



Submission to the inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

March 2025



About us

Established in 1914 and by [Royal Charter](#) in 1941, Australian Red Cross is auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. We have a unique humanitarian mandate to respond to disasters and emergencies. This partnership means governments can benefit from a trusted, credible, independent and non-political partner with local to global networks, who will work to implement humanitarian goals in a way that maintains the trust of government and Australian society.

Australian Red Cross is one of 191 Red Cross or Red Crescent National Societies that, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) – the world's largest and most experienced humanitarian network.

The Movement is guided at all times and in all places by seven [Fundamental Principles](#): Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. These principles sum up our ethics and the way we work, and they are at the core of our mission to prevent and alleviate suffering.

We remain neutral, and don't take sides, including in politics; enabling us to maintain the trust of all and to provide assistance in locations others are unable to go. Volunteering is in our DNA, and thousands of volunteers and members support us every day, helping solve social issues in their own communities. All our work is inspired and framed by the principle of Humanity: we seek always to act where there is humanitarian need.

Core areas of expertise for Australian Red Cross include Emergency Services, Migration, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Programs, Community Activities and Programs.

Highlights from our [2023–2024 Annual Report](#):



18,300+
members and volunteers acting
for humanity



213,000+
Australians supported during 70
emergency activations

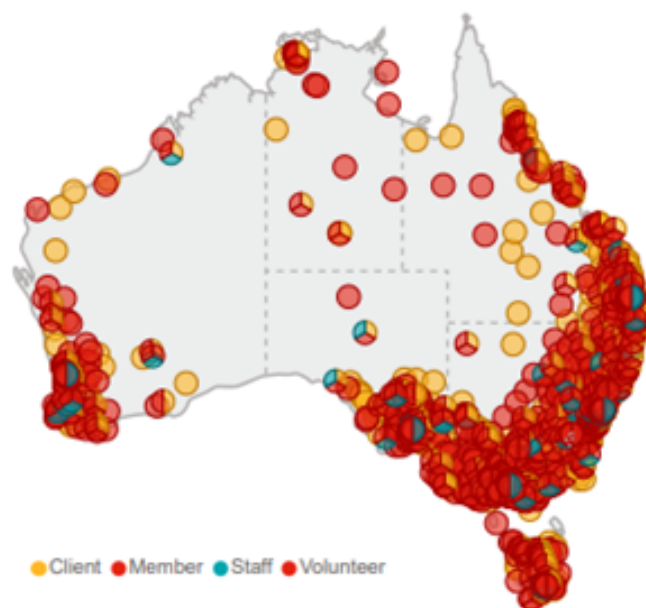


5.8 million+
people accessed information
from disaster preparedness
campaigns



23,600+
people from 129 countries
supported through migration
programs

Location of Red Cross people and clients





Purpose

Having contributed two submissions as well as testimony to the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience, Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to respond to the [Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade's National Volunteer Incentive Scheme \(Climate Army\)](#).

In our previous submissions of February 2023 and May 2024, we urged the Committee to consider:

- appropriate investment in pre-disaster resilience building
- a focus on the social cohesion and psychosocial wellbeing of people and communities
- enabling people who are affected to tell their stories only once by increased streamlining and coordination at the national level
- systematically inclusive approaches
- recognition of the longer-term impacts of disasters, with appropriate investment and sector-wide recovery training

We have focused our response on those areas where we have extensive expertise and that align with the unique humanitarian mandate of Australian Red Cross.

Summary of recommendations

Australian Red Cross recommends that the Federal Government:

Recommendation 1

Invest in the national volunteering sector, including Australian Red Cross, to cover the significant costs of recruiting, screening, training, and maintaining a volunteer workforce that can deploy across the country when and where they are needed.

Recommendation 2

Recognise the need for modern, sustainable and fair funding arrangements that fund the full costs of delivering services and cover multiple years to provide certainty for service delivery and sustainability of impact.

Recommendation 3

Use inclusive language to engage a larger and more diverse pool of potential volunteers.

Recommendation 4

Promote a culture of volunteerism through education and incentives.

1. Standing volunteer workforce

Recommendation 1

Invest in the national volunteering sector, including Australian Red Cross, to cover the significant costs of recruiting, screening, training, and maintaining a workforce that can deploy across the country when and where they are needed.

Recommendation 2

Ensure contracts and partnerships with volunteer-led organisations fund the full costs of delivering services and cover multiple years to provide certainty for service delivery and sustainability of impact.

- 1.1 'Voluntary Service' is one of our [Fundamental Principles](#). Voluntary service provides a source of inspiration and a statement of solidarity, as they take humanitarian action in their local communities. Our emergency volunteers are located around Australia, including rural and remote communities. Wearing a Red Cross emblem means we are a trusted and independent agency, who doesn't take sides and is there to support people in greatest need, without discrimination.
- 1.2 We strongly agree that there needs to be a standing workforce who can support people and communities across Australia in response to disasters. This work is best done before disasters occur, so relationships and resources are already in place when disasters strike, and can support faster and more effective recovery.
- 1.3 Australian Red Cross' evidence-based Emergency Services model and associated programs reduce the psychosocial impacts of disasters, emergencies and a changing climate on people and communities. Australian Red Cross' work recognises the varied, complex, and long-term impacts that disasters and other crises have on people's lives, including their health and wellbeing, quality of life and social connections.
- 1.4 There are already communities across Australia already living with the impacts of cascading and compounding events. Conversations about preparedness, response and recovery are happening concurrently.
- 1.5 Demands on our volunteer workforces to stand up for disasters are increasing. The National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033 noted the "unsustainable reliance on an unpaid workforce to deliver essential services and programs in the community".
- 1.6 For Australian Red Cross, current disaster funding arrangements do not recognise the costs incurred to maintain a base capability which governments rely on in crisis. Australian Red Cross does not receive government funding to recruit, screen, train and support our volunteers. Payment for activating this capability is generally made on a

reimbursement basis and for the duration of activation alone, without recognition of the full costs of service delivery.

- 1.7 For this reason, and because of the growing complexity, scale and intensity of the disaster landscape, we have been engaging Government to invest in our volunteer workforce. Australia needs a trusted and trained community-led workforce that is ready to act, helping communities manage the impacts of increasing disasters and emergencies.
- 1.8 Taking a voluntary service driven and community-led approach is strongly supported by Volunteering Australia. The National Strategy for Volunteering 2023–2033 (Volunteering Australia) states in strategic objectives 2.4: *“Enable a Community-Led Approach: Empowering and enabling communities to be drivers of how volunteering influences their futures will ensure everyone who wants to participate can do so irrespective of their level of power or access to resources.”*
- 1.9 There are also additional benefits from growing a volunteer movement within communities. Volunteering Australia also credits the positive mental health and wellbeing benefits that result from such participation: *“Volunteering promotes community wellbeing through building social capital (the networks and relationships between people). Volunteers are part of the social fabric of communities, and participation in volunteering is an indicator of social cohesion and the wider health of civil society”* (Measuring What Matters submission– Volunteering Australia).
- 1.10 Queensland’s Communities 2032 Action Plan 2022–2025 recognised that, in order to promote stability in the community and social services sector and help build workforce capability, longer-term contracts (5-years) would be provided where possible. We would recommend the same approach applies to the volunteering sector, to reflect the ongoing need for volunteers-led community workforces.

Australian Red Cross’ specific funding needs

- 1.11 Australian Red Cross – through our donors and partners – covers all costs associated with the recruitment, training and maintaining of our emergency services workforce of 2,500 people. We do this without government support.
- 1.12 But as disasters are increasing severity, and we are being called upon more frequently – we need to double the number of emergency services volunteers over the next four years to keep pace with the community needs.
- 1.13 We are engaging Government (Federal, State and Territories) for funding to grow our community workforce to 5,000, enabling them to deliver:
 - assessments of people’s recovery needs
 - immediate and ongoing recovery support including psychological first aid
 - customised disaster management training and support for councils.

- 1.14 Our emergency services staff and volunteers don't only act at the time of a disaster. They work within communities at all times and in-between disasters, so that all people in Australia are better prepared.

2. Use inclusive language

Recommendation 3

Use inclusive language to engage a larger and more diverse pool of potential volunteers.

- 2.1 There are similarities between military operations and disaster response activities. These include the need for strong organisation, logistical management, rapid responses, and planning and training to ensure support gets to where it is needed, quickly.
- 2.2 However, there are also significant differences. In preparing for and responding to disasters, we are working in the civilian domain, with and alongside civilian communities. A strong focus in the response is community, unity and collaboration. As outlined in the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, "the ADF should not be seen as a first responder for natural disasters, nor relied on as such".
- 2.3 Using language that is more inclusive to describe a volunteer-led response is likely to broaden the range of people who are attracted to volunteerism, which is what we need to meet the growing demand for volunteers.
- 2.4 After informal consultation with people involved in the work of the Australian Red Cross, a strong theme that emerged was the suggestion to avoid militarised language. It is important that all people who may want to volunteer to support people impacted by disasters feel motivated to do so.
- 2.5 A strong focus on militaristic terms like "army" and "soldier" may unintentionally deter volunteers in a civilian-led domain. For example, representatives from the NSW Youth Advisory Council and the IFRC's Climate Centre Youth Advisory Group suggested militaristic terms do not neatly align with their motivation to volunteer.
- 2.6 Australian Red Cross people who work with Vietnam War veterans have raised similar concerns. First Nations colleagues felt that First Nations volunteers may also find the call to participate in an 'army' unappealing and could be deterred from volunteerism.
- 2.7 Academic research further highlights the impact of militaristic language on outcome: for example, recognising that terms like *taskforce*, *deployment*, *operations* and *armies* can contribute to "creating an environment that is unsafe and unhealthy." ([McGuire S, Boyle J. The elephant in the room: critical reflections on militarism, war and their health](#))

[contingencies. Adv Nurs Sci. 2008;31\(2\):128–138](#)). It can particularly alienate women (as it is rooted in a masculine field) ([Arimatsu, Louise, Transformative Disarmament: Crafting a Roadmap for Peace, International Law Studies Journal. Vol. 97. \(2021\)](#)).

3. Creating a social culture of volunteerism

Recommendation 4

Promote a culture of volunteerism through education and incentives.

Raise community awareness of volunteering opportunities (educate)

- 3.1 We believe there would be value in a coordinated effort to raise the profile of volunteerism. This could include a targeted media campaign that highlights volunteering opportunities and experiences, particularly for young people. We support initiatives that celebrate volunteers such as the various volunteering awards presented by peak bodies across the country.
- 3.2 A campaign could seek to reach a diverse range of people, to ensure volunteering roles are reflective of the communities they serve.
- 3.3 In general, government infrastructure that engages volunteers should be as inclusive as possible. This might include translation of guidance documents (or targeted funding opportunities to enable organisations to translate their materials), support for providing requisite identification documents or increasing use of digital applications (so people who do not have access to private transport can still participate).

Incentivise

- 3.4 Whilst their motivations to volunteer were largely internal, Australian Red Cross volunteers suggested they valued external recognition of their efforts.
- 3.5 We have had success with our [Youth in Emergencies](#) program in South Australia. This program credits volunteering hours with Australian Red Cross towards Duke of Edinburgh Awards requirements, which young people can leverage to gain employment opportunities.

- 3.6 Programs like these that enable volunteers to credit hours towards other recognised qualifications help maximise the value of time, which we know is in high demand.
- 3.7 Our internal consultation process affirmed that Queensland volunteers value the ability to access community service leave, which enables them to deploy when required, without using other forms of leave.
- 3.8 Community service leave could be embedded in national and other state and territory jurisdictions and in a greater range of sectors.

Promote innovative co-designed volunteer programs

- 3.9 The Federal Government could engage untapped pools of employee volunteers by co-designing programs with corporate partners and volunteering organisations. For example, we are part of an [incentive trial](#) in Victoria which provides targeted discounts for essential workers in a range of businesses. As we receive further feedback from our volunteers, we would be happy to provide this advice for the Inquiry.
- 3.10 Corporate organisations are seeking ways to advance corporate social responsibility objectives, which could align with the Government's objectives to increase volunteering numbers. We are eager to be involved in such co-designed projects.

Promote programs for individuals who volunteer

- 3.11 The Federal Government could consider other financial incentives for individuals who volunteer. These have been shown to be effective in other jurisdictions. For example in the United States, tax rebate programs reportedly increased retention and engagement among emergency services volunteers, allowing them to earn points through activities like emergency response calls, training, and public outreach ([FEMA, 2023](#)).

Promote programs for young volunteers

- 3.12 Evidence suggests that young people are willing to volunteer when opportunities align with their values ([National Volunteering Strategy](#)). We know that young people are looking for flexible opportunities to make an impact.
- 3.13 Increasing cost-of-living pressures are particularly acute for younger people who may be studying or early in their careers. Our Youth in Emergencies example mentioned above shows our targeted effort to recruit young people.



Conclusion

At Australian Red Cross, we are independently seeking to modernise our engagement with our own volunteers and improve the volunteering experience. In 2025, Australian Red Cross will be conducting an in-depth consultation process with our volunteers and members, to learn from their experiences and strengthen processes and systems that support the volunteer journey and to meet the demand of new volunteers required to deliver our services. Australian Red Cross would be happy to continue to engage the Committee on this process.

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