

Volunteering Australia
10th National Conference on Volunteering
Volunteering ~ evolution, devolution or revolution?
Melbourne, 2-4 June 2004

Speech to open the 2004 National Conference on Volunteering

Senator The Hon. Kay Paterson,

Minister for Family and Community Services

Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women

02/06/2004

Hilton on the Park

East Melbourne

- My parliamentary colleagues
- Sha Cordingly, CEO of Volunteering Australia
- David Gonski, Chairman of Investec Wentworth Pty Ltd, Coca Cola Amatil Ltd, Investec Bank (Australia) Ltd, the Australia Council for the Arts, and Chair of the Taxation and Philanthropy Working Group on the Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership
- Raelene Boyle, former Olympian, Board Member of the Breast Cancer Network Australia, and a National Community Ambassador
- Our international guests, Paddy Bowen from the Canadian Voluntary Sector and George Thomson, Chief Executive of Volunteer Development Scotland
- Distinguished Guests
- Ladies and Gentlemen
- And, of course, to all the volunteers present today.

Introduction

Thank you, David Penman for your introduction.

I am delighted to be with you here this morning to open this 10th National Conference on Volunteering.

I'd like to particularly acknowledge the first two speakers – David Gonski and Raelene Boyle.

Normally in opening a conference you are first cab off the rank,

but I can think of no better way to kick off proceedings than to hear about the tremendous community work David and Raelene have been involved with.

And besides, there is no shame in being a little slower out of the blocks than Raelene Boyle!

I would like to congratulate Volunteering Australia for organising this event.

As many of you already know, I am a huge supporter of Volunteering Australia and admirer of

Australia's many Volunteers.

My affiliation with – and passion for - volunteering started at an early age when I was extended a life-altering opportunity by the Guides.
(expand on own experiences)

So I am thrilled to be here today to not only open this conference, but to also outline the government's plans for volunteering programs in the coming years.

Since 1993, Volunteering Australia has been a powerful advocate for the volunteer sector and has successfully raised the profile of volunteering in Australia.

All of us here know the work of Australia's volunteers is a crucial and valuable element of prosperous communities, helping to strengthen families and communities now and into the future.

And Volunteering Australia forms an integral part of training, placing, managing, and coordinating volunteers across the country.

At the same time, they are a critical part of two major government volunteer programs:

- the Volunteer Management Program, for volunteering generally; and
- the Voluntary Work Initiative, which encourages volunteering amongst unemployed people.

They are also integral to many other Australian Government programs.

Changing perceptions

I note that in the Conference program it states that volunteering "is both a movement in change and for change."

I think this statement is spot on. The role and profile of volunteering has evolved quickly in recent times.

Once, the term 'volunteer' invoked dread.

You've seen those old films - the Commander of the doomed battalion, surrounded by the enemy, asks for a 'volunteer' to sneak out and get help.

I'm sure that Volunteering Australia, had they been around then, might have raised an objection or two about the occupational health and safety conditions for this particular volunteer!

And I think we all remember our school teachers' concept of volunteering:

"I need three volunteers to stay back and clean the room– you, you and you!"

Yes, the volunteering movement certainly has changed!

And the latest ABS figures clearly illustrate how much it has grown.

Benefits of Volunteering

Some statistics:

In 2000:

- estimated 4.4 million volunteers in Australia aged 18 and over (32% of population of same age)

In 1995

- estimated 3.2 million volunteers (24% of the population)

In 2000:

- volunteers contributed an amazing 704 million hours of voluntary work,

In 1995:

- volunteers contributed around 512 million hours

Professor Duncan Ironmonger estimated, in 2002, that volunteering directly contributes a staggering \$42 billion each year to the Australian economy.

In his analysis, Professor Ironmonger went on to say that the financial benefits of volunteering do not take account of its enormous social benefits.

He says that volunteering is an important tool in building social capital and is also associated with better health and wellbeing for people who volunteer.

So, volunteering makes a difference to the whole nation, economically and socially.

A volunteering tradition

Volunteering in Australia is not only on the increase, but it is also helping to bring about profound change in our communities.

That is nothing new in this country.

Australia has a proud tradition of volunteering and would be a lot poorer without the extraordinary help of its volunteers.

They give up their precious time each year to help their own communities in all kinds of ways.

We all know someone who volunteers – whether it's the kids' footie coach, mums running the school tuckshop, drivers delivering meals on wheels, bushfire fighters, or people in Landcare groups.

Government support

Volunteering is an essential part of the Government's objective to promote social participation and strengthen connections within communities.

It is therefore a key Government objective that volunteers and volunteer organisations get the support they need to carry on their vital work.

All around Australia, volunteers are working on important and worthwhile Government-funded projects that can make a real difference.

They find themselves as key players in the bigger picture of their communities.

And their remarkable efforts are increasing the strength, resilience and wellbeing of the places they live.

Volunteers are part of a 'social coalition' – when individuals, families, businesses, governments, councils, and community organisations pool their experience and resources to make positive contributions to community life.

(Stronger Families and Communities Strategy funding)

Underpinning our Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, for example, is the idea that it is communities themselves that provide the best system of social support.

Indeed, this approach permeates many government policies.

Because we believe that governments alone cannot solve every social problem.

I strongly believe that the days of telling communities what's good for them are over.

The best ideas come from the 'bottom up', rather than 'top-down'.

They come from the people at the coalface – from those within the community.

And many of those ideas have turned into community projects, which the Government funds and supports.

In many cases, the success of these projects depends on the ability of a community to take charge of what it has put in place.

In the past four years, the Strategy allocated nearly \$230 million to more than 660 community projects across Australia.

This included funding for:

- 63 Volunteering Programs.
- 142 Early Childhood Programs;
- 99 Parenting Skills Programs;
- 51 Relationship Skills Programs;
- 188 Mentoring and Leadership Programs; &
- 97 Community Building Programs.

As you can imagine, it is often volunteers who help to keep these projects up and running.

Let me give you some real-life examples of the incredible benefits volunteering can bring to a community, and to the volunteers, themselves.

Billiton BHP

You have already heard from David Gonski today.

As a member of the Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership,

David would be well aware of the truly remarkable efforts of the winner of the 2003 Special Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership Award for Impact on a Community.

The Government hosts the awards each year to recognise and promote outstanding examples of successful partnerships.

Billiton BHP's involvement in a large number of communities throughout Australia - by forming workable and meaningful partnerships in those communities – is making a real and lasting impact.

The company put in place a number of community activities including:

- donations

- employee fundraising with matching dollars from the company
- transferring technical and professional expertise, mentoring
- sharing facilities and administrative support, and
- project development.

And, amazingly, between 2000 and 2003, Billiton's workers gave up over 36 000 hours as volunteers.

And David probably gave you a break down of some of the extraordinary outcomes these volunteers have produced,

But I think they are worth mentioning again.

For example:

- 100 significant Australian Wetlands have been revived;
- 60 leaders of not-for-profit organisations have been trained in volunteer management;
- 1200 disadvantaged young people have been supported in education;
- Eight Indigenous communities have had professional and financial support to work out new approaches to solving community issues; and
- 800 schools in rural communities have seen 'Actors at Work', a Bell Shakespeare project.

But it's not just a one-way-street.

The proactive and community-minded approach of the company has seen them reap some terrific benefits themselves, including:

- a higher company standing in the community;
- a visible demonstration of their corporate values;
- improved networks and communication with the groups and people involved;
- a new talent pool of potential employees, many having come up in the ranks of their leadership programs;
- better staff morale, and
- a strengthened social fabric and more stability in the communities where they operate.

It really is a 'good news story' and one that illustrates how the skills of thousands of volunteers throughout the country are being used for the betterment of their communities.

Community Alchemists of the 21st Century

One brilliant initiative that I had the pleasure of launching earlier this year was the Grandparents: The Community Alchemists of the 21st Century project.

Grandparents Victoria received funding of \$60,000 under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy National Skills Development for Volunteers Program to run a series of training sessions for up to 50 grandparents in areas such as leadership and working with families.

The main aim of this innovative new training program is to improve the skills of grandparents

in supporting young children and adolescents in their local communities.

The project's benefits will not only be felt by young people throughout the State, but also by their families and friends, many of whom may need the 'helping hand' of a grandparent.

And, of course, the grandparents themselves will also feel empowered as they help to make a very real difference to their communities.

A real case of grey power!

And the list continues ...

The message is clear - this Government values and nurtures volunteers from all walks of life in all parts of this country.

To do otherwise is to turn our back on an incredibly productive resource – one that is making a real difference to the wellbeing of many communities around the nation.

A further commitment

We are building on our support for volunteers with a recent announcement by the Prime Minister of an extra \$365 million over the next four years on phase 2 of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

\$60 million of this money will go towards an initiative called Local Answers.

Local Answers again reflects the belief that giving communities the power to develop their own solutions to local problems and help themselves is often the best way to go.

And following the overwhelming response to the Volunteer Small Equipment Grants program, the government recently extended the program for another round.

This program has so far provided over \$19 million to 8,500 volunteer organisations across the country.

Announcement

This Government values volunteers and is committed to real consultation with the sector about the future.

We are interested in hearing, from you, about the Government's role in supporting volunteering, in acknowledging volunteers and in creating volunteering opportunities within our communities.

It may also be of particular interest to members of this audience to know that the Government has extended the funding for the Voluntary Work Initiative for a further four years.

Both the Voluntary Work Initiative and the Volunteer Management Program continue to provide valuable support to the volunteer sector.

They are also making an important contribution to the Australians Working Together Initiative.

It is timely, however, to look at how our programs might work more effectively.

You may be aware that the two programs were reviewed recently under the previous Minister, Senator Vanstone.

This Review was very positive but pointed to some areas for improvement.

It will form the basis of consultation with the sector around the future of these programs.

I can announce today an extension of current funding agreements and contracts for both Volunteer Work Initiative and Volunteer Management Program for the next six months.

This will provide certainty for organisations while the consultation process about the future of the Voluntary Work Initiative and the Volunteer Management Program takes place.

As part of this extension I will also be asking the sector to review how to further improve these two programs to ensure volunteers and the community are getting the most of these programs.

This Government is looking forward.

This Government wants to explore ways of integrating our programs to get the best outcomes for our communities.

We cannot do this alone.

And so we will be talking to you about how to improve the relationship between our programs and your needs.

About how we can work better, together.

Conclusion

I strongly believe that the vital role that volunteers play in our communities and the increased profile of volunteering in this country has been in large part due to the efforts of Volunteering Australia and other volunteer organisations.

The benefits for our communities are plain to see.

Events such as this Conference can only further 'legitimise' the concept of volunteering and spread the word about what is being achieved in our communities.

In my view, the more people that hear the many good news stories about Australia's volunteer efforts, the more they will want to become involved in shaping their communities into the future.

It is a 'win-win' situation – for both the communities and their volunteers.

Can I once again thank Volunteering Australia for all their hard work in organising this terrific event.

I'm sure that the next three days will be productive and memorable ones for everyone involved.

Thank you.

ENDS