

Queensland Parliament

Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

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Contact:

Alan Le May
General Manager, Queensland
Ph: 0438 679 192
Email: Alan.LeMay@thesmithfamily.com.au

The Smith Family
PO Box 10500
South Brisbane BC 4101

The Smith Family

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide a short submission to the Queensland Parliament's Inquiry into Volunteering.

The Smith Family is a national charity that has supported Australian children and families experiencing disadvantage for more than a century. Our **vision** is a world where every child has the opportunity to change their future. Our **belief** is that education is one of the world's most powerful change agents and our **purpose** is to overcome **educational inequality** caused by poverty.

We take a **place-based** approach and are currently working in 91 low SES communities across every state and territory. This includes **16 communities in Queensland** including many regional communities, such as Cairns, Mackay, Toowoomba and Townsville.

In FY24, The Smith Family supported **220,600** children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals nationally through our education-focused programs. This includes over 178,000 children and young people, of whom more than **67,100** accessed the multiple benefits of our largest program, the **Learning for Life (Lfl)** educational scholarship.

We support around **37,800** children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals in Queensland through our programs each year. There are currently over **11,800** students in Queensland on the **Learning for Life** scholarship program. *Learning for Life* is an **early intervention**, long-term scholarship program which provides:

- A **modest biannual payment**¹ to families to help them cover core education-related expenses such as books, uniforms and excursions.
- Support from a **Learning for Life Family Partnership Coordinator** (a Smith Family team member) who works with the family to support their child's long-term participation in education.
- Access to a range of **programs** to help ensure children's engagement in education. These include **literacy** and numeracy programs, learning clubs, **career, digital inclusion** and financial literacy programs.

Volunteers at The Smith Family

The Smith Family was established by volunteers in 1922 and has always relied on them to support our work. We continue to benefit greatly from the substantial contributions of pro bono support provided by corporate partners and individual volunteers. In FY24, The Smith Family was supported by **4,913 volunteers** who donated **123,547 hours** of service, valued at **\$4.3 million**.² By way of comparison, The Smith Family has the equivalent of approximately 800 full-time paid team members.

Volunteers contribute their time and skills to various roles, including tutoring through Learning Clubs, administration support, skilled roles and one day career activity support. Over half of The Smith Family's volunteering roles support the delivery of our programs for students and families. We could not deliver our educational programs without this donation of time and skill.

¹ The annual *Learning for Life* payment to a family for a school student is \$478 and for a senior secondary school student is \$772.

² Volunteering contributions are valued based on the level of skill required by various volunteering positions.

The Smith Family also receives tremendous volunteer support from **280** Voice, Interests and Education of Women (**VIEW**) **Clubs** and their **14,000 members** nationally. VIEW Clubs exclusively support The Smith Family and play a crucial role in volunteering, fundraising, advocating and sponsoring disadvantaged students through *LfL*.

In Queensland there are **37 VIEW clubs** dispersed across the state with **2,460 members**. They support 345 *Learning for Life* students and raised over \$500,000 in 2024.

Barriers and challenges to volunteering

Pre and post COVID

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicated a decline in volunteer rates due to Australians increasingly feeling 'too busy' to volunteer.

The Smith Family managed well through this decline but as with organisations across the sector, we experienced a decline in volunteer numbers during COVID, with a slow return by volunteers from lockdowns and activities that were paused during the pandemic. The movement in volunteer numbers for The Smith Family, across 2019-2024, is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Volunteer participation rates by year

	2019	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Volunteer hours	214,000	152,596	116,038	108,341	123,547
Value of volunteering contribution (\$m) ³	6.3	4.7	3.7	3.4	4.3

The Smith Family has not generally struggled with attracting volunteers, thanks to our strong brand name and reputation, long history of volunteer involvement, sophisticated approach to volunteer management at scale, and a focus on equipping our teams (paid staff) to host and manage quality volunteer engagements.

We offer a range of opportunities to suit different ways volunteers wish to donate time, both in the type of roles (student-supporting or administration/back of house) and how they want to participate.

Our volunteer feedback regularly indicates that over 90% of surveyed volunteers would speak positively about their volunteering experience to family, friends, and colleagues.

³ Volunteering contributions are valued based on the level of skill required by various volunteering positions.

Child safeguarding as our highest priority

Due to our work with young people, child safeguarding is The Smith Family's highest priority. This commitment is supported by rigorous processes that govern the involvement of unpaid (and paid) team members in our programs and administration. The rigour, validated by recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse, has led to continued robust screening and selection for volunteers applying for most of The Smith Family's roles. This includes interviews, Working With Children Checks, National Police History Checks, and reference checks. While we see this approach to child safeguarding as essential, some volunteers and recruiting staff view this as a deterrent or source of frustration to engaging volunteers.

The timing required to move volunteers through the screening and selection process has sometimes been a pain point within the organisation, especially when the running of programs with set start dates require volunteers. However, significant investment in a multi-year digitisation project has resulted in streamlined processes, reduced timeframes for screening, and greater satisfaction among volunteer managers with the onboarding processes. Volunteers themselves, as validated by customer surveys and focus groups, see The Smith Family's robust selection and screening as a positive quality of the organisation and appreciate the rigour with which child safeguarding is approached. They also understand that mandatory training related to risk (child safety, data and cyber security) is necessary.

External challenges

- **Natural disasters:** Over the past decade, we have witnessed several natural disasters, such as the 2020 bushfires and frequent flooding. During these crises, people often jump into action, generously volunteering their time and skills. While this community response is heartening, it can pose a potential risk to more 'traditional', non-urgent forms of volunteering that require time to select and vet potential volunteer workforces. As individuals become more flexible, agile, and responsive to immediate needs, we may see a reduction in longer-term volunteers. Our current infrastructures are not built for natural disaster emergency responses, and we are already seeing an increasing demand on emergency services that heavily depend on volunteers.
- **Cost of living:** There is a potential relationship between the increased cost of living being experienced by many Australians and volunteering involvement, as individuals and families consolidate expenditure. For example, The Smith Family's volunteers currently do not seek regular reimbursement for the cost of travel to their volunteering activities. This could become a requirement of our organisation in the future, which would increase our operating costs or conversely, increasing transport costs may result in some volunteers deciding they are no longer able to support such activity. Additionally, more people are trying to access the services of charities given cost of living increases, and support services that rely on volunteer effort are seeing an increasing demand for volunteers.
- **Cyber security:** There is a growing need for effort and investment in Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) to ensure data security. This requires significant investment and expertise and the issue can also lead to increases in insurance and/or legal costs.
- **Ageing population:** We are witnessing and will continue to see a drop-off in traditional cohorts of big time-givers like Baby Boomers. This presents a challenge in sourcing new types of volunteers, particularly from younger demographics, to ensure the sustainability of volunteerism as an attractive 'extra-curricular' activity that can be flexibly managed alongside

other work, family, and personal commitments. A 2023 review of volunteers at The Smith Family showed that the largest cohort consisted of individuals aged between 55 and 64 years.

- **First Nations Volunteers:** In line with the sector's National Strategic Objective (2.1), The Smith Family recognises the need for a more diverse understanding of volunteering to include different cultural expressions and interpretations. We recognise the unique experience and interpretation of volunteering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including activities that support community, mob and family. We acknowledge that these forms of time-giving have an important place in the culture of First Nations people. We are currently reviewing our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy to further engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander volunteers. Additionally, we have revised our advertising to include more diverse representation across demographics, ensuring that images of volunteers reflect individuals with different physical abilities, cultural backgrounds, and ages

What has The Smith Family done to improve volunteer participation?

- **Increased short-term and one-day roles:** Recognising the demand for more flexible and accessible options, The Smith Family has increased the availability of short-term volunteer roles in administration, shorter program engagement and one-off career activities.
- **Enhanced virtual volunteering opportunities:** For about 20 years, The Smith Family has offered online volunteering, primarily through the iTrack online mentoring program. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the need for virtual opportunities, ensuring that tasks previously completed in person could continue online. Volunteers are supported with a range of online collaboration tools and systems to maintain a sense of community. In Queensland, we saw a significant increase in volunteer participation from 875 roles in FY 22-23 to 1,381 roles in FY 23-24. This increase is likely due to newly created virtual roles being coordinated by one of our Queensland teams.

Support from the Queensland Government

We have a number of suggestions, based on our experience, for additional support that the Queensland Government could provide to strengthen volunteering in this state.

1. **Advocate for streamlined national WWCC:** One of the biggest pain points across the sector, particularly for organisations working in multiple jurisdictions, is the lack of transferability of Working with Children Checks (WWCC) between states and territories. This creates additional costs for volunteers and not-for-profit organisations, takes unnecessary time, creates delays in services and leads to frustrations which impact volunteers' engagement. The Queensland Government could advocate to national government agencies for a streamlined national WWCC.
2. **Promote and prioritise the role of government in volunteering:** The Queensland Government can play a crucial role in driving action from the National Strategy for Volunteering by implementing activities recommended in the Action Plans. This includes:
 - **Making volunteering a cross-portfolio issue:** Comprehensive policy and investment in volunteering should be an essential remit of government at every level.
 - **Building strong leadership and shared accountability:** The government should own and actively participate in elevating the role of volunteering to foster collaboration, accountability and greater collective impact.
 - **Committing to strategic investment:** Investing in common enabling infrastructure such as technology, research, resources, and support services to improve capability and capacity across the volunteering ecosystem.
 - **Recognising the importance of volunteer management:** Providing adequate resourcing for volunteer management as a function and profession to improve the experience of volunteers and amplify the impact of volunteering.

The Smith Family has pledged its public support of the National Strategy, including membership of the Coalition of Support. Our Chief Executive Officer, Doug Taylor, is the Chair of the National Strategy for Volunteering Council.

We seek the Queensland Government's assistance and commitment to playing its part in using the National Strategy for volunteering to develop new initiatives to support the vision of the Strategy.

This includes:

- Making a case for investment in initiatives that further the Strategy.
- Collaborating with other members of the volunteering ecosystem to achieve shared goals.
- Conducting internal reviews of relevant government departments to understand the direct and indirect influencing role Government can play in activating the Strategy.
- Working together to advance a shared agenda to ensure volunteering in Australia is sustainable over the long-term and continues to be part of the rich social and cultural fabric of society. <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/>

Other practical examples of Government support

The Smith Family believes there are several important practical steps that the Queensland government can take to support volunteering:

- **Promote community support through advocacy and public campaigns:** Government-led advocacy and public campaigns can highlight the importance of all types of volunteering. This will help ensure the ongoing availability and willingness of different cohorts to support both short-term emergency volunteering and longer-term engagements essential for organisations like The Smith Family (TSF).
- **Provide financial support for volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs):** The Australian and Queensland governments could offer incentives to volunteers, such as subsidies or reimbursements for out-of-pocket expenses (e.g., free travel) and cover volunteer insurance for VIOs.
- **Establish sophisticated and responsive emergency volunteer teams:** Create pools of trained emergency volunteer teams that can be quickly deployed in times of crisis.