

Submission to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committees on the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme

From: Australian Business Volunteers (ABV)

Date: October 2025

Dear Committee members,

Australian Business Volunteers (ABV) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee's inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army).

ABV strongly supports the expansion of volunteer opportunities and incentives to meet Australia's needs in disaster resilience, community development, and economic recovery. We join expressed support from government bodies, volunteer organisations, and emergency response actors for the Federal Government to grow volunteerism in Australia and safeguard the critical role volunteering has long played in protecting Australian communities in the face of climate adversity and disaster.

About Australian Business Volunteers

ABV is an international development organisation with a 40-year history of delivering inclusive economic development across the region. Established by the Australian Government Volunteer Program in 1981, ABV has worked in 35 countries across Australia, Asia and the Pacific where it has empowered thousands of local business owners to build thriving and sustainable futures in the face of adversity.

Today, ABV works across Australia and Pacific neighbours mobilising business volunteers for positive change, connecting communities with the skills and expertise that they value most. Our programs work across strengthening small and micro businesses in the Pacific, furthering First Nations economic pathways, and building economic and disaster resilience across rural and regional Australia. ABV supports communities through robust corporate, government and philanthropic partnerships focussed on genuine, sustained impact.

Discussion

On 18 September 2024, the Senate referred the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee. This was in response to the Final Report of the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into Australia's Disaster Resilience, which identified the critical role of volunteers in Australia communities' disaster preparedness and resilience, amidst the concerning fall in the number of volunteers in Australia, particularly across emergency services.

This was noted as a priority to address given the increasing severity and frequency of extreme weather events and climate hazards. The Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding, the Colvin Review, also raised these concerns and recommended a coordinated and national approach.¹

¹ Andrew Colvin AO APM, *Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding: Final Report* (National Emergency Management Agency, April 2024).

ABV supports the submissions to this inquiry by the national volunteer peak body for volunteering, Volunteering Australia, and the national voice for local government, the Australian Local Government Association, in both:

- Welcoming a federal scheme that strengthens disaster volunteering in Australia,
- Reducing the pressure and costs of natural disasters on local councils,
- And importantly, supporting the safety and wellbeing of disaster-affected communities through volunteering, now and in the many years ahead.

Recommendations

1) Complementing the volunteer and emergency management ecosystem

ABV echoes calls for the design and implementation of the Scheme to carefully consider Australia's existing emergency management and volunteer ecosystem; consider existing sector strategies and priorities to build volunteerism in Australia; and focus on removing the key barriers and challenges to mobilising volunteers in a disaster.

Namely, the development of the Scheme should:

- Be sensitive to the existing roles and challenges facing the emergency management landscape in Australia to avoid duplication and unintended consequences.
- Provide ample time for consultation with the many volunteering actors, including formal and informal volunteering in Australia's disaster management landscape. In particular, ABV recommends this be undertaken with volunteering peak bodies at a national, state and territory level, Disaster Relief Australia, Red Cross Australia, BlazeAid Australia, First Nation's representative bodies, and local council associations.
- Support the strategic objectives of Volunteering Australia's [National Strategy for Volunteering](#), including consideration of the three-year action plan that prioritises a volunteer passport to improve volunteer mobility and data collection across organisations and programs. Significant sector and government consultation has gone into this strategy and should be strongly considered and leveraged in the Scheme's development.²

2) Humanitarian and inclusive language

Consistent with humanitarian and community development principles, ABV also seconds the position expressed by Volunteering Australia and Red Cross Australia to adopt inclusive and humanitarian language in the context of volunteering and strongly avoid military references in the Scheme.

This extends from the use of "army", "soldier" or "battles" and given volunteer management occurs in a civilian domain, its language should be distinct from military efforts. The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements also provides the distinction between disaster management more broadly, and military intervention highlighting that "the ADF should not be seen as a first responder for natural disasters, nor relied on as such".³

² Volunteering Australia, *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023–2033* (Volunteering Australia, January 2024).

³ Commonwealth of Australia, Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, *Report* (October 2020).

Volunteering is at its core community-led work and needs to be communicated in a way that reflects that. The use of militarised language can be a barrier to enabling the grass-roots volunteer mobilisation that ABV believes is needed for the long-term sustainable community-led action in disaster preparedness and resilience in Australia.⁴

Humanitarian and inclusive language is also important to increase uptake among diverse audiences who are unlikely to identify with either military or hypermasculine representations often associated with disaster and emergency management volunteering. Consistent in discussion surrounding government language during Covid-19, military language can alienate community members and in this potential volunteers.⁵

3) Fair and sustainable funding

It is crucial that the Scheme invests in the full associated costs of volunteer management in Australia. This work spans from the recruitment and awareness campaigns, through to the screening, training, insuring, supporting, engaging, and maintaining a diverse volunteer cohort over the lifespan of their support.

These programs can involve a wide range of demographics who live across jurisdictions, in rural and regional Australia, and often have significant competing priorities with work, family and carer responsibilities. Working with diverse communities with complex needs, including disaster grief and trauma, these cohorts also require specialist training, support, briefing and debriefing.⁶

The expertise, tools and resources required to effectively manage these cohorts must be fully accounted for and funded in a fair and sustainable way. This support is important for both respect to the volunteers, and the communities that they serve. Mobilising skilled volunteers for close to 45 years across Australia and our region, ABV can speak to the full costs and expertise involved in sustaining this workforce and delivering significant community impact across complex and diverse environments – from PNG to the Pilbara.

Fair and sustainable funding is required for this work, including five-year grants and adoption of National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033 funding recommendations to address the current unsustainable reliance on volunteer programs to deliver essential work that it highlights. ABV has witnessed the numerous communities we have supported since 2020 lose momentum, engagement and hope as their three funding for preparedness or response hits a “funding cliff” meaning well intentioned and frankly vital community led services must shut.

The disengagement this leads with volunteers and community members who give of their time freely and generously is disastrous for future mobilisation and preparedness efforts. As one volunteer told ABV: *“I put my heart and soul into this recovery centre. The funding is gone and no-one in government*

⁴ Ramsbottom, A; O’Brien, E; Ciotti, L; Takacs J. Enablers and Barriers to Community Engagement in Public Health Emergency Preparedness: A Literature Review, 2017, National Library of Health.

⁵ Stephanie Topp, ‘Using military language and presence might not be the best approach to COVID and public health’ (The Conversation, 18 May 2021) <https://theconversation.com/using-military-language-and-presence-might-not-be-the-best-approach-to-covid-and-public-health-166019>.

⁶ Hayes, H; Ryan, N. Tailoring emergency and disaster preparedness engagement approaches for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, AIDR, 2024.

will talk to us about what is needed for our long positioning in preparedness for the next emergency. Next time they need me, I won't be here, and I won't put my hand up".

ABV also acknowledges the existing emergency volunteer cohorts such as SES, Red Cross Australia, and Disaster Relief Australia, and emphasises the ongoing need for all levels of government to fully fund and support their vital roles in the disaster management ecosystem.

4) Prioritising community-led economic and disaster resilience

Consistent with findings from the independent reviews of disaster funding and community preparedness by the Australian Government, it is important that the Federal Government redirect its focus to community resilience and empower local communities well before the natural hazard and climate shock hits.^{7 8}

Currently 92% of all disaster funding is spent on response and recovery, with only 8% on prevention and community resilience efforts.⁹ Consistent with the Colvin Review (2024) findings, ABV's resilience approach demonstrates that community-led resilience planning is crucial to place-based solutions that strengthen and leverage local networks, knowledge and capacity for high-impact hyperlocal solutions.

With a conservative return of investment of 13:1 from Monash University modelling, we know that community-led resilience programs like that ABV manage are of significant economic and social value – directly reducing the economic impact of natural hazards and disasters on local economies.

The business and economic impact of disaster is wide-reaching for a community:

- The Workforce disruptions from poor mental health, internal displacement and migration, insecure housing and livelihood disruption.
- Supply chain failures, slowing industry output and economic activity.
- Economic downturns in tourism, retail and agriculture sectors, and deferred investments in regional communities, exacerbating inequality and slowing long-term economic recovery.

According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (2020), 40% of small to medium sized enterprises do not reopen after a disaster, and many that do, close within a year.¹⁰ A focus on securing sustainable local businesses and strong local economies is paramount to safeguarding the economic lifeblood of many regional and remote communities most at risk of climate hazards and natural disasters.

Walking alongside communities to build economic resilience supports risks of livelihood loss, housing insecurity, internal displacement, mental health implications, and exasperated inequality. Drawing on

⁷ Andrew Colvin AO APM, *Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding: Final Report* (National Emergency Management Agency, April 2024).

⁸ Dr Robert Glasser, *Independent Review of National Natural Disaster Governance Arrangements: Final Report*, National Emergency Management (December 2023).

⁹ Andrew Colvin AO APM, *Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding: Final Report* (National Emergency Management Agency, April 2024).

¹⁰ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, *Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2025* (United Nations, 2025).

continued learnings from the delivery of community preparedness and resilience planning for communities and governments, ABV has developed its evidence-based framework to put communities in the driver's seat to lead their own resilience priorities and plans.

ABV recommends that the Committee prioritise the adoption of community-led volunteer management models in designing and implementing the Scheme, as well provide adequate focus to channelling volunteer cohorts for economic and disaster resilience work. ABV has done much work in this space with strong partnerships and is an important starting point for this consideration.

Our framework in action

Since the Black Summer Bushfires of 2019-2020, ABV has delivered over 175 community-led economic and disaster resilience projects in 16 disaster affected local government areas where it has partnered with local councils, small business networks, community and First Nations leaders to build place-based capacity for disaster risk management and adaptability. Through this work, ABV's developed a three-pronged evidence-based framework for community-led resilience in Australia.

Starting with meeting communities where they are at, ABV unlocks place-based resilience networks by facilitating collective conversations and goal setting. This work is followed by practically supporting communities through mobilising crucial volunteer support for integrated disaster preparedness and resilience plans, which is guided by emergency services, government and community leaders. It is also uniquely resourced by best-practice skilled business volunteering and cross sector support, including corporate and philanthropic partnerships.

Tangible examples of this include our work in Mallacoota and Orbost, where ABV facilitated small business workshops for impacted communities to identify local priorities and skill gaps, and then mobilised skilled business volunteers to meet this need and provide the strategic support and mentorship to realise these local goals. Alternatively, ABV walked alongside local groups and organisations in Braidwood to build local tourism amidst bushfire recovery and flood impacts.

This work has also included ABV partnering with Bateman's Bay Local Aboriginal Land Council to co-host a Cultural Burning Conference that brought together an unprecedented number of LALCs, emergency management, and disaster agencies together in disaster planning and preparedness efforts following a locally identified need.

5) Leveraging corporate and skilled business volunteering

ABV underscores the value of recognising and leveraging both skilled volunteering and corporate volunteering programs within the Scheme. At ABV our skilled business volunteers provide a crucial contribution to the resilience and recovery of communities across Australia. By mobilising experienced professionals with expertise in strategic planning, financial management, industry development, and human resources, skilled volunteers help not-for-profits and small businesses to strengthen their operational capacity, build new systems, and manage risk in response climate hazards and disaster risks.

Our tailored skilled volunteer programs in economic and disaster resilience across Australia deliver sustainable community outcomes, enabling communities to adapt, recover and build stronger futures from the ground up. Equally when managed effectively, corporate volunteer programs also offer an

important avenue to channel skilled professionals to aid disaster resilience and recovery work when applying a community-led framework.

At ABV, we work closely with corporate partners in Australia and the Pacific to co-design programs that are tailored to the needs of both the business and the communities that they operate in, responding to the expressed needs and priorities of communities. These collaborations support genuine, lasting impact by aligning corporate goals with community priorities.

Like our work with NAB and Arup, ABV builds strong corporate partnerships harness employee skills for long-lasting community impact, including adapting local industry for climate hazards, and accelerating disaster and economic resilience. Well-managed skilled volunteering programs like these brokers deep partnership between corporate and community sectors to amplify social value.

ABV urges the Committee to leverage the existing contribution and untapped potential of skilled business volunteering in Australia and corporate volunteer programs to support disaster resilience and recovery work in Australia. ABV further urges the Committee to consider the important role of ABV's Disaster and Economic Resilience Framework to guide this skilled volunteer mobilisation and ensure these programs realise sustainable and community-led outcomes.

ABV recommends that the Committee:

- Consider the existing volunteer and emergency management landscape;
- Adopt humanitarian and inclusive language and avoid military references;
- Ensure fair and sustainable funding to cover the costs of volunteer management;
- Support volunteer programs that keep communities in the drivers' seat; and
- Leverage skilled business and corporate volunteer programs for DRRR.

At ABV, we know that it is never too early to walk alongside communities to build a pathway for disaster resilience so that together, we can protect communities and prevent natural hazards from becoming longstanding disasters.

The benefit of this work extends well beyond the natural hazard to building social cohesion, wellbeing and lasting connection when it matters most. ABV would welcome the opportunity to provide further detail or case studies from our community-led disaster and economic resilience projects to assist the Committee's deliberations and planning.

Yours sincerely,

Liz Mackinaly

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