

28 February 2025

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**Re: The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)**

Dear Committee members,

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to support a thriving volunteering ecosystem in Australia by promoting and advocating for volunteering and providing leadership at a national level. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are foundation members of Volunteering Australia.

The proposed National Volunteer Incentive Scheme has the potential to better formalise the role of the Australian Government in disaster volunteering and support the training and management of volunteers. However, the design and implementation of the proposed Scheme must be sensitive to the current context of emergency management and volunteering in Australia. We emphasise that the development of the proposed Scheme should:

- Allow for and follow extensive consultation with the volunteering ecosystem, including the volunteering peak bodies, State and Territory government emergency management organisations, crisis response charities and not-for-profits, other community sector organisations that support disaster response, and spontaneous volunteers, including those who volunteer informally.
- Carefully consider its role in the broader emergency management landscape, including the roles and challenges facing existing organisations to prevent duplication and unintended consequences.
- Support the strategic objectives of the National Strategy for Volunteering, and consider the initiatives outlined in its Three-Year Action Plan.
- The name of the initiative ('Climate Army') should be reconsidered. The term 'Army' has been used historically in other government settings and as noted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of military language may alienate some people in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://theconversation.com/using-military-language-and-presence-might-not-be-the-best-approach-to-covid-and-public-health-166019>

Important considerations in taking this work forward include:

- The Australian Government is a key stakeholder in the volunteering ecosystem and an essential enabler of the National Strategy for Volunteering.<sup>2</sup> This includes the crucial role of the Department of Social Services, which has responsibility for volunteering in the Australian Government and is currently leading on key actions in the first Three-Year Action Plan, including:<sup>3</sup>
  - Scoping a whole of Australian Government approach to volunteering.
  - Encouraging alignment between state and territory volunteering strategies and the National Strategy for Volunteering.
  - Progressing appropriate alignment of federal government funding for volunteering with the National Strategy for Volunteering. Over the course of the three-year Action Plan phase, the Department of Social Services will aim to align funding criteria for volunteering initiatives and grants with the National Strategy for Volunteering.
- The National Strategy Coalition of Support also includes a broad range of organisations involved in emergency management, such as the Australian Landcare Network and the Australian Red Cross.<sup>4</sup>
- The first Three-Year Action Plan includes an action to develop a national volunteer passport. Volunteering Australia has also called on the Government to fund the development of the passport in our 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission.<sup>5</sup> Some progress has been made, with work being undertaken by the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). This platform would aim to increase volunteer mobility and enable better planning through improved data collection. Relevant to this Inquiry, we argue that this passport should build on other initiatives at the national and state/territory level, using a scalable approach.
- There is a myriad of ways in which people act in a voluntary capacity during crises, ranging from highly formalised roles (such as volunteers in state and territory emergency management services) to informal volunteering activity that occurs spontaneously in the community. Some state and territory peak bodies, for example Volunteering WA and Volunteering Queensland, have existing emergency response platforms for supporting spontaneous volunteers.<sup>6</sup>
- According to the General Social Survey, rates of formal volunteering (undertaken through an organisation or group) have declined over time, from around one-third (34.4 per cent) of adults in 2002 to around one-quarter (24.8 per cent) in 2020.<sup>7</sup> The State of Volunteering research found that

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<sup>2</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/the-strategy/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/actionplan/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/supporters/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/policy/budget-election-platform-2025/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.volunteeringwa.org.au/volunteer-management/programs-and-projects/spontaneous-volunteering-in-wa>; <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/emergency-volunteering/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 28

64.3 per cent of people aged 15 years and over, or 14.1 million people, volunteered formally or informally in Australia in 2023.<sup>8</sup>

- Nationally, the numbers of volunteer personnel (both firefighters and support staff) in fire services organisations have decreased by 14.3 per cent between 2014-15 and 2023-24.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, disasters have become more intense and frequent.
- Young people volunteer at similar rates to the general population. For example, 28.8 per cent of people aged 15-24 years volunteered formally in 2019, compared to 29.5 per cent of all people aged 15 years and over.<sup>10</sup> The State of Volunteering research found that 73.6 per cent of people aged 15-25 volunteered formally or informally in 2023 – the highest rate of any age group.<sup>11</sup>
- The Fire and Emergency Services Workforce Plan 2024, developed by Public Skills Australia, highlights challenges recruiting, retaining, and training volunteers in emergency management as volunteering rates decline, and that the frequency and severity of disasters puts greater strain on existing volunteers. It also notes that, ‘Increasingly, more parts of government are being called upon to support all facets of disaster risk reduction’.<sup>12</sup> This must include preparedness and prevention.
- Volunteering in a disaster relief scenario requires deliberate and ongoing strategic consideration, underpinned by adequate resourcing. Volunteers need induction, training, screening, insurance, coordination, and management. Volunteer leadership and management is essential to effective volunteer involvement.
- There are currently insurance gaps affecting volunteers differently depending on the state or territory in which they are located, including a lack of coverage for illness and Medicare-related expenses.<sup>13</sup>
- National oversight and coordination of volunteers during national crises in which Commonwealth capabilities are engaged is currently lacking. Recommendations to improve support for volunteering, particularly in national crises, were made by the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements and the Senate Select Committee on Australia’s Disaster Resilience.<sup>14</sup> Foundational work to establish a national program which builds and connects environmental and climate change volunteering capacity was also recommended by Volunteering

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<sup>8</sup> Muller, P. 2025. *A Snapshot of Volunteering in Australia*. The Centre for Volunteering. Forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2025/emergency-management/emergency-services>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/2019#voluntary-work-and-unpaid-work-support>

<sup>11</sup> Muller, P. 2025. *A Snapshot of Volunteering in Australia*. The Centre for Volunteering. Forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> <https://publicskillsaustralia.org.au/2024-workforce-plans>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.volunteeringwa.org.au/assets/advocacy-policy/volunteers-in-western-australia-and-insurance-gaps.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/natural-disasters>;

[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Disaster\\_Resilience/DisasterResilience/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Disaster_Resilience/DisasterResilience/Report)

Australia and the state and territory volunteering peak bodies in our 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission.<sup>15</sup>

- The Terms of Reference of the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) include suggestions that intersect with other key initiatives, including strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, systems to recognise and compensate volunteers, integrating volunteer opportunities within educational institutions, and creating a nationally recognised qualification scheme. These areas of focus should consider the findings of the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience and the development of the proposed national volunteer passport, as well as other initiatives as relevant.<sup>16</sup>

We welcome the opportunity to engage further with this inquiry and to appear before the Committee to provide further information.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/policy/budget-election-platform-2025/>

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[https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/RB000053/toc\\_pdf/BootsonthegroundRaisingresilience.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/RB000053/toc_pdf/BootsonthegroundRaisingresilience.pdf); <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/policy/budget-election-platform-2025/>

## About this submission

This submission follows previous submissions and position statements made by Volunteering Australia, in partnership with the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies, on volunteering and crisis response, including:

- [Submission to the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience](#)
- [Submission on Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response](#)
- [Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding](#)
- [Submission on the second National Action Plan to implement the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework](#)
- [Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements](#)
- [Volunteering Australia & State and Territory Peak Volunteering Bodies Response To Australian Government Compensation Scheme](#)
- [Pre-Budget Submission 2025-26](#)

## Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.



Mr Mark Pearce

Chief Executive Officer

## Endorsements

This submission has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.



## About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's mission is to support a thriving volunteering ecosystem in Australia by promoting and advocating for volunteering and providing leadership at a national level.