



What are the real costs of volunteering?

Almost all volunteers (88%) incur out-of-pocket expenses that are not reimbursed. These costs average \$700 for each volunteer with net expenses, or \$600 if averaged across all volunteers. This is sufficient for one-in-ten volunteers to have stopped or reduced their volunteering participation in the last year. Volunteers and not-for-profit organisations agree that responsibility for reducing the impact of these costs should be shared between government and volunteer-involving organisations themselves.

88% of volunteers have out-of-pocket expenses that are not reimbursed

Methodology

During October 2006, Volunteering Australia conducted an open online survey promoted and made available through Volunteering Australia's website and inVOLve e-newsletter. The survey was completed by 1,245 respondents – 724 volunteers, 466 representatives of volunteer-involving organisations, and 55 other respondents (from groups such as government, media, and businesses).

Participation in volunteering

More than six million Australians aged 18 and over volunteer – around 41% of adults – contributing approximately 836 million volunteer hours. Volunteering was a regular activity for most of the 724 volunteers responding to the online survey, with 71.4% volunteering at least weekly. Volunteers most commonly worked in the community services and welfare sector (25.0%), followed by emergency services (19.6%), and education, training and youth development (17.2%).

Impact of the costs of volunteering

Volunteers

One-in-ten volunteers (10.6%) had changed their volunteering involvement in the past twelve months due to the costs associated with volunteering – with the majority of this group having reduced their volunteering, but many having stopped entirely or having changed their volunteer role or organisation. A further 24.3% were considering changing their involvement in one of these ways at the time of the survey.

Amongst volunteers who had stopped or reduced their volunteering, three-quarters (75.3%) cited petrol prices as the reason for this decision. Other non-petrol costs also led or contributed to the decision to stop or reduce volunteering for half of this group.

Amongst organisations, 6.3% had volunteers leave during the past year due to the costs of participating, 17.3% had volunteers who reduced their involvement, and 1.2% had volunteers change roles within their organisation. A further 16.1% of organisations knew of volunteers currently reconsidering their level of future involvement due to associated costs.

Amongst volunteers not considering any change in their volunteering due to costs many were now worse off financially, however, they felt unable to leave their role due to community demand for the services that they provided.

Volunteer-involving organisations

Over a quarter of volunteer-involving organisations (27.7%) experienced an increase in reimbursement requests from volunteers over the past year. One cause was that 13.8% of volunteers who claimed travel expenses during the prior year had done so for the first time due to rising petrol costs. Amongst volunteers, 7.9% worked in organisations that had adjusted their travel reimbursement policy or formula following petrol price rises, and 5.9% indicated that their organisation had increased reimbursement levels.

For many not-for-profits growing reimbursement requests compounded existing organisational cost increases. Over this period, 3.6% of volunteer-involving organisations introduced volunteer reimbursements for the first time, 16.4% increased their levels of reimbursement, and 1.4% decreased their reimbursement levels.

On average, volunteers with net expenses are out-of-pocket by \$693 each year

Costs of participation

Over the year, almost all volunteers incurred related costs that were not reimbursed. Of survey respondents, 637 volunteers (88%) detailed and quantified these costs. On average, these volunteers were out-of-pocket by \$693 for the year, net of any reimbursements, although for half of volunteers their net costs were below \$300. When these costs are averaged across all volunteers the net cost per volunteer is approximately \$600.

Average annual costs per volunteer varied by sector, and were highest in sport and recreation organisations (\$1,293), although the median for this group was lower at \$475. Emergency services volunteers showed the second highest costs net of reimbursement, at \$1,048 (median \$575).

Volunteers' costs also varied with the intensity or frequency of their volunteering. The highest average costs were incurred by those who volunteered in significant blocks of time – for example, 4-12 weeks away from home – and those involved in almost full-time voluntary work. Average costs declined with the frequency and/or intensity of involvement. People volunteering more than weekly averaged \$906, those volunteering weekly averaged \$467, those participating once or twice a month averaged \$248, and those with less frequent participation averaged \$149.

A majority of volunteers (80.9%) incurred travel expenses related to their volunteering – either car and petrol costs, or public transport. Some volunteers also incurred other transport costs, such as the use of personal boats for offshore activities or paying for flights.

Fuel and vehicle costs were the most commonly incurred expense-type. Almost all volunteers (92.6%) at least occasionally used their own car to travel to and from their volunteering, with 82.4% always commuting in their private vehicle. Half of volunteers (48.8%) at least occasionally used their own car to undertake their volunteer role, with 41.0% always doing so. Across all volunteers using their own cars, approximately half (46.9%) incurred fuel and vehicle expenses of \$200 or more over the year that had not been reimbursed, with 18.9% estimating their costs at \$500 or above (the survey did not specify whether or not this included commuting expenses).

Only 12% of volunteers used public transport at least occasionally to fulfill their role. For those that did incur public transport costs, for the majority these costs remained below \$200.

The majority (88%) never took public transport during their volunteer work, and only 25% used public transport even occasionally to travel to their role. However, 18.2% of volunteers reported volunteering-related public transport costs that had not been reimbursed. For the majority (87.9%) these costs remained below \$200.

Telephone calls were the second most common expense, with 68.9% of volunteers having out-of-pocket telephone expenses after any reimbursement. However for 69.1% of volunteers these costs remained below \$100 annually, and for 80.4% they remained below \$200.

Uniform expenses were detailed by 19.6% of volunteers, and in 75.4% of cases, non-reimbursed expenses remained below \$200 in the past year. 20.4% of volunteers incurred costs of between \$200-400.

Concerningly, 12.7% of volunteers reported purchasing compulsory safety equipment that was not reimbursed or not fully reimbursed. These costs remained below \$200 for 71.7% of these volunteers, however, one-fifth (20.7%) had costs between \$200-400, and 3.3% of volunteers incurred costs for this required equipment of between \$1,000-3,000.

Significantly, 41.9% of volunteers also reported other types of expenses that were not reimbursed, without specifying the nature of these. While for the majority of these volunteers (61.4%) 'other' costs remained below \$200, for many volunteers they were significant with 5.9% (or 2.5% of all volunteers) reporting other costs of over \$1,000 that were not reimbursed.

One-in-ten volunteers has stopped or reduced their volunteering in the last year due to the cost

Expense Reimbursement

The survey asked respondents who should be responsible for responding to the financial cost of out-of-pocket expenses. More than half of volunteers (54.4%) indicated government had a responsibility to reduce the impact, while just over one-third indicated that volunteer-involving organisations should take responsibility. Interestingly, almost one in five volunteers (18.5%) felt that volunteers themselves have responsibility for these costs – although around half of this group (9.9%) indicated that this was not a sole responsibility, but one shared with government, organisations, business, or the community.

Not-for-profit organisations typically shared the view that costs should be the responsibility of government (55.8%) together with themselves as volunteer-involving organisations (49.1%).

Of surveyed volunteers, 40.4% indicated that the organisation they volunteered in offered some level of expense reimbursement, with 7.7% of working in organisations offering full reimbursement. However, only 18.7% of volunteers claimed reimbursement for travel expenses in the past year, and 16.0% for non-travel expenses. In total, 68.2% of volunteers did not claim any reimbursement – despite most incurring related expenses – and many volunteers who did submit reimbursement claims did not claim for their full costs or entitlement.

The likelihood of volunteer-involving organisations offering at least partial expense reimbursement increased with the size of their volunteer programmes. Almost half (43.9%) of organisations with less than 50 volunteers did not provide any expense reimbursement for volunteers, while 47.7% did. Two-thirds (67.0%) of these smaller organisations identified they were unable to reimburse expenses due to being unable to afford such a commitment. Amongst organisations with 50-299 volunteers, 53.1% provided some level of expense reimbursements. Amongst those with 300+ volunteers, 63.3% were able to provide some level of reimbursement (however, the ability to reimburse expenses also declined for organisations with extremely large numbers of volunteers).

Conclusion

The costs of volunteering are significantly affecting both volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations. One-in-ten volunteers have already changed their involvement due to out-of-pocket costs, and up to a quarter more are considering doing so. While Australia has an enviably high level of volunteer involvement, the pressure on volunteers and their organisations of these costs risks impacting on the invaluable services they provide and Australia's volunteering tradition.

Over 25% of organisations have had increased reimbursement requests from volunteers in the last year

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