



Australian  
Youth Council

# gen **Y** & flexible volunteering

a good practice guide

**Jack Boessler**

Policy Coordinator  
Australian Youth Council  
St John Ambulance Australia

**Belinda Ding**

National Youth Manager  
St John Ambulance Australia



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St John Ambulance Australia  
8/18 National Circuit  
BARTON ACT 2600

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Writer: Jack Boessler & Belinda Ding  
Editor: Shirley Dyson

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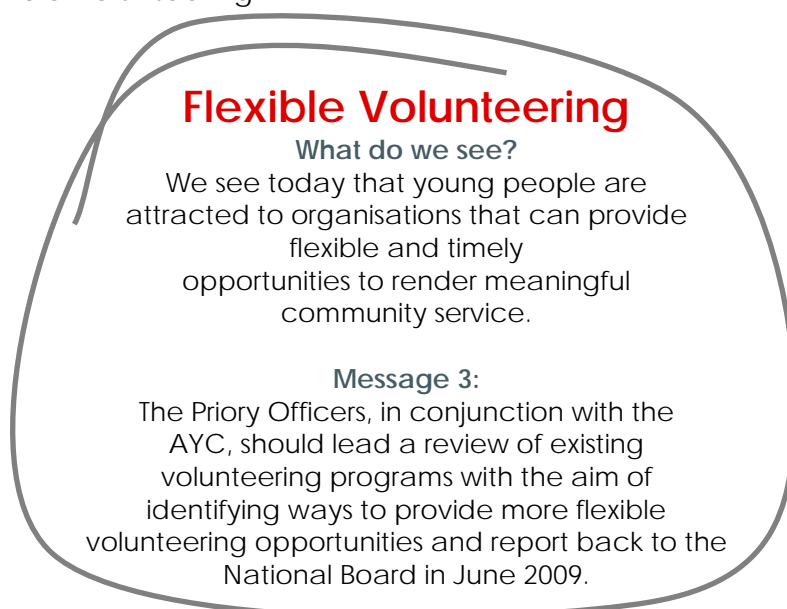
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# introduction

There is a common belief in today's society that young people are inwardly focused and 'out for themselves'. Contrary to this view, research tells us that an increasing number of young people are engaging in some form of volunteering each year (ABS, 2006)<sup>1</sup>. The literature also tells us that, more and more, the types of volunteering that young people involve themselves in does not fall within typical definitions of volunteering (i.e. staying with one cause or organisation for long periods) and that there is a need for organisations to get with the times when it comes to recruiting and retaining young members. As such, organisations like St John Ambulance Australia ('St John') need to become more innovative in the ways in which they engage young volunteers in order to ensure the ongoing sustainability of its volunteering programs in the future.

## What are we Doing About It?

In 2009, the Australia Youth Council ('AYC') developed its Key Themes and Messages – one of these being Flexible Volunteering:



The development of this paper forms an important part of the response to this theme and is designed to provide background information regarding young people and volunteering, from which a set of principles for flexible volunteering has been developed. Additionally, evidence of flexible volunteering within St John has been identified and provided. These case examples demonstrate that flexible volunteering is possible within St John – it simply takes innovative thought, perseverance and leadership.

## Who is this Paper For?

This paper is aimed at leaders in St John, of all ages, and persons who have the ability to influence organisational culture with respect to volunteering. It is also highly relevant for any St John member who has an interest in creating more flexible volunteering options, particularly for young people.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006). Census of population and housing: Australia's youth 2001. Cat 2059.0. Retrieve from [www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/dosensf/productsbyTopic/AB3F340B33](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/dosensf/productsbyTopic/AB3F340B33)

# background

## Did you know...

around 18.5% of Australia's total population is made up of young people? In 2004, this was around 2.8 million young people aged between 15 and 24 (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2007).

Thousands of young Australians give up their time each year to participate in some form of volunteering. In 2002, the Australian Bureau of Statistics<sup>1</sup> found that 28% of young people (aged between 18 and 24 years) had participated in volunteering in the past twelve months. This figure is significantly higher than for 1995, where 17% of young people participated in voluntary activities (being around a 1% increase per year to 2002)<sup>1</sup>.

## Who are Young Volunteers?

Young volunteers come from every walk of life in Australia. They are from every culture, socio-economic background, race, religion, location and gender. They have diverse interests in their chosen volunteering activity – from working with homeless persons to leading youth groups to participating in the emergency services – and all have different motivations for volunteering.

## What is Volunteering?

There are many different understandings of 'volunteering'. Some see volunteering as purely a voluntary activity and without payment, while others see some compulsory activities (such as school based community service) and receiving low payment as acceptable<sup>2</sup>. Common to these definitions however, is that volunteering is about doing something that benefits others or the community<sup>2</sup>.

Volunteering Australia<sup>3</sup> defines formal volunteering as:

'...an activity which takes place through not for profit organisations or projects and is undertaken:

- to be of benefit to the community and the volunteer
- of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion
- for no financial payment
- in designated volunteer positions only'.

This definition however, excludes some other forms of volunteering that other, broader definitions would allow. It also downplays the role that informal (and notably essential) volunteering plays in our communities. Some examples of activities that would be excluded under such a definition include school-based community service (a requirement of an increasing number of educational institutions), Work for the Dole

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006). Census of population and housing: Australia's youth 2001. Cat 2059.0. Retrieved from [www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/dosensf/productsbyTopic/AB3F340B33](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/dosensf/productsbyTopic/AB3F340B33)

<sup>2</sup> Ferrier, F., Roos, I. & Long, M. (2004). *Passions, people and appreciation: Making volunteering work for young people*. National Youth Affairs Research Scheme: Canberra.

<sup>3</sup> Volunteering Australia (2005). *Definitions and principles of volunteering: Information sheet*. June, 2005. Retrieved from [www.volunteeringaustralia.org](http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org)

programs, and as well as activities that occur outside of 'formal' or organisational structures such as child care and caring for the elderly<sup>2</sup>.

Unfortunately however, many misconceptions about young people in society still exist (such as young people are selfish, uninvolved, are incomplete or not fully developed people and dependent)<sup>4</sup>. These limiting misconceptions do not lend themselves to a culture of youth involvement and participation, and additionally, society often downplays the role that young people have in performing voluntary services.

Many people also believe that our sense of community has been lost or has become fragmented. Research however, supports the view that many young people engage in '...activities that they do not think of as 'volunteering', although these activities would meet formal and narrow definitions of the term'<sup>2</sup>, providing evidence that young people are engaging in voluntary service.

The ways that young people participate however may be in more non-traditional or hidden ways<sup>2</sup>. Young people are also more likely to downplay their involvement in volunteering as they often do not see themselves as fitting the image of a volunteer – so we are less likely to know or hear about young people's voluntary acts<sup>2</sup>.

If this is the case, we need to be adopting practices that tap in to the diverse ways young people are giving up their time, instead of remaining fused to rigid ideas of volunteering that exclude young people from the mix. We also need to target the rigid definitions of volunteering that maintain rigidity regarding what is deemed volunteering and what is not.

A more flexible, and youth friendly definition of volunteering might be:

'The voluntary act of giving time, skills and energy to activities that benefits others (either a person or a group)'

for example.

## What Motivates Young People to Volunteer

There are a number of factors that motivate young people to volunteer and for everyone it is different. Provided below are some examples of the reasons young people volunteer:

- because their friends are volunteering
- because of a school (compulsory) program/requirement
- they believe in the cause (i.e. global warming, youth homelessness) or the volunteering is meaningful
- it provides the opportunity to use existing skills and experience
- it allows them to explore their own strengths and abilities
- they like to helping others less fortunate or in difficult circumstances
- it makes them feel good about themselves
- wanting to meet new people and make new friends
- loneliness
- external expectations, encouragement or pressure from others (i.e. parents/care givers)
- wanting to feel a sense of achievement
- having a sense of social responsibility
- thanks from others

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Institute of Community Practice and Governance (n.d).

- working in groups with other young people
- being able to witness the results of their efforts Schondel & Boehm, 2000)<sup>5, 2, 6</sup>.

By providing volunteering opportunities to young people, organisations are making a conscious decision to assist young people develop the skills and competencies that will benefit them well into adulthood<sup>7</sup>. Also, this decision will help in ensuring the sustainability of organisation's that rely on volunteers the future<sup>7</sup>.

## Benefits of Volunteering for Young People

We know that volunteering benefits organisations and the community. Volunteering also has benefits for the young people who give their time, as it is a powerful youth development tool<sup>7</sup>. Below are some of the benefits for young people:

- it can be enjoyable, interesting and/or exciting
- there can be a sense of satisfaction in helping others
- volunteering provides professional development opportunities
- it can improve career/job opportunities (often a route to paid employment)
- improved communication skills
- increased resilience
- feeling valued and needed
- feeling a sense of belonging
- learning about the world and its problems
- young people can use their existing skills and attributes, while also learning new skills
- Improved self confidence
- meeting new people and making new friends
- appreciation and acknowledgment for the part that they play
- increased involvement in their communities<sup>5, 6</sup>.

## Things that Stop Young People from Volunteering

Many factors however, can drive volunteers away. Examples are:

- poor organisation
- poor supervision and support
- closed decision making processes (i.e. volunteers do not have a say in the decisions that affect them)<sup>4</sup>.

Organisations can also avoid the following factors that are specific to recruiting and retaining young volunteers:

- adults talking at or down to young people
- inflexibility
- giving young people the tasks that no one else wants to do
- non-youth friendly training processes (i.e. classroom style training only)
- not providing timely responses to enquiries about volunteering
- being turned away because of age
- poor previous experiences of volunteering
- inappropriate advertising (i.e. advertising that makes young people feel guilty)
- young people feeling silenced and not like their have voice

<sup>5</sup> Jones, F. (2000). Youth volunteering on the rise. *Perspectives on labour and income*, 12(1), 36 – 43. Retrieved on October 23, 2009, from ProQuest database.

<sup>6</sup> Schondel, C. & Boehm, K. (2000). Motivational needs of adolescent volunteers. *Adolescence*, 35(138), 335 – 344. Retrieved on October 23, 2009, from ProQuest database.

<sup>7</sup> Ausyouth (2002). Volunteering and youth development: Making a positive difference, Good practice, an implementation guide. Ausyouth: Adelaide.

- a lack of appropriate volunteer role models
- placing too much responsibility on young people
- working in isolation
- not being trusted
- not acknowledging the role young people play<sup>7, 4, 2</sup>.

As a society, until we can recognise that young people are valuable contributors to the volunteering community and society as a whole, and that to engage young volunteers we need to change our practices and attitudes, we will keep losing golden opportunities to engage young volunteers<sup>8</sup>. Much of the research points to young volunteers being the volunteers of the future, with volunteering at a young age a strong predictor of adult volunteering<sup>7</sup>. Positive experiences of volunteering as a young person will increase this likelihood of volunteering in adult life<sup>8</sup>.

However, this message is still promoting volunteering as an activity for older Australians, and volunteering practices (and age demographics) in the Australian community continue to reflect this view. We need to recognise that young volunteers are willing and wanting to volunteer **now** and our practices simply do not fit in with the increasingly time poor lives of young people<sup>8</sup>. As such, we need to find ways to increase flexibility so that we can tap into this valuable and unique resource. It is clear that the very concept of volunteering needs to expand in its scope.

### The Need for Flexible Volunteering Options

Current literature on Generation Y suggests that patterns of volunteering for young people can be somewhat different than for those of older age groups<sup>2</sup>. In Australia, young volunteers are more likely to participate in one-off or short-term volunteering opportunities rather ongoing or long-term experiences<sup>8</sup>. Despite this knowledge, research shows that young people are still far less likely than older Australians to volunteer, which is concerning and begs the question 'What are we doing about it?'<sup>2</sup>.

So what do we know about Generation Y volunteers? Research by Ferrier and others provides some indicators that Generation Y:

- are time poor – they juggle many commitments, from school to part time work
- are often from a higher socio-economic background
- have higher self esteem and a stronger sense of self concept
- are more likely to be from rural areas
- are women
- are more likely to be full time students
- are more likely to volunteer if there are job/career related benefits
- are people with a disability
- are often not asked to volunteer<sup>2, 5</sup>

In St John Ambulance Australia, 55% of our volunteer base is aged under the age of 25 years. We therefore strongly rely on our young volunteers to deliver the services that St John provides to those in sickness and distress.

In a time of high risk (i.e. where young people have a heightened awareness of terrorism, natural and man made disasters due to increased media exposure and access to high speed internet), there is evidence to suggest that young people align closely with emergency management sector, with organisations increasingly likely to

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<sup>8</sup> Wesley Mission (n.d.). *Youth the future volunteers*. Retrieved from [www.wesleymission.org.au](http://www.wesleymission.org.au)

employ Generation Y paid and volunteer staff<sup>9</sup>. This is a unique opportunity for St John to capitalise on this sympathy and boost its young volunteer base.

Wajs-Chaczko suggests that Generation Y has a very different experience of the world than previous generations (such as the Baby Boomers). Gen Y is an information seeking generation that is always 'switched on'. They heavily rely on technology to communicate, and on social networking websites, such as *Facebook*<sup>TM</sup>, for the immediate delivery of information<sup>9</sup>. This has influence in respect of how we attract and retain young volunteers. To get with the times, so to speak, organisations need to utilise technology effectively to address the need for immediacy that Generation Y is characterised by.

One method of flexible volunteering that is becoming increasingly common is corporate volunteering. Corporate volunteering involves for-profit organisations providing their staff members to contribute services to the community without charge – corporate social responsibility<sup>7</sup>. This is another powerful resource that St John could tap into, and particularly targeting the young workforce.

Another important consideration is the use of advertising. Generation Y pays attention to advertisements, however they are tough customers. Research suggests that young people do not appreciate campaigns that make them feel guilty and make problems look so large that no one can make a difference<sup>2</sup>. Microsoft<sup>TM</sup> ([www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com)) also suggests that advertising needs to target both young people and their parents/caregivers as parent/caregivers (generally) have a great deal of influence in the lives of young people. Additionally, the use of social media will also play an important role, as we now need to meet young people on their own turf.

What appears to be needed, is **innovative campaigns** (accessing an array of different media) that **communicates** to young people that they will be **making a difference** in giving up their time. Communication coupled with **technology** is the key to accessing and attracting Gen Y.

## Summary

In order to capitalise on both St John's current young volunteers and to recruit new volunteers interested in giving to the community, St John therefore needs to ensure that our practices and programs are flexible and adaptive to the needs of Generation Y. This includes developing flexible, short-term volunteering opportunities to fit the needs of a busy target group as well as utilising technology and innovation in communicating with this population. In the next section, a set of Flexible Volunteering Principles are provided.

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<sup>9</sup> Wajs-Chaczko, E. (2008). Gen Y and emergency management: How do we engage generation Y in the emergency management sector? *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 23(3), 58 – 61.

There is little information regarding principles for flexible volunteering for young people in the field. Based on the background information above, the following principles for flexible volunteering have been developed:

### Valuing Diversity

Organisations value young people in all their diversity and regardless of their background, experience and time availability for example. Organisations have a range of volunteering options available to young people.

### Meaningful Interactions

Young people volunteering their time should feel that their contributions are meaningful and that they are making a difference. This develops a sense of service and social and personal responsibility.

### Strengths Based Skills Development

Young people are able to build on existing skills, knowledge, competencies and attributes when volunteering. They are provided with the opportunity to use existing skills and new learnings in practice.

### Valuing Young People

The contributions, views and ideas of young people are valued by the organisations that they serve and the actions of the organisations reflect this. This includes recognition of young people's contribution and the ability for young people to influence the decision making processes.

### Social

Young people have the opportunity to form relationships with others during the course of their volunteering experience, particularly other young people. Volunteering is also made interesting and fun.

### A Fair Go

Volunteers of all ages are provided with opportunities to participate. Should they require particularly skills for a particular activity, the organisation will make every effort to accommodate the training needs of the volunteer.

### Technologically Savvy

Organisation's methods of communication to young people are relevant. This includes advertising, internal communications, publications and websites for example.

# principles of flexible volunteering

# ways St John is flexible: state/territory stories

In this section, examples of different types of flexible volunteering from South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and the Northern Territory are provided. These examples demonstrate that flexibility in St John's programs is possible and that the types of flexibility vary significantly across the states and territories to fit their needs.

## Examples from South Australia

In South Australia, the South Australian Youth Council (SAYC), Communications, Logistics and Recreational Activities Team (RAT) have combined forces and crossed branches in working together to set up and provide supplies for major duties. For example, first aid tents, amenities, first aid supplies, stretchers, blankets and etcetera, and affiliate members. Below are some examples of the roles of these groups, including why/how they are flexible:

### Communications

Communications offers members to be a part of St John's presence at major public and sporting events. They help to coordinate First Aiders via radio and convey information ensuring that all members are in contact with each other. This helps to develop communication skills via other methods and develops in depth understanding of how an event is organised. The Communications group meets monthly.

### Logistics

Logistics provide efficient and comprehensive logistics support service to the Operations Branch in South Australia. There are many opportunities to volunteer 'behind the scenes' including maintaining medical supplies throughout events, equipment management, event planning and liaising with event organisers, and setting up First Aid posts at events. Logistics operates as a division and meets on a weekly basis, but provides flexibility on attendance. This division often fits in with the lives of young people with time constraints, as the involvement of this group in duties consists of small time frames at the beginning and end of duties. Some people choose to stay for the duty length to provide extra supplies if required at major duties. Currently Logistics is looking at creating 'traineeship' positions for senior cadets to gain some experience and exposure to other areas in St John.

### Recreational Activities Team (RAT)

RAT is a division for over 18 year olds only. RAT runs all activities on State Camps, holds 'recreational' activities throughout the year including discos, games nights and divisional visits. This group meets monthly and provides an opportunity for young members to interact with other young members in a leadership position without the commitments of weekly divisional meetings. This group develops a variety of personal development skills including event planning, mentoring, team work, marketing, budgeting and working with large groups of young people.

By Mel Oudshoorn, Chair, South Australian Youth Council

## Examples from New South Wales

NSW has several examples of flexibility in various programs, including in University Divisions, the Program to Aid Literacy (PALs) and Immunisation Programs, and the State Operations Group. These examples are detailed below.

### University Divisions

NSW has three university divisions which base their meeting dates/programs around the university semester dates, taking into account holidays, exam periods, mid semester breaks and major assessment times. This allows members who are attending the corresponding university to attend regular meetings and continue their training/learning at times that suit their university schedule. This also benefits the divisions as it increases the level of participation by members.

### PALs Program

The Program to Aid Literacy is a flexible program offered by Community Care for volunteers to help primary school children with their literacy. The program is flexible as volunteers can choose a time (from options) that suits them to visit a school and work through a literacy program with a school child. Volunteers can commit for a term or more as it suits them. Training is minimal – weekend workshop and does not require re-certification/refreshment.

### Immunisation Program

Community Care also offers volunteers a chance to take part in the NSW Health Immunisation program for primary school children. Immunisation dates are set for schools all around NSW and volunteers can choose the dates and locations that suit them to help out. There is no set commitment required for the program. Training is minimal – one workshop and does not require re-certification/refreshment.

By Charlotte Robinson, Chair, New South Wales Youth Council

### State Operations Group NSW

In NSW, there has been a re-development of the existing State Operations Group. The aim of the re-development was to develop sustainable State Operations Group in NSW. The program is multifaceted and has led to the complete re-organisation of the existing team, development of new roles and lastly, development of flexible options which allow people outside the organisation and outside the team to operate in specialist operation roles whilst maintaining their existing positions within the organisation.

#### *So for us what is flexible volunteering?*

Flexible volunteering aims to make the best use of human resources to meet organisational needs. This approach capitalises on an individual's background and interests, but equally does so without compromising the individuals existing roles and responsibilities.

The best example of this approach is the event commander position. In NSW this role can be fulfilled by a State Operations Staff Officer, a Regional Staff Officer or a Divisional Superintendent. The strategy of using people at different levels of the organisation, to fulfil Event Commander roles is a good example of what flexible volunteering can offer both to an individual and the organisation.

Firstly, this approach capitalises on the capability of people to meet our core objective i.e. providing a service to the community. Secondly, this approach develops a capable pool of

people able to fulfil a difficult role and in turn builds (indirectly) a succession plan for senior operations roles. Thirdly, members can do their 'day job' in the organisation but enjoy the challenges of higher or more targeted duties which they have shown a particular talent or aptitude for, and this of course plays into retention.

Flexible volunteering offers some real opportunities for engaging and retaining the illusive 18 to 25 years old volunteer market. By allowing individuals to become involved in projects and activities that interest them, these members are more likely to find meaning in their membership and are happier to contribute to their normal units. Youth members are often highly motivated and very capable and can therefore contribute greatly outside of their normal role.

It is important to give youth members opportunities and experiences they would not encounter elsewhere. This adds value to their membership, retains them and makes them far more effective members in the future with a greater sense of ownership in terms of St John as an organisation. One such flexible approach has allowed youth members to take on formal roles within the team, and roles outside of the team but contributing to State Ops, such as logistics and IT management.

By Didier Moutia, NSW State Operations Group

## Examples from Victoria

The Victorian Youth Council (VYC) has identified the following state-based programs as having elements of flexibility:

### St John State Office

Volunteers who are able, spend a couple of hours a week doing a range of administration tasks from data entry to filing. This is great, as in many offices, employees do not have a great deal of time to spend filing papers and entering forms, etc. It is flexible because it allows volunteers who have some extra time to help out.

### Cadet Birthday Cards

All cadets in Victoria get a birthday card from the State Cadet Team. Just like the example above, people who have a bit of extra time might take a month's worth and actually hand write the cards to say Happy Birthday!

### Phoenix Division

This division meets at State Office on a week day. This is a great example for Flexible Volunteering as it allows people who work part time or have young children or want to give back to the community, the ability to participate. They also often participate in duties and training during the week.

### Communications Division

This division is for the volunteers who aren't interested in First Aid and really enjoy working with radio's and other communications devices. This is a great example of flexible volunteering because it allows people who may not be competent in First Aid able to help the organisation.

### Working with Other Organisations

Many of our members also volunteer with other organisations. For example, the SES or CFA. When the time comes, St. John is flexible with how much time is required. Take a CFA volunteer – during bush fires that volunteer will only volunteer with CFA and not St. John – and that is OK!

Scott Mitchell, Chair, Victorian Youth Council

## Examples from the Northern Territory

The Northern Territory Youth Council (NTYC) has provided the following example of flexible volunteering:

### The Palmerston Youth Division, NT

The Palmerston Youth Division is aimed at cadets and young adult members between the ages of 16–25 years and is held from 6:30 to 8:30pm on Tuesday nights.

Many of the members within this division hold NCO ranking in another division, generally Cadet Division's, where they teach classes or help with the general running of the nights. With this responsibility it was found many were not getting the opportunity to enhance or maintain their own skills. Many were also not being given the opportunity to take part in activities which may be available to other members in Adult divisions.

This is where the youth division fits in.

Members are given the option of staying with their original division as well as attending the Youth Division where the program is designed for them. The Youth Division also attracts members in the 16 to 17 year old age bracket who may not be finding the cadet program in their division engaging. This is the age group in which members are more likely to leave the organisation, so by giving them the option to attend the youth division hopefully this will start to be overcome this problem.

At present the division has only been running for a few months but has already had a fairly solid number of members regularly attending. These members are currently undertaking both First Responder Accreditation and First Responder Re-accreditation with activities in the future possibly including work with student paramedics and Defensive Driving training.

By Amy McKay, Chair, Northern Territory Youth Council

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