

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

**How the Australian Government Values and Supports
Volunteers in the ever-changing volunteer sector**

**Glenys Beauchamp, Executive Director, Community Development and
Support Cluster, Department of Family and Community Services**

- Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to talk to you all today about this important topic.
- I was happy to be invited by Volunteering Australia to speak here today as volunteering policy and programs are an important part of the work done by the Department of Family and Community Services.
- I would like to take the opportunity this morning to highlight the evolving profile of volunteers, the great work they are doing for the community and themselves, and how this work is being supported by the Australian Government.

Volunteering in Australia

Background

- 4.4 million volunteers undertake some 704 million hours of unpaid work each year.
- It is estimated that volunteering contributes around \$42 billion to the Australian economy each year.
- The Hon. Kay Patterson, Minister for Family and Community Services, pointed out at the opening of this conference, Australian volunteers make a significant contribution to our communities. This is evident just by looking at the figures above.

Volunteer activities can range from helping out at the local library to running the school canteen, delivering meals on wheels to elderly members of our community or undertaking the often life-threatening work of fighting bushfires.

Why Volunteering is important

- The Australian Government funds a number of initiatives which I will talk about shortly.

- The Department of Family and Community Services not only manages these initiatives on behalf of Government but has had first hand experience acknowledging the importance of volunteers when affected by the 18 January 2003 Canberra bushfires. This fire not only came dangerously close to our central office, but affected many people in the Department – some lost homes and some were injured.
 - More than 30 staff helped as volunteer firefighters or with the ACT Government in a number of roles, such as community recovery officers or counsellors. A large number of people volunteered their time, expertise, goods etc to assist with the crisis and recovery. The ACT Government publicly acknowledged their contribution.

- Volunteers play a crucial role in developing the skills and knowledge that enable a community to thrive.

- As nature and needs of communities have changed over time so have the roles and contributions of volunteers.

- Volunteering and volunteers are not confined to traditional notions of selling raffle tickets and making cakes for school fetes.

- Volunteers make an enormous, and often unrecognised, social contribution to our communities for example

- Helping kids participate in sport
 - Assisting the elderly and people with disabilities
 - Assisting in animal welfare
 - Providing crisis support to others
 - Assisting with the recovery effort in times of community crisis
- Volunteers create networks that members of the community can rely on. This acts as a mechanism that enables community change.
 - Volunteering is a contribution to a community's social capital; a necessary ingredient in community productivity and well-being.
 - Volunteering fosters what international researcher Lyda Judson Hanifan describes as “those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people”.
 - Through volunteering people commit themselves not only to a cause, but to other members of the community.
 - Research has shown that communities with strong social capital are more likely to benefit from lower crime figures, better health, higher educational achievement and better economic growth.
 - The benefits of volunteering, and its accompanying social capital, also extend to the individual.
 - Volunteer organisations, and volunteering itself, are extremely important factors in the social engagement of individuals.

- People who volunteer report better health and greater happiness than those who do not volunteer¹.
- Volunteering is also associated with preventing social isolation. It is a method by which people can keep up existing friendships and networks and forge new ones.
- This is enormously important in today's increasingly individualised and "time-poor" world, in a time where the development of new technologies and evolving priorities are creating new social environments and challenges.
- Volunteering can also help to address loneliness and depression that can result from people feeling disengaged from other members of their community.
- There is another benefit of volunteering in that it is also fundamental in re-acquainting people with the paid workforce.
- The World Bank has argued that social capital, built by activities such as volunteering, is "critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable" (World Bank 1999).
- Volunteering helps people facing employment barriers to gain valuable networking and employment skills - skills that are necessary in finding work.

Support for Volunteers

¹ Onyx, J, Warburton, J, "Volunteering and health among older people: a review", *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, Vol 22, No. 2, June 2003

- The Government provides support to foster the benefits of volunteering for communities and individuals.
- Volunteering is a key building block towards building a better future for our families and for our communities.
- Support for volunteers by the Australian Government in this portfolio is mainly through the following three programs:
 - Volunteer Small Equipment Grants

Under this program community organisations have been able to apply for a grant up to \$5 000 to purchase equipment to make their volunteering activities safer, easier or more enjoyable.
 - Voluntary Management Program (VMP)

Supports organisations by providing appropriate training for volunteers and volunteer managers
 - Voluntary Work Initiative (VWI)

Helps income support recipients fulfil their obligations through voluntary work that builds their capacity to participate, and the capacity of their communities
- Funding for these programs is identified below:
 - Volunteer Small Equipment Grants
 - 2003 - \$3m to 1405 organisations (Invitations to claim announced September 2003)
 - 2004 - \$4.06m to 2082 organisations (Invitations to claim announced May 2004)
 - Voluntary Work Initiative
 - 2002-03. \$2.2m. 21 048 clients were referred to voluntary work

- Funding for 2003-04 is \$3.26m

- Volunteer Management Program
 - 2002-03. \$1.5m. 19 399 volunteers were referred to 26 member organisations – 58% were retained. 6701 training hours provided.
 - Funding for 2003-04 is \$1.63m

Voluntary Work Initiative/Volunteer Management Program

- Under the Volunteer Management Program (VMP) and the Voluntary Work Initiative (VWI) the Government funds Volunteer Resource Centres to provide a volunteer matching service throughout Australia.

- Volunteer Resource Centres (VRCs) are community organisations that interview people interested in volunteering.

- Across Australia some 50 VRCs are funded for the Voluntary Work Initiative with around half also receiving funding to deliver the Volunteer Management Program.

- These centres are basically a gateway to volunteering opportunities.

- Through running informal assessments of the interests and skills of potential volunteers, VRCs find volunteering opportunities to suit people from all walks of life.

- Following a review of these programs, the Government will now be engaging people from across the volunteering sector in a consultation process about how to improve the outcomes and management of the VMP

and VWI programs.

- I welcome your views about the best ways of using these programs to work with and to serve the interests of volunteers, volunteer involving organisations and our communities.

Volunteer Small Equipment Grants

- It is recognised that for organisations to effectively support and make best use of our volunteers, new equipment and materials to do their valuable work are required. The Government provides direct financial assistance for this under the Volunteer Small Equipment Grants.
- As you may already be aware, a further round of funding under this program has just been announced. Applications close on 18 June 2004. If you are interested in finding out more about the program or indeed in making an application for assistance under the scheme, I encourage you to find out more either from our website or from some of my Departmental colleagues who are also attending this conference. Information is also available at the Department's information stand at the conference.

National Skills Development Program for Volunteers

- The National Volunteer Skills Development program has been another initiative undertaken by the Government to help Australian volunteers and organisations.
- This assistance provides general and specialist training and skills development to volunteers so that they can improve the standard of services that they provide to their communities.
- Of particular importance is the National Volunteer Skills Centre, which supports volunteer involving organisations by providing accredited general and specialist training material for volunteers, a resource library and the

development of a national peer network.

- Given the often complex and challenging nature of voluntary work the national skills program provides an invaluable resource to volunteers.
 - For example, the program enables volunteers to undertake training to develop the resilience needed to cope with the demands associated with dealing with issues of homelessness, violence, family breakdown and other forms of crisis.

- Through all of these programs and other initiatives of the portfolio, for example the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy the Government continues to provide support and assistance to volunteering.

- Through the Volunteer Management Program and the Voluntary Work Initiative we are providing assistance to individual volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, with a special focus on encouraging people who are currently disengaged from the workforce to participate in their community.

- Through the Volunteer Small Equipment Grants we are assisting community organisations with their volunteer efforts

- Through the Local Answers initiative under Stronger Families and Communities Strategy we are enabling communities to help themselves, to form partnerships, and to realise their potential to meet their challenges.

- Through these programs we have been able to contribute to the well being of the volunteering sector. But the Government is also keen to ensure that all of these programs and initiatives are working together.

- Again, as the Minister noted in her opening address on Wednesday morning, 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.

- Once again I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the Government's support for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations in our community.
- Engagement with the volunteering sector continues to be an important part of the Department's work as we develop and deliver outcomes for Government and for Australian communities.
- Thank you.