

Submission

to Queensland Floods
Commission of Inquiry



Volunteering Qld

Prepared by: Volunteering Qld
Date: March 2011

Outline

During the summer of 2010-2011, Volunteering Queensland played an active role in assisting Queensland's flood and cyclone affected communities. Given its first-hand experience in disaster response, Volunteering Queensland is keen to continue its contribution to **improving and further developing Queensland's capacity to respond** to natural disasters and also to improving the state's **resilience capacity**.

This submission in general focuses on the following two issues listed in the Commission of Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

1. Preparation and planning by federal, state and local governments, emergency services and the community
2. The response to the 2010/2011 flood events, particularly measures taken to inform the community and protect life, and private and public property.

About Volunteering Queensland

Volunteering Queensland is an independent, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to the improvement of volunteering in Queensland. It is the state's peak body in volunteering and a key partner to the Queensland Government in advancing volunteering in the state. Volunteering Queensland provides a broad range of services to the general population, and to the not-for-profit, government and corporate sectors. Core activities include advocacy, volunteer referral, training and education, research and policy development. Volunteering Queensland has a network of over 1,000 member organisations, which range from large charities to small local community groups across a variety of sectors including general welfare, arts, sport and recreation, environment and education. Volunteering Queensland is a founding member of Volunteering Australia, the national peak body in volunteering.

The nature of service provided by Volunteering Queensland during recent natural disasters

Volunteering Queensland established the Community Response to Extreme Weather (CREW) service in November 2008 during the Brisbane North storms. Since its inception, CREW has been further developed and refined in close consultation with a number of agencies that have active and major roles in disaster response and recovery. Volunteering Queensland also works with members of the State Community Recovery Committee, which includes both government and not-for-profit agencies. CREW is solely Volunteering Queensland's initiative and was not specifically funded by any external sources. As such, its capacity has been largely dependent on the flexibility of the organisation to adapt to surges in demand during busy and catastrophic natural disasters. It is also important to note that Volunteering Queensland's national network of like agencies allowed for rapid expansion of call centres with short term assistance from Volunteering Australia and Volunteering Tasmania. Ability to rely on additional network based resources made CREW more flexible.

CREW is structured to meet three objectives:

1. Act as **one point of contact for the general public** willing to volunteer its time during natural disasters through placement via one of several client agencies that utilise volunteers.
2. Act as **one point of contact for emergency response and recovery agencies** willing to access a central database of people offering to volunteer during times of natural disaster.
3. Act as a **relationship manager**, informing people on the database about upcoming volunteering opportunities throughout the year; not just during the peak periods.

The service operates on a permanent basis. However, previous to the recent disasters, it had been observed that there was a general lack of awareness about the service and that public had not been accessing it to register interest. It is important to note that since the recent flood events the level of awareness has significantly increased. That is reflected in the fact that **over 84,000 registrations** have been recorded on the CREW database to date.

In acting as the central communication point, CREW offered the following benefits to the public, and to government and not-for-profit agencies:

1. Given the current disaster response and recovery arrangements and the level of public awareness of those arrangements, it has been regularly observed that the **general public acts 'spontaneously'** during disasters and often contacts (phone, email, in person, SMS, etc.) many agencies in the hope of realising an opportunity to volunteer. This, in reality, places an extra burden on all agencies (such as SES, Red Cross, Lifeline etc.) as they attempt to provide essential services to affected individuals and communities. Instead of remaining focused on service delivery, they are often required to deal with inquiries from people wanting to volunteer. **CREW acts as a "shock absorber" between agencies and the general public** by taking all the inquiries, registering them onto a database and managing all communication.
2. The general public was offered a central location to enquire about volunteering opportunities, thus **reducing the stress associated with finding accurate information**, and avoiding the confusion that is often generated in disaster situations. The general public was also given an opportunity to learn more about the system and what the next steps would be. Equally so, those registering their details on the CREW database were in the position of receiving updates when necessary as well as receiving key messages such as "health related" messages issued by the state government.
3. CREW was conceived with a **long term benefit** in mind. The most critical issue is to produce a shift in thinking amongst the general public away from a 'spontaneous' reaction and towards longer term engagement in emergency volunteering. The idea behind it is to educate and inform the public that, in most cases, last minute enquiries are hard to process and are less likely to lead to volunteering. Instead, **those who are interested in volunteering in emergencies are far better off making enquires before the disaster** season occurs, thus giving themselves a much more realistic chance of getting involved on time. This is largely due to the very nature of how agencies prepare and act before, during and after natural disasters.

It is critically important to emphasise that Volunteering Queensland also accepted calls from individuals who were under the impression (in part fuelled by somewhat messy communications and media involvement) that registering on the CREW database was the appropriate avenue for donating goods, cash and other forms of service such as childcare, transport, accommodation, catering etc. Equally so, many flood-affected people, under the impression that CREW's role was to provide direct help to affected individuals, contacted CREW seeking assistance. While Volunteering Queensland's CREW service was **not designed** to deal with these aforementioned enquiries, it was decided to retain these registrations on the database and inform partner agencies, thus allowing possible further action and follow-up. (Note: Upon registering, individuals were informed about the exact purpose of CREW.)

Observations and comments

Immediate feedback from partner agencies was that Volunteering Queensland did what it was asked to be prepared for - and more - despite the magnitude of the 2011 flood event. CREW was available immediately and the team was **able to adapt to sometimes rapidly shifting circumstances**. Importantly, Volunteering Queensland was able to act as the 'shock absorber' between the surge of offers and client user groups who were relieved of the stress of having to deal with the volume of spontaneous offers, while getting access to a diverse range of volunteer skills and experience.

The response also highlighted important lessons and a **need for additional resources** so that future responses can be more structured and some endemic issues around spontaneous volunteering can be mitigated to the extent possible. Notably, Volunteering Queensland actually had to do things it was not resourced for – such as referring offers beyond volunteering and acting as a point of general information and comfort for callers. Some of these matters might necessarily be accommodated and accepted as endemic systemic issues – but **have to be resourced nonetheless**.

Offers were diverse, beyond those anticipated and sometimes simply not appropriate. While not all offers could be utilised given client demands and the nature of natural disaster responses, Volunteering Queensland now seeks to improve how it follows up unused offers, provides feedback and manages the expectations of registrants. Overall, this was an event that tested the entire system. Not surprisingly, while Volunteering Queensland and CREW were available immediately and met the need of client groups to provide volunteers, there are issues about the extent to which Volunteering Queensland needs to adapt systems to deal with a range of unexpected offers and demands. While remaining firmly focused on the most immediate and actual volunteer demands of client stakeholders, Volunteering Queensland does need to **respond more promptly to volunteer offers** that, while genuinely made, could not/ cannot be accommodated. The importance of this is to ensure that the public is not wrongly under an impression that Volunteering Queensland 'prevents' people from volunteering. Educating the public about this process is vital for sustainability of the process. Improvements in this area require a collaborative approach from all stakeholders involved in disaster response and recovery.

Spontaneous volunteering has endemic characteristics and **not all expectations can be met in a disaster response**, especially one as large as the recent events. There are huge expectations from both stakeholders and media that might not be realised in a major disaster – not least because offers don't always match user organisation demands, **nor do all offers come at the time that suits client organisations**. Disasters are naturally dangerous and there is an onus on coordinators of formal volunteering to provide a duty of care. There can be too many volunteers and dealing with spontaneous

volunteers **can incur a management demand that distracts key organisations from operational tasks.**

Some of the issues described above can be illustrated by many examples. For instance, at one point Volunteering Queensland received a request from a client organisation asking for 30 volunteers. CREW contacted 300 people who registered on the CREW database in order to find those 30 volunteers. **Only a week after registering on the database, a vast majority that were contacted were not prepared to volunteer.** In most cases the explanation was that personal circumstances of those who registered changed; they had to go back to work, needed to help their family and friends or simply lost interest.

Volunteering Queensland is **a referral agency, not a placement agency.** It cannot - nor should not - guarantee placement. During times of disaster the **task at hand needs to take priority over the desire to provide an opportunity** for every offer of support. Between disaster events, Volunteering Queensland needs to manage expectations about its role and the endemic issues of spontaneous volunteering. Illustrative stories about the range of offers can help both stakeholders and the media.

It was Volunteering Queensland's own experience that there was significant disparity between the actual need for volunteers (based on the low demand by agencies) and the impression given in the media. It can be argued that in part this was due to a lack of clear explanation about how volunteering in disaster response actually works.

From Volunteering Queensland's experience, it is important to note the following key factors impacting on preparation and planning on all levels:

During disasters, there is high expectation amongst the general public to be involved in an emergency response. This is directly related to a range of factors. One of these factors is the lack of long term education of the general public about the disaster response and recovery process. Equally so, the need for pre-trained and well prepared volunteers is the preferred option.

Volunteering Queensland recognises the **critical importance of a co-ordinated communication strategy** aimed at the general public. During disasters, there are too many messages from various angles which contribute to confusion in relation to people wanting to volunteer. All agencies involved with volunteering should be clear in their communication about how the process works.

While the CREW service was made available immediately (given that it was operational for two years prior on a permanent basis), how it operated was not clear to many agencies. Better communication on its functioning could improve long term planning. A communication strategy should be a joint effort by all stakeholders.

While the recent events show that an unprecedented number of people can be recruited to help, it is important to note that when a clear point of contact exists, and with proper support, larger numbers could be expected in future disasters. This, in reality, places high expectations on all stakeholders to plan for a faster and more efficient way of utilising large numbers of volunteers. Failure to allow larger number of people to get involved in a co-ordinated way could hamper recovery efforts. Communities can respond well when called to action but they equally expect good organisation and co-ordination.

Feedback from many volunteers to Volunteering Queensland highlighted the importance of **maintaining health and safety standards** during volunteer deployment. There are recorded concerns

in respect to health and safety measures for volunteers who in many cases were not given a sufficient level of co-ordination on the ground. As the peak body, Volunteering Queensland has urged all organisations that involve volunteers to observe national standards for volunteering which have been in existence for many years.

Over the years Volunteering Queensland has observed that a significant number of people who call offering to volunteer during natural disasters may in fact be under some degree of distress; triggered by media coverage and the entire atmosphere of a natural disaster. These individuals may not be directly affected by a flood or a cyclone per se but are, in fact, affected. Many of these people also call CREW and in fact are **simply wanting to have someone to talk to**. Further work needs to be done in order to assist these individuals, given that often these calls can number **up to 30%** of total calls taken.

It is critically important to avoid situations whereby lack of proper analysis and planning leads to a overcrowding of volunteers in one place. Volunteering Queensland has received feedback from many **volunteers who felt like “seagulls fighting over a chip”**.

Recommendations for immediate consideration

Reduce the element of “spontaneity” from the volunteering effort during natural disasters and **increase long term involvement** for people wanting to volunteer through a targeted education campaign.

Increase the degree of planning and preparation amongst all agencies expected to provide services during natural disasters, with a special focus on their ability to absorb larger number of volunteers who are prepared to volunteer on a short term basis. The focus can be on examining new areas of work suitable for short term and temporary engagement by volunteers.

Conduct research (no such research has been done to date) that would lead to a better understanding of the needs of those people who call to volunteer but in fact are more likely **masking their distress** and are in fact seeking to talk to someone during natural disasters.

Better co-ordination of messages and communication issued to media. This should include regular joint media statements by all stakeholders involved in disaster recovery.

Investigate a more thorough role of the corporate sector in disaster recovery. To date, the corporate sector was not well integrated in the disaster response and the sustainability of future disaster response and recovery should include all parties through structured and firmly agreed roles.

Given the recent events and the incredibly rapid response from the general public wanting to volunteer, efforts should be made to engage the public in **natural disaster resilience**. Activities focused on building resilience offer long term opportunities for the general public, thus creating a sense of real engagement that adds value to the overall effort in managing natural disasters.

Consider national approach that would be built on lessons learnt from Volunteering Queensland’s CREW service. This in particular is worthwhile considering given that thousands of call came from across Australia and indeed there were many people from other states asking for CREW to be made available in other states.

Conclusion

Volunteering Queensland has attempted to provide a level of information that is based on its own role and experience in recent natural disaster events. As a peak body in volunteering it also sought to bring a balance in thinking and understanding of **volunteering as a whole**, rather than just focusing on volunteering in natural disasters. Therefore, the emphasis on volunteering safety, co-ordination and management remain paramount and should be observed by all agencies involving volunteers. This submission attempted to highlight the **complexity involved in managing unrealistic expectations** of placing large numbers of volunteers in very limited time and space. However, ways forward are also outlined and are largely dependent on a collaborative approach. Volunteering Queensland is prepared to provide further information on specific aspects of the submission should that be required.