

## **Submission to the Australian Parliament – Inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)**

**Date:** 23 October 2024

**From:** Greg Peak

**Subject:** Response to the Terms of Reference for the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

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### **1. Introduction**

This submission is in response to the Terms of Reference outlined by the Senate's Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade Committee regarding the formation of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army). The initiative seeks to mobilise volunteers, especially young people, to respond to natural disasters and engage in climate-related actions across Australia. I will address each point of reference based on my experience in environmental and structural resilience projects.

### **2. Response to Terms of Reference**

#### **(a) Targeted Initiatives to Encourage Youth Participation**

To foster youth engagement, targeted initiatives should include:

- **Incentive Programs:** Offering financial stipends, scholarships, or credits towards educational qualifications can incentivise young people to participate.
- **Social Media Campaigns:** Utilising platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to highlight volunteer success stories and the tangible impact of volunteer work will resonate with younger demographics.
- **Partnerships with Youth Organisations:** Collaborating with existing youth-focused environmental and service organisations can broaden reach and engagement.

#### **(b) Strategies to Enhance Volunteer Engagement**

Key strategies to enhance volunteer engagement include:

- **Recognition Systems:** Publicly acknowledging volunteers through certificates, awards, and public campaigns will build a positive volunteer culture.
- **Compensation Structures:** While many volunteers do not expect monetary compensation, offering allowances for travel, meals, and equipment can reduce financial barriers.
- **Mental Health Support:** Providing access to counselling and peer-support groups will promote long-term satisfaction and wellbeing, particularly for volunteers engaged in disaster recovery.

#### **(c) Integrating Volunteer Opportunities in Educational Institutions**

To boost student participation:

- **Curriculum Integration:** Volunteer work could be integrated into school and university curricula, where hours spent in the Climate Army contribute to course credits.
- **Volunteer Days and Camps:** Organising volunteer-focused days or camps during school breaks will make participation accessible and structured.
- **University Partnerships:** Partnering with universities to offer internship credits or research opportunities related to climate action through volunteering can further encourage participation.

#### **(d) Nationally Recognised Qualification Scheme**

Creating a qualification scheme could offer the following:

- **Skill Development Pathways:** Recognising skills learned, such as leadership, project management, and disaster response, would give volunteers credentials that are valuable in the workforce.
- **Certifications and Diplomas:** Establish a national certification program that provides volunteers with formal recognition, allowing them to demonstrate their competencies in relevant sectors such as emergency management or environmental conservation.
- **Cross-Sector Applicability:** The qualifications should be transferable across sectors, enhancing career prospects for volunteers.

#### **(e) Health and Safety Protections for Volunteers**

Ensuring volunteer health and safety is crucial. Recommendations include:

- **Mandatory Safety Training:** All volunteers should undergo basic safety training specific to the types of disasters or environments they may encounter.
- **Insurance Coverage:** Volunteers must be provided with adequate insurance coverage, protecting them from potential injury, illness, or psychological harm sustained while volunteering.
- **Legislative Safeguards:** Reviewing and potentially updating national and state-level legislation will ensure that volunteers have the same protections as paid workers under health and safety regulations.

#### **(f) Structure and Governance of the Scheme**

The governance structure should include:

- **A National Volunteer Agency:** This agency would coordinate all activities, training, deployment, and volunteer welfare, ensuring the scheme operates uniformly across Australia.
- **Partnerships with Local Authorities:** Local councils and regional disaster management bodies should have key roles in deploying volunteers and identifying areas most in need.

- **Feedback Mechanism:** Establish a feedback system that allows volunteers to express concerns or suggest improvements to the program, ensuring the scheme is adaptable and responsive.

#### **(g) Overseas Models and Best Practices**

Several overseas models provide valuable insights:

- **AmeriCorps (USA):** AmeriCorps combines service with financial incentives, offering education grants in exchange for volunteer service. This model is effective in mobilising young people for public service.
- **European Solidarity Corps (EU):** This program focuses on cross-border volunteer opportunities, offering young people the chance to gain international experience while contributing to climate-related projects.
- **New Zealand's Student Volunteer Army:** Formed after the Christchurch earthquakes, this organisation provides a model for community-led disaster recovery, demonstrating the power of grassroots volunteerism.

#### **(h) Other Related Matters**

Additional points to consider include:

- **Climate Justice Focus:** The scheme should emphasise support for vulnerable communities most affected by climate change, particularly Indigenous populations and those in remote areas.
- **Corporate Sponsorship:** Partnering with private sector companies can provide financial support and enhance the reach of volunteer initiatives.
- **Long-Term Sustainability:** While the focus is on immediate disaster response, volunteers should also be engaged in long-term climate resilience and sustainability projects to ensure continuous impact.

### **3. Conclusion**

The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) has the potential to significantly bolster Australia's response to natural disasters and climate change challenges. By engaging young people, integrating educational incentives, and providing structured, meaningful volunteer opportunities, this program can become a cornerstone of Australia's climate resilience strategy.

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Signed,

Greg Peak