforce that is necessary to advance their mission and cause.

We directly represent around 300 member organisations and support thousands more through our wider network, encompassing hundreds of thousands of volunteers who contribute their time, money and skills to the benefit of all Queenslanders. Beyond our direct networks, we advocate for the rights and wellbeing of all volunteers in Queensland, numbering over three million. Our activities involve us in collaborating with all levels of government, individual volunteers, and diverse networks of organisations across the state and country. Our work spans disaster response support, training (including accredited courses), advice and consulting, research, advocacy, management resources, recruitment support, and capacity-building projects.

## Comments on the legislation

Volunteering Queensland does not oppose the overall goals involved in implementing reforms relating to disaster management. However, we wish to take the opportunity to affirm that volunteers are essential in the activities and effectiveness of the Fire and Emergency Services in Queensland.

Volunteering Queensland recently provided a submission to the Community Support and Services Committee for its inquiry into related legislation for Marine Rescue Queensland and the State Emergency Service. The core principle we outlined in that submission – which was to highlight the necessity to treat all volunteers with adequate support, respect, due process and natural justice in the oversight and management of volunteer activities – is one we repeat in this submission for Fire and Emergency Services volunteers.

We very much welcome the amendment proposed in Clause 22 of this legislation to explicitly recognise “the valuable role of volunteers in supporting the delivery of fire and emergency services” in Queensland, by incorporating this into the Objects of the existing Fire and Emergency Services Act.

However, we wish to emphasise that formal recognition of the valuable role of volunteers is not sufficient to guarantee that volunteers will be treated fairly.

We understand that the work of firefighters and other emergency service workers – whether volunteer or paid employees – can be both extremely dangerous and also life-saving. Valuing volunteers who willingly put themselves in these situations to support their local communities for no financial gain must be significantly more robust than simply affirming that their contribution is valued. It must be embedded in the way that those volunteers' roles are designed and managed, including how those volunteers are treated and to ensuring that their rights, views and experiences are respected. This will not only strengthen the outcome of the volunteer work, but support recruitment and retention, as well as raise the reputation of the volunteer program in the community.

Volunteering Queensland does not wish to make comment on whether volunteers are currently under-recognised or under-supported in firefighting and other emergency service organisations.

Rather, we are seeking to emphasise that good volunteer management must be intentionally and specifically invested in whenever changes are made to operational or organisational structures. It is crucial that volunteers continue to be recognised and supported to achieve the outcomes sought through this legislation.

Volunteering Queensland is involved with supporting disaster responses on the ground through our long-standing support for EV CREW (Emergency Volunteering Community Response to Extreme Weather), a service that matches volunteers with disaster and emergency management arrangements when and where they are needed across Queensland. Since 2008, we have facilitated over 46,000 volunteers to provide assistance and ongoing recovery support in over 200 natural disaster situations. We are also a part of EVAC, the Minister's Emergency Volunteer Advisor Committee.

We recognise that EV CREW is a form of supplemental emergency and disaster response support. Frontline volunteering in firefighting, as well as other areas such as the SES or Marine Rescue, is a specialised area that requires specific skills and training. We do not seek to speak to their specific and specialised experiences. Our aim in our role as the Peak Body for volunteering in Queensland is to emphasise, the core principles involved in best respecting and managing volunteers across the varied work they do and contributions they make.

Central to best practice is to ensure fair processes are used in any context where a volunteer may be subject to a complaint or disciplinary procedure. While volunteers may not lose a source of income as a result of such processes, it can still have a significant impact on the individual volunteer. The perception of poor processes can also have a significant effect on overall volunteer motivation, recruitment and retention.

Volunteering Queensland will be launching the State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 report in May this year, which contains independent research from the Institute of Project Management (IPM). The research shows, consistent with other literature, that *word of mouth* is the most significant factor for people deciding to volunteer. The corollary is that poor volunteering experiences is significant factor that leads to people deciding to stop volunteering, to not to start volunteering, or to shift volunteering activities to a different organisation.

We recognise that volunteers are in a different position to paid employees but wish to emphasise the need for any processes relating to complaint or disciplinary activities to protect volunteer rights sufficiently and fully.

While it is generally known that volunteers play a significant role in assisting with disaster response and relief, Volunteering Queensland's experience is that the size of this volunteer workforce is often under-estimated. Evidence recently provided to the Community Support and Service Committee by Mr Edward Cowie from the Queensland State Emergency Service Volunteer Association stated that approximately 96% of the SES workforce are volunteers, who number around 5,400 in total. The submission to this inquiry from the Rural Fire Brigades Association of Queensland indicates that there are over 26, 500 volunteer brigade members in Queensland. These volunteers need to be supported, and with broad declines in volunteer participation, now more than ever, volunteer programs need to be supported in legislation.

These figures show how quickly disaster response and management would collapse were volunteering contribution to significantly decline. It is for this reason that we are providing this submission to emphasise the necessity for volunteers in the disaster response area to be fully supported and respected, both in practice as well as word.

While it is not appropriate to embody operational detail into legislation, once the legislation passes into law, Volunteering Queensland encourages members of Parliament, including those on this Committee, to continue to monitor and review the adequacy of the support provided and processes used relating to volunteers.

The contribution of volunteers is often acknowledged, but the voices and experiences of volunteers are not always heard or listened to. While volunteers contribute their skills and time willingly without financial gain, they also need to be supported and their experience and knowledge genuinely listened to and incorporated into the ongoing activities of any Volunteer Involving Organisation. Volunteers do not all appear organically, and they do not continue to volunteer if they are not respected. As Queensland moves towards a new mechanism for disaster management arrangements, it is essential that the thousands of volunteers who contribute to assisting the community in times of crisis are properly supported.

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