



**The Centre for
Volunteering**

**National Volunteer
Incentive Scheme
(Climate Army)**

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Policy Submission: National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

Introduction

As the peak body for volunteering in NSW, The Centre For Volunteering (hereafter The Centre) is responding to the Australian Senate request for submission responses regarding the formation of a National Volunteer Incentive Scheme. We are also grateful to the NSW Department of Communities and Justice for feedback in preparing this submission.

While we recognise and celebrate the important contributions that volunteers make to emergency services in the aftermath of natural disasters, our core recommendation to the Senate is that this scheme requires much deeper consultation with the sector, including volunteers and state-based volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) such as the NSW State Emergency Service (SES) that already undertake many of the functions that the scheme proposes to address. We also posit that the terms of reference for the scheme provided by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee are based on several inaccurate assumptions of volunteering in Australia and particularly a misunderstanding of the volunteering habits of younger Australians.

Our submission will respond broadly to a range of issues covered in the terms of reference.

Responses to the terms of reference

Volunteering and young Australians

We note that there are several assumptions that underpin both the scheme and its target of young people which require reassessment. To begin, there is a pervading assumption that young people do not volunteer at the same rates as other age groups. This is simply not borne out in the data. Our research demonstrates that in NSW, people aged 15-25 are the largest cohort by age of any other age group, with 70.7% of people in this age group engaging in some type of volunteering.¹ Considering this same data across Australia, the figure increases to 73.6% of people aged 15-25, again the largest cohort by age.²

The interests of this age bracket should also be considered; our research into youth volunteering in Australia found that the top 3 areas that young people volunteered were in sport and recreation support (26.4% of the cohort), followed by event support (26% of the cohort), and then social or wellbeing support (22.6%).³ This is broadly consistent with the whole adult population in Australia, where the top three areas are support in someone else's home (23.2%), social or wellbeing support (22.8%), and sport and recreation support (21.8%).⁴ Of particular relevance to this inquiry are the rankings for the categories "environmental or animal protection" and "emergency support", as these two categories broadly cover the activities that the scheme proposes to address. For young people, environmental or animal protection was ranked 8 out of 14 (15.8%) possible categories of volunteering activities, while emergency support was ranked 12 out of 14 (9.7%).⁵ However, the whole adult population of Australia had the same rankings for both activities, with 14.3% of volunteers engaging in environmental or animal support and 11.1% engaging in emergency support.⁶ This data demonstrates that while there are some small differences in

¹ Muller et al. 2023. *NSW State of Volunteering Report 2023*. The Centre for Volunteering. <https://www.volunteering.com.au/2023-state-of-volunteering-report/>.

² Muller, P. 2025. *A Snapshot of Volunteering in Australia*. The Centre for Volunteering. Forthcoming.

³ Muller, P. and Muller, L. 2024. *Volunteering and Youth*. The Centre for Volunteering. <https://volunteering.freshdesk.com/helpdesk/attachments/51180032980>.

⁴ Muller, 2025. *Snapshot*

⁵ Muller and Muller, 2024. *Volunteering and Youth*.

⁶ Muller, 2025. *Snapshot*.

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participation rates for these areas, young people are broadly engaging in environmental and emergency support volunteer activities at much the same rate as the rest of the adult population.

Furthermore, there are a range of different needs and barriers that impact young people when volunteering. Firstly, the bracket of 15-25 years old encompasses very different stages of life, in that the abilities and needs of a fifteen-year-old school student are vastly different from a 25-year-old who may have finished tertiary study, just entered the workforce, or even begun a family. This is compounded by the difficulties in insuring volunteers who are legally still children, alongside the difficulty of legal children obtaining the necessary safety checks (such as working with children/vulnerable people checks) in some states and territories.

Other barriers exist for young people when engaging with formal volunteering opportunities, such as the need to balance their volunteering around obligations for work, study, and family. These barriers are especially significant when younger people lack the resources of older Australians and are increasingly impacted by a cost-of-living crisis that reduces the disposable income that young Australians can access when compared to their older peers. For example, recent research demonstrates that volunteers under 25 spend an average of \$16.12 per volunteering hour compared to \$11.62 for volunteers aged 45-54, \$6.78 for volunteers aged 55-64, or even \$3.21 for volunteers aged over 65.⁷

The skills and motivations of young people also warrant consideration. A desire to help others is the highest motivator for young volunteers, as it is for the general population, but young people are particularly more likely to want to volunteer for enjoyment, to be active, or, as is mostly clearly shown in the research, to develop skills and experience for employment.⁸ This should not be seen as somehow less altruistic than older volunteers (who themselves have many similar motivations for volunteering), but understood by those seeking to recruit young people. As shown, young people volunteer in environmental and emergency support areas at a comparable rate to other adult volunteers, and it is important to consider that the entire volunteering sector needs volunteers of all age groups.

We thus question the narrative and need for targeted incentives to bring in young people to this area of volunteering. These narratives are damaging to young volunteers, who report disengaging with formal volunteering because of an attitude that they are simultaneously expected to know everything they need to do while not being treated as having any experience or ideas worth listening to.⁹ Difficulties with scheduling and balancing the myriad responsibilities facing young people are instead perceived as being unreliable, lazy, or disinterested¹⁰. We urge the committee not to further alienate young volunteers by reinforcing these narratives and attitudes, tacitly or otherwise.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Muller and Muller, 2024. *Volunteering and Youth*.

⁹ Ibid, 7-9

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

Current approaches to emergency volunteering

We recommend that the committee avoid unnecessary duplication of volunteering activities that already exist. In particular, the broad proposal for a Climate Army of volunteers seems to duplicate the work already done by organisations such as the State Emergency Service (SES), Rural Fire Service (RFS), Marine Rescue and other similar organisations. While we appreciate that these organisations tend to operate at a state level, and that the scheme seeks to establish a similar, Federal body, we caution against this duplication. It is unlikely that people will volunteer for both a national climate army and their local SES branch, given that both activities have significant overlap in the demands placed on the volunteer, types of training expected, and so on. Accordingly, if the scheme is not carefully designed, this could have the result of diluting the volunteer pools at both a state and federal level as volunteers are incentivised to participate federally to the detriment of their local community. We also suggest that there is presently a group that the Federal government can deploy in the event of a disaster that functions in part as a volunteer corps – the Army Reserve Response Force.

The scheme must also be careful not to incentivise spontaneous volunteering in the immediate aftermath of an emergency. At present, the terms of reference do not clearly establish when the scheme would operate in terms of the timeline of dealing with a disaster, whether this would be in the immediate aftermath, the mid-term response, or the recovery period of rebuilding a community. We have received feedback from several of the NSW branches of the SES, RFS and other emergency response agencies that one of the challenges that they must manage is well-intentioned but inexperienced volunteers coming to them in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and wanting to help. These people are often untrained, unvetted, and take resources away from dealing with the disaster itself requiring resources and personnel to manage and direct these people.

Issues also arise in terms of establishing how the volunteers from the scheme will be transported, accommodated, trained, and supported, and how this will be coordinated across the states and territories. This is particularly relevant given that each state or territory has different vetting standards and safety checks for volunteers, and, at present, there is no federal scheme that qualifies somebody to volunteer Australia-wide, only in their current state of residence.

We note as well that many of the existing emergency response agencies already have processes in place for drawing on personnel from similar organisations in the event of a shortage. For example, Marine Rescue NSW will at times contact local Surf Life Saving (SLS) branches for volunteers who may be willing to help with a marine disaster, as SLS volunteers often have equivalent or transferable skills that are relevant for such a disaster (such as CPR training, swimming ability, ability to navigate dangerous water, possible boat licences etc.) that more general emergency response volunteers may not have.

We strongly encourage the committee to allow for deeper and extensive engagement with the volunteering sector and emergency management sector in the drafting and design of any such scheme, both to ensure that there is not a duplication of existing activities, and that best practices from local organisations can be effectively implemented before looking at overseas models which may not adequately consider the Australian context.

Public Discourse and Framing of the 'Climate Army' Scheme

Though technically outside of the scope of the terms of reference itself, we believe it pertinent to the discussion of the structure and scope of the scheme to respond to public comments made by Senator Jacqui Lambie regarding the scheme and its intent, given her role as its chair.

To begin we commend Senator Lambie for recognising the pressures placed on young people looking to volunteer, though we have covered above our concerns with the broader narrative of a lack of young volunteers in Australia. However, the use of militaristic language and framing of a "Climate Army" is problematic and confuses the purpose of the scheme.

In comments published in both *The Senior* and *The Australian*, Senator Lambie notes that conscripted national service is a model used in other countries to build up a group of young people who can respond to community needs, with particular reference to France's post-school service for 15-17 year olds.¹¹ While Senator Lambie is quick to clarify that she is not proposing a conscription model in this context, the counter-example provided is an incentive program in the United States of America (USA) where students are given priority in admissions for university if they join the National Guard. In this discussion, the Army service of both Senator Lambie and Queensland Senate candidate Ange Harper (a member of the Jacqui Lambie Network) is referenced as context.¹²

We strongly recommend that any discussion or reference to a conscription model is removed from this scheme, even with the clarification that conscription itself not being proposed. Conscription is inherently antithetical to volunteering, which Volunteering Peaks have long defined as "time *willingly given* for the common good and without financial gain" (emphasis added). While we recognise and commend the role that Australia's armed forces play in disaster responses of many kinds, we are concerned that this language and reference to military and conscription programs of the USA and France have problematic connotations in connection with the discussion of youth volunteering. The implication, intentional or not, is that the issue of young people supposedly not volunteering at a sufficient rate must be met with militaristic discipline to increase the ranks of the Climate Army.

Further to this, the use of the term "Climate Army" in the terms of reference adds to the confusion as to the purpose of the scheme. We suggest that a framing of a "volunteer corps", who can be deployed in a militaristic sense, is not appropriate for a volunteering context. Even in organisations such as the SES or RFS, volunteers cannot be ordered to undertake activities in any areas and are free, at any time, to cease their volunteering. While we do not believe it was the intent of either the committee or Senator Lambie to seriously advocate for a literal military corps of volunteers, we argue that it is important that the language and messaging around such a scheme is clear and unified, and consistent with what volunteering is in Australia. We also strongly argue that it important that this language does not become a part of the inaccurate narrative that young people do not volunteer at the same rate as other Australians, which we have demonstrated is clearly not the case.

¹¹ "Volunteering as the first line of defence." *The Senior*, <https://www.thesenior.com.au/story/8863883/volunteering-as-the-first-line-of-defence/>; Wang, J. 2025. "Tasmanian senator Jacqui Lambie's call to arms for young Aussies to volunteer." *The Australian*. 09 January 2025, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/breaking-news/tasmanian-senator-jacqui-lambies-call-to-arms-for-young-aussies-to-volunteer/news-story/cf22cd141fd215bf89a7f9d975cee470>

¹² Wang, 2025 "Tasmanian Senator....".

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Summary of key recommendations

- Deeper and more extensive consultation with the Australian volunteering sector and emergency response VIOs is needed before any concrete structure, responsibilities or governance models for the scheme can be designed and considered. This is necessary to ensure that the scheme does not unintentionally duplicate the work of organisations that already operate in this area, thus reducing the volunteer and resource pool for both groups.
- The Scheme should not characterise young people as neglecting to engage with volunteering. Any such scheme, if it were to proceed should consider the different interests, motivations, pressures and barriers placed on young people that may influence their engagement with formal volunteering opportunities. Any such scheme, if it were to proceed should strive to address the motivations and barriers as core to increasing formal volunteering among young people.
- The focus of the scheme and language used in public comments about the scheme be closely considered, and language that is militaristic or suggestive of elements of conscription be clearly and definitively separated from incentives to volunteer, as we assert that the definition of volunteering is “time willingly given for the common good without financial gain”.
- Existing models in Australia be considered in terms of responding to natural disasters, such as Marine Rescue sourcing additional help from Surf Life Saving due to the overlap of skills, rather than a group of broadly trained, or untrained volunteers who may be more of a liability than an asset.
- Insurance will be a particular issue that the scheme and committee need to consider, given how heavily it restricts formal volunteering opportunities for young volunteers and especially those under the age of 18.

Conclusion

The Centre welcomes the Senate’s interest in volunteering in Australia and the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed scheme. We strongly encourage extensive engagement and consultation with the sector across state and territory jurisdictions to ensure that the scheme is fit for purpose, specific, and beneficial to the wider needs of the Australian community and emergency services volunteers.

Authorisation

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

Gemma Rygate

Chief Executive Officer

About the Centre for Volunteering

The Centre for Volunteering (The Centre) is the peak body for volunteering in NSW, supporting and connecting people and organisations to enrich the community. We are a not-for-profit organisation with more than 50 years' experience providing leadership on volunteering in NSW. This involves playing a key role in advocacy, support services and sector development.

Our membership services are available to a range of primarily not-for-profit organisations of varying scale, spanning all sectors. Additionally, we work with government organisations on corporate social responsibility and employee volunteering programs.

The Centre for Volunteering Contacts

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