

Senate Standing Committees on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade
Inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

Questions on Notice

Public hearing, 29 September 2025

Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Council / Brett Loughlin and Rob Webb

Question 1

Hansard page reference: 13

Senator Henderson asked the following question:

I'd welcome any further information you could provide on notice as to what governments would need to do before providing incentives, to ensure you weren't incentivising people just for signing up and not making any volunteer contribution. If you could provide any further thoughts on notice, that would be great.

Response:

AFAC's position, as outlined in our submission and oral evidence, is that any system of incentives for volunteers must be carefully designed to reinforce genuine, meaningful participation, and avoid outcomes where individuals are rewarded merely for registering, rather than for actual service and contribution.

To achieve this, governments could consider the following measures:

- **Integrate incentives with existing emergency management structures**

Incentives should be delivered through established emergency management agencies and volunteer organisations, not as standalone schemes. This ensures that volunteers are properly onboarded, trained, and deployed, and that their contributions are tracked within robust governance frameworks. Creating parallel or siloed structures risks undermining the effectiveness and safety of the current system, and may create compliance and coordination challenges.

- **Link incentives to demonstrated engagement and contribution**

Incentives should be contingent on measurable participation, such as:

- Completion of required training and onboarding.
- Attendance at events, exercises, or deployments.
- Documented hours or activities performed in prevention, preparedness, response, or recovery roles.

Recognition and rewards (certificates, awards, scholarships, stipends) should be based on actual engagement, not just initial registration.

- **Implement clear onboarding, training and compliance processes**

Volunteers should undergo onboarding and training before qualifying for incentives. This ensures they understand their roles, responsibilities, and the organisation's mission. Training completion can serve as an initial threshold for eligibility.

All volunteers must be covered by work health and safety (WHS) laws, and their activities must be supervised and recorded by responsible organisations.

- **Monitor participation.**

Use digital platforms and organisational systems to record volunteer engagement, hours, and roles. This data could be used to verify contributions before incentives are provided.

Regular check-ins and feedback sessions help maintain engagement and provide opportunities to assess ongoing participation.

- **Consult with Volunteer Organisations**

Ongoing consultation with volunteer-involving organisations is essential to design incentives that support, rather than undermine, existing volunteer cultures and retention strategies.

Question 2

Hansard page reference: 14

Senator Henderson asked the following question:

CHAIR: I just want to ask about your reference to the US Peace Corps model. Could elements such as employment pathways be adapted in this country without undermining the ethos of volunteering, do you think?

Mr Webb: I don't know enough about the detail of it, sorry. It's perhaps overstating the details of that particular program. It would be hard for me to say whether they would work. You look at those pathways in terms of the investment needed.

CHAIR: Yes. You might want to give some further thought to exploring employment pathways, and perhaps you could provide some further information to us on notice.

Response:

The reference to the US Peace Corps was in relation to instilling pride and being part of something. Though the US Peace Corps is an example of how participation in a volunteer organisation can be promoted and made attractive to potential participants, the environment is very different and typically volunteers need a 4-year college degree.

Australian emergency management volunteer organisations arguably offer similar pathways for employment given the ongoing training and experience gained.

Question 3

Hansard page reference: 14

Senator Henderson asked the following question:

Mr Loughlin: In terms of employment pathways, some kind of scheme the Commonwealth can offer to guarantee mandate leave for emergency service volunteers is something that would be of great interest nationally. Also, how do you recognise those small-business employers who are employing our volunteers, and how do they release their volunteers to go out and make a contribution without being financially disincentivised, as they are now? That is something else I would encourage in terms of employment pathways and things like that for the government to consider.

CHAIR: Do you have any thoughts about how small businesses could also make that contribution without being so disadvantaged?

Mr Loughlin: I think there are opportunities for the Commonwealth to consider what tax concessions or breaks there might be for small-business owners who employ active volunteers, noting that these volunteers aren't just attending major emergencies; they are dropping tools at a moment's notice to go and help with all manner of emergencies that occur in their local communities, providing incredible support at the expense of local businesses. That is something we can consider and expand on, perhaps on notice.

Response:

The first way to address this is to spend time understanding in more detail just what volunteers provide to society, and the impacts on their employers. Unless this is truly understood, it is difficult to understand the ways to adequately cover the costs of their volunteer, including the lost of revenue or market share.

Incentives include tax relief and deduction, reimbursement, honours and awards, certifications, discounted services.

Additional Questions from Senator David Pocock

Questions 1

Does anyone within your organisation currently hold a sponsored pass to Parliament House?

Response:

No.

Question 2

If so, who, and which Member of Parliament sponsors that pass?

Response:

Not applicable