Australian Human Rights Commission
Human Rights Scrutiny Team
GPO Box 5218
Sydney NSW 2001

22 May 2026

Emergency Response and Human Rights during Disasters and Natural Hazards Consultation

Dear Commissioner,

Thank you for the opportunity for Council on the Ageing Queensland (COTA Queensland) to respond to the Emergency Response and Human Rights during Disasters and Natural Hazards Consultation.

As the Seniors Peak and Seniors Social Isolation Prevention Peak, COTA Queensland has advocated for the rights, needs, interests and futures of older Queenslanders since 1957. We work alongside older people, service providers, community organisations, local governments and community networks across Queensland to support age-friendly, inclusive and resilient communities.

This submission draws upon statewide insights gathered through COTA Queensland's community engagement, regional forums, volunteering, emergency and crisis insights work, policy and advocacy work, and previous submissions relating to discrimination and community resilience and emergency preparedness.

Our submission provides contextual evidence regarding the impact of emergencies, disasters and climate-related crises on Queensland communities, with a particular focus on the human rights of older people and the volunteer workforce that sustains local resilience and recovery.

Queensland is the most disaster-prone jurisdiction in Australia. During a recent seven-month period, the state experienced twelve significant disaster events, triggering disaster recovery funding across 66 of Queensland's 77 local government areas.[1]

Through statewide community engagement, regional forums and surveys, COTA Queensland has heard how disasters and emergencies disproportionately affect older people, particularly those:

- living alone
- living with disability

[1] Queensland Government. (2024). *Queensland disaster recovery and resilience roadmap*. [Ministerial media statement, 23 August 2024]. The Queensland Cabinet and Ministerial Directory. https://statements.qld.gov.au/statements/101160

- managing chronic illness
- experiencing financial insecurity
- relying upon home care and support systems
- residing in regional, rural and remote communities
- experiencing social isolation, and/or
- or facing digital exclusion.[2]

For older Queenslanders, emergency and disaster situations can intensify existing inequality and disadvantage. Seasonal weather activity (e.g., bushfire/flood watch/severe storm seasons) and one-off acute severe weather events can amplify existing vulnerabilities relating to housing, transport, healthcare access, mobility, communication, affordability and social connection.

Older Queenslanders are carers, volunteers, neighbours, community leaders, Elders, advocates and experienced contributors to disaster preparedness and recovery. Human-rights based emergency frameworks must recognise older people both as rights-holders and as contributors to community resilience.

Research and engagement undertaken through the Griffith Institute for Human and Environmental Resilience (GIHER) further reinforces that climate and disaster risks are no longer future considerations but are already influencing infrastructure planning, service delivery and investment decisions across sectors. Resilience cannot be addressed in isolation and requires integrated social, environmental, health, infrastructure and governance approaches.[3]

Current strengths of Queensland natural disaster and emergency responses

Community-led responses and place-based support systems have consistently been identified as strong aspects of effective emergency response across Queensland communities. Across regional Queensland people have described the importance of trusted local networks, including local emergency response groups, community transport and social services, volunteer organisations, local councils, community hubs and neighbourhood support systems. In some regional communities, established services such as the Flying Doctors, Air Sea Rescue, Meals on Wheels and cancer support services played critical roles in supporting older people during emergencies and recovery periods.[4]

Communities have also spoken positively about volunteer engagement and local coordination models. Strong relationships between community organisations, councils, Queensland Fire Department

[2] COTA Queensland. (2026). *2023–2026 emergency and crisis insights*. [Compilation of analysed insights from community engagements and regional forums. Unpublished document].
[3] Griffith Institute for Human and Environmental Resilience. (2026). *Findings from an Industry Engagement Workshop: Climate resilient development and disaster resilience*. [Unpublished internal document].
[4] Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2024). *Re-imagining Ageing – Regional forums report October 2023 – June 2024*. [Internal report, 10 July 2024].
Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2024). *Re-imaging Ageing Regional Forums July 2024*. [Report]. https://cotaqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Re-imagining-Ageing-Report-COTA-QLD-2024.pdf

personnel, State Emergency Service (SES) teams and neighbourhood centres were identified as essential to effective emergency response and recovery.[5]

Many older volunteers contribute significantly (or have voiced that there need to be increased opportunities to contribute) during and post disaster and emergency events acting in essential roles in logistics, communications, administration, welfare checks, meal preparation, recovery support and neighbourhood coordination.[6]

Community-led preparedness activities were also identified as highly effective local resilience initiatives. Neighbourhood centres, councils and community organisations have hosted preparedness and recovery events which involve emergency services such as Queensland Fire Services. Recent examples of community preparedness initiatives include in Caboolture, Wamuran and Redcliffe, where residents received practical disaster preparedness information, emergency kits and recovery support resources. Following the 2022 weather events, one community recovery event in Redcliffe distributed preparedness kits including battery-operated radios, torches, waterproof phone bags and emergency supplies to local residents.[7]

Several Queensland communities are delivering Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) initiatives. Programs delivered through councils and community organisations including Logan City Council, Mackay Regional Council, Gladstone Regional Council and community organisations in Cooktown have supported people living with disability, older people and carers to undertake individualised emergency preparedness planning. These approaches recognise that preparedness must be tailored, relationship-based and community-connected.[8]

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[5] Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2025). *Submission to the Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland February 2025*. [Submission]. https://cotaqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250328_Vol_Inquiry_COTAQ_final.pdf

[6] Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2025). *Submission to the Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland February 2025*. [Submission]. https://cotaqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250328_Vol_Inquiry_COTAQ_final.pdf

[7] COTA Queensland. (2026). *Insights through the Seniors Social Isolation Prevention Peak* [Email correspondence, 20 May 2026].

[8] City of Moreton Bay. (n.d.). *People with disability disaster preparedness*. https://www.moretonbay.qld.gov.au/Services/Disaster-Management/Before-a-Disaster/Education/People-With-Disability

Collaborating for Inclusion. (n.d.). *Partnerships for P-CEP implementation in Queensland communities*. https://collaborating4inclusion.org/partnerships-for-pcep-implementation-in-queensland-communities/

Cooktown District Community Centre. (n.d.). *P-CEP program* [Facebook page]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/share/18oeTVjPug/

Gladstone Regional Council. (n.d.). *Person-centred emergency preparedness*. https://conversations.gladstone.qld.gov.au/person-centred-emergency-preparedness

Logan City Council. (2026). *Council P-CEP workshops for seniors*. https://www.logan.qld.gov.au/about-council/media-releases/2026/council-PCEP-workshops-seniors

Mackay Regional Council. (n.d.). *Person-centred emergency preparedness (P-CEP)*. https://www.mackay.qld.gov.au/residents/emergency_management/person-centred_emergency_preparedness_p-cep

Queensland Disability Network. (2021). *Person-centred emergency preparedness (P-CEP) workbook*. https://qdn.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2020-08-19-Person-Centred-Emergency-Preparedness-P-CEP-WORKBOOK_FORM_FINAL.pdf

Also acknowledging the work of Volunteering Queensland: Volunteering Queensland. (2024). *Assisting facilities and community agencies that provide services to older people: Business continuity and disaster preparedness*. https://volunteeringqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Assisting_facilities_and_community_agencies_that_provide_services_to_older_people_business_continuity_disaster_preparedness.pdfAnd the work of state government: Queensland Government. (n.d.). *Get Ready Queensland*. [Website] https://www.getready.qld.gov.au/

COTA Queensland has heard that where emergency responses have worked best, they have generally been locally led, relationship-based, community-connected and informed by local knowledge.

Key challenges observed by COTA Queensland

Older people experience significant barriers before, during and after disasters and extreme weather events particularly in the areas of food insecurity and access to essential supplies, housing insecurity and displacement, transport challenges, disruption to care services, and pressures on the volunteer workforce. We outline below some regional examples across these challenges.

Food insecurity and access to essential supplies

A major issue raised in Far North Queensland relates to equitable access to food and essential supplies during flooding events. Older people in the Cairns region report difficulty accessing groceries and medications when flooding isolates the region or when flooding occurs south of Cairns, particularly around the Ingham and Bruce Highway corridor.[9]

Older people report arriving at supermarkets to find empty shelves due to supply shortages and panic buying. These situations disproportionately affect older people living alone, people living with disability, people with mobility limitations and those unable to physically navigate crowded, chaotic and/or stressful environments.[10]

We believe more targeted planning is required to ensure equitable access to essential supplies during emergencies. This would include arrangements for dedicated supermarket access for older people and people living with disability during disaster periods, systems for priority deliveries, and arrangements for locally coordinated access to (when essential services are not available) food and emergency supplies.

Housing insecurity and displacement

Disasters in Queensland frequently exacerbate existing housing insecurity and rental instability. In regions including the Scenic Rim and Ipswich, participants described increasing homelessness risks, people living in showgrounds or temporary accommodation following flooding events and growing pressure on already limited rental availability.

Community members in the Scenic Rim region have described women escaping domestic violence situations to relocate in regional areas and who then struggle to secure safe accommodation which compounds their housing stress during and following disaster events.

Many older people expressed concerns about long-term housing security, affordability and the ability to remain connected to their communities as disaster events become more frequent and severe.[11]

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[9] Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2023). *Listening Post 2022 Final Report*. [Internal report].
Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2023). *Listening Post 2023*. [Report]. https://cotaqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Listening-Post-COTA-QLD-2023.pdf
COTA Queensland. (n.d.). *Securing equitable food access during Cairns flood emergencies – Insights through Aged Care Service Navigation – Care Finders* [Email correspondence, May 2026].
[10] COTA Queensland. (n.d.). *Securing equitable food access during Cairns flood emergencies – Insights through Aged Care Service Navigation – Care Finders* [Email correspondence, May 2026].
[11] Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2023). *Listening Post 2022 Final Report*. [Internal report].

Transport, evacuation and regional isolation

Transport barriers significantly affect older people's safety and recovery during emergencies.

Older Queenslanders have told us that they live in areas with limited or non-existent public transport and fear that losing the ability to drive would leave them isolated and unable to access healthcare, food, evacuation points or support services.

> *I am stuck in a fairly remote area. No neighbours. No public transport. No social life.*
>
> *No public transport in Aratula, Boonah or Beaudesert. As soon as I no longer drive, I will be forced to move.*[12]

Older residents in regional areas have also raised concerns regarding limited road access points and infrastructure failures during emergencies and flooding events particularly in North Queensland.[13]

Disruption to care

Older people have raised concerns regarding disrupted access to healthcare, medications, home care and specialist services during and after emergencies. They have also described challenges navigating aged care and disability support systems during periods of instability or deteriorating health which is compounded during and after disaster events. Continuity of aged care, home care and community care services during emergencies must be acknowledged as a significant human rights issue.

Communication and digital exclusion

Emergency communication systems are frequently inaccessible for older people, particularly those with low digital confidence, disability, sensory impairments or limited internet access.

The State of the Older Nation 2026 report found that 14% of older Australians experience a lack of confidence when using online services.[14] This has potential implications during emergencies where critical information is increasingly distributed digitally.

Community stakeholders also described how digital exclusion significantly affected older people during the 2022 Queensland weather events. Recovery workers reported that many older people were unable to access online disaster dashboards, emergency updates or digital recovery information due to limited internet access or low digital confidence.

Stakeholders also observed that some older people were reluctant to evacuate without pets or supports including in situations involving prolonged power outages or unsafe living conditions. In some

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Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2024). *Re-imagining Ageing – Regional forums report October 2023 – June 2024*. [Internal report, 10 July 2024].

[12] Australian Catholic University. (2026). *Ageing Well survey dataset*. [Internal report provided to Council on the Ageing Queensland].

[13] COTA Queensland. (n.d.). *Securing equitable food access during Cairns flood emergencies – Insights through Aged Care Service Navigation – Care Finders* [Email correspondence, May 2026].
Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2023). *Listening Post 2022 Final Report*. [Internal report].
[13] Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2024). *Re-imagining Ageing – Regional forums report October 2023 – June 2024*. [Internal report, 10 July 2024].

[14] COTA Australia. (2025). *State of the Older Nation (SOTON) 2025 Report*. [Report, 4 February 2025]. https://cota.org.au/report/state-of-the-older-nation-soton-2025-report/

instances, older couples reportedly isolated themselves to a single room within damaged homes during recovery periods.

People also identified barriers for people living with hearing impairment:

> *Emergency situations are often very challenging for deaf people because there is rarely adequate information in Auslan available.*

These experiences reinforce the importance of non-digital communication pathways, neighbourhood-level outreach, welfare checks and trusted local communication networks during emergencies.[15]

Volunteer workforce pressures

Emergency response organisations and community services are facing increasing pressure due to ageing volunteer bases, recruitment challenges, burnout and administrative burden.

Between 2020 and 2023, Queensland lost approximately 200,000 volunteers. Older volunteers in Queensland contribute an estimated 111.1 million volunteer hours annually, with an economic replacement value estimated at $4.6 billion per year.

At the same time, volunteers face increasing financial and administrative burdens. In Queensland, volunteers spend an average of $15.57 per hour out-of-pocket to support their communities.[16]

Evidence from emergency management volunteering research demonstrates that financial pressure is not only a social issue but also an emergency capability risk. Volunteers increasingly absorb the private costs of fuel, travel, training, communications, equipment and deployment while emergency systems rely heavily upon unpaid labour. Research also indicates that cost pressures disproportionately affect younger and working-age volunteers, threatening future workforce sustainability, succession planning and daytime emergency response capacity.[17]

Community members repeatedly reported that excessive red tape and regulatory requirements discourage participation:

> *Take away red tape when getting involved in community activities e.g., volunteering, fire fighters.*
>
> *Some of us would like to help in some capacity, but don't want to be out in the field fighting fires or covering roofs with tarps…*

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[15] Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2025). *Submission to the Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland February 2025*. [Submission]. https://cotaqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250328_Vol_Inquiry_COTAQ_final.pdf

[16] Volunteering Queensland. (2024). *State of volunteering in Queensland 2024 report*. Volunteering Queensland. https://volunteeringqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/State-of-Volunteering-in-Queensland-2024-Report.pdf
Volunteering Queensland. (2024). *State of volunteering in Queensland 2024: Older Queenslanders full report*. Volunteering Queensland. https://volunteeringqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/State-of-Volunteering-in-Qld-2024-Older-Qlders-Full-Report.pdf

[17] Stalker, J. (2025). *Submission from John Stalker to the Local Government, Small Business, and Customer Service Committee Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland*. [Submission]. https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/com/LGSBCSC-AACA/IVQ-1A2A/submissions/00000178.pdf
Stalker, J. (2026). *Financial pressure, cost of living and Queensland Rural Fire Service volunteer sustainability* [Unpublished policy paper].

Community stakeholders also raised concerns regarding the extent to which volunteers and local communities are consulted regarding emergency management reforms and operational expectations.[18]

Human-rights based emergency frameworks must recognise that participation in public life includes the ability of volunteers and affected communities to contribute to decision-making processes that directly affect local emergency capability, volunteer sustainability and community safety.

Learnings from recent disasters

A key lesson from recent disasters is that an approach of one-size-fits-all does not work for emergency planning. Communities have shared with us that local knowledge, trusted relationships and community-led approaches are essential during emergencies. Older people have told us about their escalating concerns:

> *Climate change is delivering us major challenges: fires, heat waves, floods, storms, damage and high insurance charges.*[19]

Preparedness and recovery systems must be place-based, accessible and inclusive. Further, emergency planning cannot be separated from broader issues such as housing affordability, healthcare access, transport availability, digital inclusion, infrastructure resilience and social connection. Our engagements with communities have highlighted the importance of:

- ensuring emergency communication is accessible and available in multiple formats
- strengthening local supply chain resilience
- embedding continuity planning for home care and healthcare services
- supporting local volunteer networks
- reducing administrative barriers for volunteers
- recognising diverse volunteering roles beyond frontline physical work
- strengthening community coordination and local recovery supports
- improving climate and disaster literacy, and
- embedding co-design and lived experience into disaster planning.

Human rights protections during future emergencies

COTA Queensland believes future emergency planning frameworks must embed human rights principles including dignity, accessibility, equality and non-discrimination, safety and protection, and participation and inclusion.[20] Emergency preparedness, response and recovery systems must

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[18] Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2025). *Submission to the Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland February 2025*. [Submission]. https://cotaqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250328_Vol_Inquiry_COTAQ_final.pdf

[19] Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2024). *Re-imagining Ageing – Regional forums report October 2023 – June 2024*. [Internal report, 10 July 2024].

[20] Queensland Government. *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld). Queensland Legislation: https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2019-005
Further references that were utilised to inform COTA Queensland response include:

recognise the diverse needs, capacities and contributions of volunteers and older people and people living with disability, particularly those residing in regional, rural and remote communities.

COTA Queensland therefore recommends:

1. **Embedding co-design and inclusive planning** by ensuring disaster frameworks are developed in partnership with older people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people living with disability, and older people living with changing capacities.

2. **Strengthening accessible communication systems** through greater investment in inclusive emergency communications, including Auslan interpretation, non-digital communication pathways, accessible early warning systems, and locally trusted information channels.

3. **Improving equitable access to essential services and recovery supports** by:

    - ensuring reliable access to food, medication and essential supplies during disasters
    - embedding continuity planning for aged care, home care and healthcare services
    - improving access to temporary and long-term housing following disasters, and
    - strengthening regional transport and evacuation planning.

4. **Investing in community resilience and place-based recovery** through stronger local coordination mechanisms, regionally led recovery hubs, and expanded Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) initiatives.

5. **Strengthening and sustaining emergency volunteering** by:

    - reducing administrative barriers to volunteering
    - creating flexible volunteering pathways for older people
    - providing financial and wellbeing supports for volunteers
    - ensuring volunteering can operate on a cost-neutral basis wherever possible, including reimbursement of reasonable out-of-pocket expenses, and
    - investing in regionally led volunteering hubs to strengthen local emergency response capability.

6. **Strengthening legal protections for emergency response volunteers** through consideration of legislative reform, including amendments to the *Civil Liability Act 2003* (Qld) to enhance 'Good Samaritan' protections for people acting in good faith during emergencies.

Council on the Ageing Queensland. (2022). *Review of the Anti-Discrimination Act 1991: COTA Queensland submission to the Queensland Human Rights Commission*. COTA Queensland.
Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers. (2025, May 6). *Inquiry into volunteering: Departmental commentary on key themes raised in written submissions*. Queensland Government. https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/com/LGSBCSC-AACA/IVQ-1A2A/Department%20of%20Local%20Government%2C%20Water%20and%20Volunteers%2C%206%20May%202025.pdf
Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee. (2025). *Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland* (Report No. 4, 58th Parliament). Queensland Parliament. https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/com/LGSBCSC-AACA/IVQ-1A2A/Tabled%20document%20-%20Executive%20Summary.pdf

Volunteering remains the backbone of Queensland's disaster resilience, yet participation is increasingly challenged by systemic, financial and administrative barriers. As Queensland's older population grows exponentially and climate-related disasters become more frequent, emergency management systems must evolve to ensure preparedness, response and recovery frameworks are inclusive, accessible, place-based and grounded in human rights principles.

Older Queenslanders bring significant lived experience, local knowledge, practical capability and community connections that are critical to strengthening community resilience before, during and after disasters. Protecting the rights and wellbeing of older Queenslanders, and the volunteer (including older volunteer) workforce, requires sustained investment in community resilience, local capability and inclusive emergency planning.

Yours sincerely

Listen Rusten

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