



volunteering queensland

Submission to the Community Support and Services Committee regarding:

- Marine Rescue Queensland Bill 2023;
- State Emergency Service Bill 2023; and
- Emergency Services Reform Amendment Bill 2023.

Introduction

Volunteering Queensland 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.

We do not oppose the three relevant pieces of legislation being passed by the Parliament, and the overall goals of implementing these reforms. We particularly welcome that volunteers continue to be legally covered by insurance and have the same legal protections that apply to other members of the SES and MRQ. We wish to take the opportunity to reinforce the importance – indeed the necessity – of ensuring that all SES & MRF volunteers are treated with full respect, and any disciplinary processes which may apply to them follow due process and natural justice.

Comments on the legislation

Volunteering Queensland's comments on the legislation relate predominantly to Section 16 of the Marine Rescue Queensland Bill 2023 (the MRQ Bill) and Section 23 of the State Emergency Service Bill 2023 (the SES Bill), which cover suspension of volunteers. We recognise that the work of the SES and the MRQ require specialist skills and training, and often involves situations that can be dangerous and life-threatening. Given this reality, it is of course essential that those responsible for overseeing the operations of MRQ and SES

members, including the activities of volunteer members, understand and are confident that all their members are suitable, and are adequately trained, equipped, protected and supported for the tasks they are required to perform.

Volunteering Queensland does not oppose the wording in the relevant pieces of legislation, but we emphasise that any process used when considering the must fully comply with due process and natural justice.

Volunteering Queensland was consulted on the initial draft of these pieces of legislation – an opportunity we appreciate. Our response to the initial draft was to express concern that, in its draft form, the Bills could infer a negative connotation to how volunteers are viewed and managed, and may create an unnecessary divide between the paid and volunteer workforce.

We expressed concern that there may be a risk that, while the draft Bills established the power of the Commissioner to appoint both MRQ/SES paid employees and MRQ/SES volunteers as members, it quickly moved onto considering the potential suspension of volunteers. While the essential role of volunteer workers in the SES and MRQ is recognised in many ways, part of volunteer recognition is ensuring investment into providing a positive day-to-day volunteer experience. This includes ensuring volunteer rights are respected and that the voluntary work, though given freely, is appropriately valued in the organisation. This is fundamental to promoting both recruitment and retention of the volunteer workforce and ensuring effective outcomes for the organisation.

We appreciate that volunteers are in a different position to paid employees, but we remain concerned that the processes involved in suspending volunteers are not guaranteed to be sufficient to fully protect their rights.

Suspensions and the issues that lead to suspensions can have a significant impact on the morale of volunteers and therefore the goals of the organisation, including a positive community reputation of the volunteer program. A suspension can also significantly impact the personal well-being of the individual volunteer, even if it does not result in their loss of income. We know that the SES and MRQ deeply value their volunteers, but as Volunteering Queensland is the peak body for volunteering, we regularly encounter an undercurrent perception that volunteers are less valuable and important than paid workers. We are not inferring that such an attitude is present within the SES, MRQ or Queensland Police Service. We wish to highlight this issue forthrightly as a common risk to the operations and processes in volunteer involving organisations. It must be actively addressed and openly discussed in the interests of both the volunteers and the organisation.

The Explanatory Notes for both the MRQ and SES Bills state that volunteers play a critical role in keeping the community safe. It states that the SES alone “relies heavily on the support it receives from ... about 5400 volunteers.” This statement alone shows how essential volunteers are to the work of the SES and MRQ. Should volunteers believe they have been treated poorly, including through inadequate disciplinary processes, this program will be put at risk. Levels of volunteering across the state are continuing to decline for a variety of reasons, and so the quality of a volunteer program must meet a high standard to survive.

Volunteers are not likely to be members of a union that focuses on their volunteer work and thus would normally not be able to access their support in a situation where they are facing suspension. However, Volunteering Queensland acknowledges there are organisations specifically focused on supporting SES & Marine Rescue volunteers. Our main concern is that it is guaranteed that volunteers are able to access the necessary supports during an investigation or appeal into the grounds for suspension. We believe it is important for any volunteer in such a circumstance to have the opportunity to access human resource, legal or personal wellbeing support through such a process.

While Volunteering Queensland does not propose any specific amendments to the wording of the MRQ and SES Bills, we do want to emphasise and encourage Members of Parliament, and particularly members of this Committee reviewing this legislation, to get a clear commitment from the Queensland Police Service Commissioner, as the chief executive under the Disaster Management Act, that there are documented processes for the suspension of a volunteer that will operate in accord with due process and natural justice, including in the prompt review of any suspension. Volunteering Queensland encourages Members of Parliament, and this Committee in particular, to monitor and review the operation and adequacy of these processes going forward.

Volunteers contribute their skills and time willingly without financial gain. However volunteering is not free either for the volunteer or the volunteer involving organisation. Volunteers need to be supported. They are members of the community and of limited numbers, and they will not continue to volunteer if they are not respected or treated fairly. As Queensland moves towards a new arrangement for disaster management, it is critical that the thousands of volunteers who are essential in their communities during times of crisis are fully and fairly supported.

Contacts:

Amanda Nixon, Executive Manager Initiatives
07 3002 7632
amanda.nixon@volunteeringqld.org.au

Samuel Delamoir, Policy and Research Manager
(07) 3002 7623
Samuel.delamoir@volunteeringqld.org.au