



volunteering
queensland

Volunteering Queensland

Submission response to Future Foundations for Giving -
Draft Report

from the Productivity Commission Review of Philanthropy

Contents

Introduction	1
General comments.....	1
Specific comments	2
Draft finding 3.2	2
Draft finding 3.3	3
Draft finding 4.1	3
Draft finding 4.2	4
Draft recommendation 7.5.....	5
Draft recommendation 9.2.....	5
Draft recommendation 9.5.....	5
Draft finding 10.1	5

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Introduction

Volunteering Queensland is the state's peak body for advancing and promoting volunteering, starting in 1983. A core part of our work is assisting Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) to engage, manage and retain a strong and effective volunteer workforce necessary to advance their missions and causes. We directly represent around 300 member organisations and support thousands more through our wider network, encompassing hundreds of thousands of volunteers who freely 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, who number over three million. We collaborate 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, resources for volunteer management, volunteer recruitment support, and capacity-building projects.

General comments

Volunteering Queensland appreciates the many recognitions in the Draft Report about the essential value of volunteering. We especially appreciate the explicit acknowledgements that volunteering, which is *time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain*, is often a more valuable form of giving than monetary donations. Volunteering builds social capital and community resilience. Volunteering produces significant flow-on benefits for our economy (estimated at \$6.3B gross value added to Queensland in 2020¹). Volunteering promotes health and wellbeing, including with addressing social isolation and loneliness. Volunteering creates strong threads throughout the fabric of our society.

Volunteering Queensland is generally supportive of proposals to collect and publish more data on volunteerism, however we believe it is essential for the scope to be broadened beyond that suggested in the Draft Report; beyond formal volunteering in organisations registered as charities. The size of the volunteer workforce in the charitable sector is immense, estimated at around 3.2 million people nationally, and 370,000 in Queensland in 2023.²) However, it is dwarfed in comparison to the overall number of volunteers in Australia, which Volunteering Queensland estimates to be around 13.9 million people nationally and 2.8 million in Queensland in 2023.³

Non-charity volunteer organisations that do not come under the remit of the ACNC include most sporting clubs; many smaller arts, music and cultural endeavours; many animal welfare groups; and many community-level organisations, such as local bushcare groups. Many of these groups are entirely volunteer-run, or otherwise would be unable to operate without volunteers.

It also must be recognised that many charities do not have Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status. This is especially important when considering how to encourage volunteerism. The Draft Report estimates that "only a third of charities wholly dependent on volunteers have DGR status".

It would be impractical to seek complete and accurate data on formal volunteering. Volunteering Queensland would recommend against such a proposal were it made, especially for the burden it would invariably place on volunteer organisations. However, we strongly recommend collecting more data on formal volunteering, particularly for estimating the resulting social, economic, and environmental benefits. This could help inform policy-making, including identifying the need for investments into volunteering and measuring returns on those investments. However, we must emphasise that in collecting data, it must not come as an undue burden to volunteer involving organisations, most of which have very limited capacity and resources.

Our recommendation to broaden the scope of the proposed data collection is still confined to formal volunteering in this instance. The indicative value of informal volunteering is enormous, and we do recognise and seek to support informal volunteering. However, we do not see that it is practical to recommend collecting data on informal volunteering in this instance.

Volunteering Queensland believes the Draft Report under-recognises the significance of limited household finances (especially with high costs-of-living) as a barrier to volunteering. In the upcoming State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report, the cost to volunteer was the second-highest barrier reported by volunteers wishing to volunteer more, with the first being a lack of time.

Volunteering Queensland supports and welcomes the statement that “volunteers are essential to the operations of Australian charities”, however we wish to emphasise that in our view, the report must clearly and centrally acknowledge that volunteering is *essential* to the fabric of our society. A strengthened acknowledgement will reinforce all the recommendations in the report that aim to reduce the barriers for giving and to encourage volunteering.

Volunteering Queensland reiterates that we support the development of this report. We are seeking to not only increase volunteering rates, but to also promote the benefits of volunteering to volunteers and maximise the effectiveness of volunteer contributions. This will in-turn promote the health and wellbeing of our communities, society and lifestyles. All of us at Volunteering Queensland wish to thank the Productivity Commission for this opportunity to provide feedback on the draft document and for taking the time to read and consider our comments.

Specific comments

Draft finding 3.2

Volunteering Queensland’s research, as well as research by others in the volunteering sector, continues to indicate an overall decline in formal volunteering rates, both in the percentage of people who volunteer and the amount of time given per volunteer. We wish to highlight that the figures suggested in this Draft finding for informal volunteering are likely to be underestimated as a result of under-recognition of this type of volunteering.

In our upcoming State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report (to be released in May 2024), we estimate that 64.3% of Queenslanders (aged over 15 years) volunteered in the 12 months prior to July 2023: a decline of more than 10% across three years when compared to the previous 2021 Report. We estimate that the total hours volunteered in Queensland is 719.8 million hours, which is also a decrease by a comparable amount.

However, Queenslanders want to volunteer. Around 30% of residents surveyed for the report, regardless of if they currently volunteer or not, would like to volunteer more. Most people who currently volunteer wish to keep volunteering. The reason people don’t volunteer is multifaceted, but our research identifies some key barriers, most notably people’s restrictions on time and the costs to volunteer, a barrier which may be exacerbated under rising costs of living. Other research suggests that low mental health and wellbeing may also be barriers to volunteering, despite the benefits to health and wellbeing that volunteering can provide⁴.

Those who perform the valuable work of managing volunteers identify additional barriers to volunteering, including a lack of appreciation or recognition, a feeling of loss of connection or interest, or just something as simple as a loss of confidence.

Draft finding 3.3

Volunteering Queensland believes it is essential to explicitly recognise that people affected by natural disasters are likely to donate more of their time and skills through volunteering to help others in their *own* community. We also believe that the report should emphasise that the lack of financial resources (including cost-of-living pressures) needs to be included alongside “work and family commitments” as a barrier to volunteering.

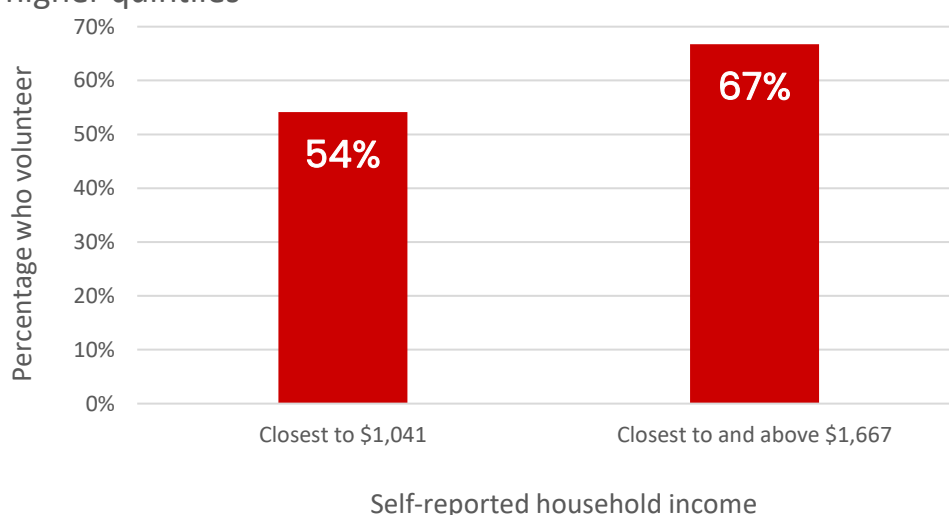
EV CREW (Emergency Volunteering Community Response to Extreme Weather) is a long-standing initiative of Volunteering Queensland. Through EV CREW, we work alongside councils, agencies and volunteer involving organisations to provide volunteer teams for coordinated disaster recovery anywhere in the state. Under the existing Disaster Management Agreements for Queensland, EV CREW provides the primary avenue for the registration and referral of volunteers in disaster management.

Through this work, Volunteering Queensland uniquely understands the critical importance of volunteers in helping to respond to natural disasters. We understand the costs and barriers involved to this type of volunteering. Many of the people who volunteer their time and skills during emergencies and natural disasters incur significant and potentially prohibitive costs and are rarely eligible for reimbursement or compensation.

Draft finding 4.1

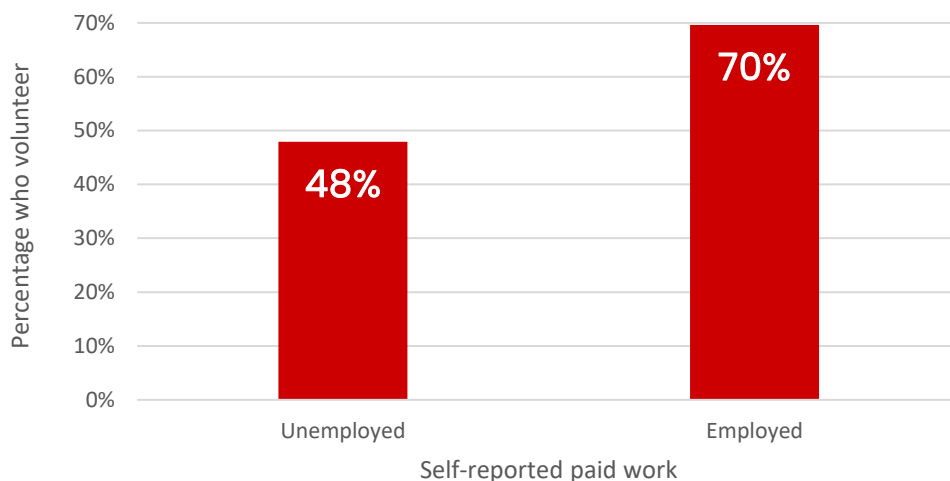
It is not surprising that people on higher incomes are more likely to philanthropically donate money than people on lower incomes. Early data from Volunteering Queensland’s research suggests a similar dynamic may occur with volunteering rates, however the dynamic is more complicated than with monetary giving. Data in the State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report, although still under development, appears to indicate that people on lower incomes volunteer significantly less than those on higher incomes, with those in the highest household income quintile reporting the highest participation in volunteering. Our research looks at volunteering rates across household incomes by quintile, based on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Comparing the lowest quintile to the other four, we see a stark difference in volunteer participation between the groups of 54% and 67% respectively ($p < 0.01$).

Volunteering rates and lowest income quintile vs all higher quintiles



Similarly, those who report not having paid work report an even lower participation rate, although we note that unemployment does not necessarily correspond to living in a low-income household.

Volunteering rates and employment



When asked about barriers to volunteering in our State of Volunteering survey, the three highest responses were a lack of time, the associated costs, and that they were not sure how to volunteer more (23.3% of those who did not report volunteering).

People on lower incomes may be more likely to volunteer if the barriers they face were lowered. This may be in the form of financial support but also through initiatives that make volunteering more accessible. Understanding that this is feedback on a draft finding, we wish to highlight that people respond to incentives, and that additional incentives for lower-income households and those for whom we do not have employment is likely to increase the amount of time they can and will willingly give.

If the Commission wishes to use Volunteering Queensland's research in the report, please contact Volunteering Queensland via the details on the Contents Page of this document. The findings presented in this document are in draft form, and are only to be used for indicative purposes.

Draft finding 4.2

Volunteering Queensland believes this finding is incongruous within the Draft Report. While we recognise the potential challenges of compliance and tax integrity, we strongly advocate for reasonable volunteering costs to be reclaimable as a tax credit or tax deduction. The same challenges apply to existing tax deductions for donations and Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) claims. One way to minimise the potential risks would be to cap the claims permitted for tax deductions. Another would be to only allow claims through volunteer involving organisations, or at the most restrictive level, trial only allowing claims through endorsed DGRs. In effect, this would restrict claims to formal forms of volunteering, but if viewed as a trial, Volunteering Queensland would likely support such an initiative.

Restricting claims to DGRs likely poses a minor and mild risk of distorting the distribution of volunteering to DGRs, potentially impacting other organisations and informal volunteering. But if compliance and integrity risks are seen as a higher priority, such a scheme as a trial would at least assist some volunteering. It could especially assist volunteering related to natural disasters and emergencies, which often involve extensive costs to volunteers.

Draft recommendation 7.5

Volunteering Queensland strongly supports the intention of this recommendation, but we believe the current wording is too general. We see that it is important not only to “consider the effects on volunteers when designing policies and programs”, but also to provide evidence that volunteer involving organisations have been consulted as part of the process. Additionally, we strongly recommend measuring the impact of policies and programs following implementation. If we are to promote policies and programs that encourage the genuine giving of time and skills, we need to assess if they are efficacious or if they are hindering the cause.

Draft recommendation 9.2

Volunteering Queensland appreciates the mention of the views of volunteers in this draft recommendation. Nonetheless, we would like to see these views taken into consideration by the relevant regulatory bodies more broadly. Poor volunteering experiences are one of the greatest barriers to *ongoing* volunteering. To promote volunteering is to promote momentum in volunteer participation. A mechanism that requires charities to report not just financial giving but also the giving of time and skills would be of great value. The desirability of explicitly mentioning volunteering in all reporting and disclosures is also relevant for Draft recommendation 9.3. The giving of time and skills is often de-prioritised compared to financial giving.

Draft recommendation 9.5

Volunteering Queensland supports the views expressed in the submission by Volunteering Australia on this matter. The more information gathered on the amount and impact of volunteering, the better, provided that volunteer involving organisations are not encumbered with reporting data. We concur that there are likely better ways to do this than through the Census, but we do not oppose information being collected through the Census as well, provided the limitations are recognised.

Draft finding 10.1

Volunteering Queensland does not wish to explicitly endorse or oppose a government-funded campaign to increase participation in giving. Nonetheless, were it decided that a government-funded campaign is worthwhile, we would strongly urge that volunteering in all facets be made a core part of the campaign. Informing and encouraging people to give time and skills to their local community is much more likely to have a deeper and richer ongoing impact than encouraging people who have spare money to donate more of it.

¹ State of Volunteering in Queensland 2021 Report

² ACNC Australian Charities Report - 9th Edition, 21 June 2023

³ Based on data collected for the upcoming State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report

⁴ Biddle, N and Gray, M (2023). ‘Ongoing trends in volunteering in Australia’, *The ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods*, https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2023/10/Ongoing_trends_in_volunteering_in_Australia.pdf