

Strengthening and sustaining volunteering in Australia



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INTRODUCTION

In Australia there are over six million active volunteers over the age of 18. They make up around 41% of the adult population and between them provided approximately 836 million volunteer hours in 2005¹. Ironmonger (2000) estimates that volunteering is responsible for around \$42 billion of economic activity annually². In 2000 the Australian Bureau of Statistics calculated the direct value of volunteer work was \$8.9 billion.

Australia also has anywhere up to 700,000 third-sector organisations, the majority of which involve volunteers in some capacity. The ABS tells us that although most of these do not have paid staff, they are responsible for 3.3% of GDP, and if you include the financial value of volunteer activity, the figure rises to 4.7%³. This is serious business: not-for-profits make an economic contribution larger than the communications industry, about equal to that of the agriculture industry; or a contribution almost twice as large as the entire economic contribution of the state of Tasmania.

This paper offers a strategic vision of volunteering for the future. It describes the steps that Government should take to ensure the sustainability of volunteering in Australia.

The process of reform outlined in this paper presents an opportunity for the Commonwealth Government to ensure that Australia continues to be one of the most innovative and dynamic volunteering environments in the world. It requires a focussed investment of financial resources into the sector over time. Such an investment will deliver significant short and long-term benefits to Australia's economic, social and cultural future.

¹ Department of Family, Community and Indigenous Affairs, *Giving Australia. Research on Philanthropy in Australia. Survey of Business*. Department, Canberra.
http://www.partnerships.gov.au/philanthropy/philanthropy_research.shtml#FinalReports

² Ironmonger, D Federation Press 2000 *Volunteers and Volunteering*

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Volunteering Australia's vision for the future of volunteering is drawn from the voices of the sector itself.

In 2001 Volunteering Australia, together with Australian Volunteers International, co-chaired the International Year of Volunteers National Community Council of Advice and conducted a national consultation to identify the major issues facing volunteering and the solutions to help address them.

Following extensive face-to-face consultations in all states and territories and the distribution of some 15,000 questionnaires *A National Agenda on Volunteering: Beyond the International Year of Volunteers* (Attachment A) was produced. It reflects the views of the sector, government, business and volunteers and provides a framework for the future of volunteering in Australia.

Although five years on from when it was presented to Senator The Hon. Amanda Vanstone, the then Minister for Family and Community Services on International Volunteer Day 2001, the *National Agenda* is as relevant now as it was then – even more so given the level of on-going community and government interest in volunteering.

A future for volunteering framed by the *National Agenda* would ensure that:

1. The essential contribution that volunteers make to building and sustaining the Australian community is publicly respected and valued in enduring, formal and tangible ways.
2. Volunteers have a legal status and are afforded protection through every piece of legislation and public policy that affects them and their work.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Non-profit Institutions Satellite Account, Australian National Accounts*

3. All new legislation, by-laws and public policies, developed at any level of government which may affect volunteers and their work, act only to facilitate and sustain volunteering.
4. There is acknowledgement that the activity of volunteering is not without cost and means are developed by which Australian volunteers and volunteer involving organisations are supported and funded to provide valuable services.
5. Excellence is achieved in all levels of volunteer involvement and management which encourages, protects and enhances the work of volunteers.
6. Volunteering is recognised as a potent, dynamic and unifying social force for community benefit.

The Australian Government has a unique opportunity to embrace the vision conveyed by the above outcomes to build on one of Australia's greatest strengths – the willingness of its citizens to engage with one another, assist those who require support and to respond in times of community need.

OVERVIEW OF VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering in the International Context

Internationally both the government and non-government sectors recognise the importance of the volunteering movement in creating dynamic social change.

United Nations

The United Nations has played a particularly significant role through the adoption of specific resolutions on volunteering. The first in 1985 invited governments to observe 5th December each year as an International Volunteer Day for Economic and Social Development and the second in 1997, sponsored by 126 countries including Australia, proclaimed 2001 the International Year of Volunteers. Both resolutions noted the *critical* role of governments in supporting and encouraging volunteering.

The contribution made by volunteers is regarded as crucial to the achievement of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) set in 2000 for achievement by 2015. In the words of Eveline Herfkens, Executive Coordinator for the Global Millennium Goals Campaign, 'The Millennium Development Goals are owned by the people. The role of volunteers as MDG campaigners is essential in connecting the global community and its people around the goals.'ⁱ

In its Resolution 60/134 *Follow-up to the implementation of the International Year of Volunteers* the United Nations General Assembly has requested the Secretary General to report to the General Assembly as its sixty-third session proposals of ways to mark the tenth anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers in 2011.

International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE)

IAVE was founded in 1970 by a small group of women who shared a common vision of how volunteers can contribute to finding solutions to human and social problems, as well as to the development of understanding among people of all nations and walks of life. It draws its members from across the globe

IAVE worked closely with the United Nations Volunteer (UNV) program to mobilise members to gain the support of their respective governments for the United Nations resolution to declare 2001 the International Year of Volunteers.

IAVE continued to work with members to develop the *Universal Declaration on Volunteering* (Attachment B) and the *Global Agenda for Action to Strengthen Volunteering* (Attachment C), both of which were adopted by the board of IAVE at the 16th World Volunteering Conference in Amsterdam, January 2001.

More recently IAVE has joined a formal alliance with the World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS) and the UNV program to identify key areas of collaboration, including promotion and advocacy campaigns, publications, studies on volunteering and publicity for volunteer initiatives. One of the mutual areas of interest among these organisations is advocacy in support of international and national policy and legislation in relation to volunteering.

IAVE recognises the essential role that a dedicated volunteering infrastructure plays in the development and sustainability of volunteering worldwide. One of IAVE's key areas of work is the support and development of strong national and local volunteering infrastructure (volunteer centres) throughout the world. IAVE has convened an international working group to determine how best to facilitate communication among existing centres and the supports needed for the development of new centres. Australia is represented on this group.

A Snapshot of Volunteering in Australia

In Australia, volunteers work in all spheres of community and across many sectors including health, welfare and community services, emergency services, arts, culture and heritage, the environment, sport and recreation, education and youth development, overseas aid, animal welfare, human rights and in religious organisations.

Following the Sydney Olympics in 2000, the International Year of Volunteers 2001 the Bali bombings, the Commonwealth Games and Cyclone Larry, community interest in the contributions of volunteers remains high. An estimated 6.3 million adult Australians are active volunteers. They work over 836 million hours a year and their activity has an annual economic value of \$42 billion.

Unlike some of our western counterparts the level of volunteering in Australia is increasing – moving from 24% of the adult population in 1995 to 32% in 2000, 34% in 2003 to 41% most recently. Young people are participating in increasing numbers with the 18–24 cohort being the fastest growing.

Interestingly whilst there have been roughly an equal proportion of women to men volunteering in recent years, since 2005 women have once again started to dominate.

It has been estimated that there are between 500 000 and 700 000 nonprofit (or third sector) organisations in Australia that are almost wholly volunteer run.

The Volunteering Infrastructure

The development and sustainability of volunteering in Australia is supported in significant ways by what has been described as the volunteering infrastructure.

Volunteer Centres

In Australia there are a number of organisations that exist solely to promote and advance volunteering to ensure community organisations are robust and in a position to address local and national needs. Included in these organisations is a national peak body for volunteering, seven state peak bodies and around 130 local organisations that identify themselves as volunteer centres.

Role of the volunteer centres:

Broadly speaking these organisations can best be described through a set of core functions that are carried out to varying degrees depending on whether the organisation is at the national, state or local level.

The core functions can be summarised as:

- ❑ Strategic development of volunteering to create community capacity to address human, social and environmental need.
- ❑ Promotion and support of best practice in volunteer involvement through the development or provision of tools, resources and training for the sector to ensure the sustainability of volunteer services.

- ❑ Education on the value, place and importance of volunteering to the Australian community
- ❑ Advocacy of volunteering and its principles to ensure that volunteers are not exploited and the activity of volunteering is sustainable
- ❑ Linking potential volunteers and organisations to achieve outcomes on behalf of the Australian community
- ❑ Policy advice to governments and other interested parties

Volunteering infrastructure organisations subscribe to a set of foundation documents which have successfully guided the development of volunteering in Australia to this point. The documents were developed after extensive consultations with the broader sector, government, unions and business and include:

- ❑ *The Definition of Formal Volunteering (Attachment D)*
- ❑ *Principles of Volunteering (Attachment D)*
- ❑ *Volunteer Rights (Attachment E)*
- ❑ *National Standards for Involving Volunteers in Not for Profit Organisations and a Model Code of Practice*
- ❑ *Referral Standards for Volunteer Resource Centres and Referral Agencies*
- ❑ *Code of Ethics for Volunteer Resource Centres*

The important thing about these documents is that they provide a framework to ensure volunteers are supported and protected in their work and the services they provide address community need.

Development of volunteer centres

The development of regional volunteer centres has been largely organic, developing at a local level to provide a service that supports organisations to involve, manage and retain volunteers. More recently however, some state government moves towards developing volunteer centres in local government areas and federal government priorities to fund volunteer referral services in

areas of high-need have pro-actively fostered the development of new centres – not always with success or sustainability.

The state peak volunteer centres have had varied origins; some have developed from a volunteer resource centre whilst others were specifically created through the Commonwealth Government *Volunteer Management Program* in 1995. In 2006 there are seven state peak bodies; Volunteering NT having closed down in 2003.

Volunteering Australia, the national peak body for volunteering, first received funding in 1997; it is now funded through several government departments including the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs' (FACSlA) National Secretariat Program.

Other support organisations

There are a number of other organisations providing services that directly relate both to the linking of volunteers to nonprofit organisations and to the strategic development of volunteering. Many of these organisations are funded through corporate support and limit their activities to the connection of employee volunteers to nonprofits, with the strategic development of volunteering being a pragmatic response to sourcing appropriate volunteer roles for corporate clients.

Infrastructure

A number of web sites which list volunteer positions or volunteer skills are available for the use of the Australian community. GoVolunteer for example, which is the first and largest volunteer recruitment site, was developed through a community business partnership. There is now a proliferation of smaller sites, including Australian Volunteer Search, which facilitate the linking of volunteers.

Volunteering in the Broader Context

Volunteering is increasingly viewed within a broader environmental context defined variously as civic engagement or community participation.

While recognising that volunteering is only one mechanism by which social capital develops, community capacity grows and citizens become engaged, the unique role of formal volunteering should not be easily dismissed in a rush to promote more informal forms of participation and engagement.

Formal volunteering structures and opportunities are an effective means by which people join together in groups to provide a service or generate activities for others and at the same time find expression of their own citizenship. Many of the services provided by the Australian community service, health and welfare sectors are underpinned by the work and contribution of volunteers, not to mention the important role of volunteers in providing safe and enjoyable community environments through their work in the emergency services and sport and recreation sectors. The consequences of shifting our focus from formal volunteering onto wholly informal participation opportunities would have significant repercussion for the Australian community.

This is not to say that informal participation and mechanisms for broader civic engagement are not important or valid. Indeed they are critical and more study into the linkages between formal and informal participation and the creation of social capital and strong communities is needed. However care is needed that in promoting one, we do not discount the value of the other.

EMERGING TRENDS AND CRITICAL ISSUES

Despite the increasing popularity of volunteering and community recognition of the mutual benefits of participating in volunteering activities, there are many issues and challenges confronting volunteering. These, if not adequately addressed, risk undermining the sustainability and outcomes of volunteering in Australia.

These issues can be grouped into several categories:

Legislative Issues

While logic suggests that it is in the interests of the whole community that volunteers are afforded the protections of legislation this is rarely the case. Unlike paid staff, volunteers are not always covered by legislation that protects or compensates within the workplace. Many volunteers are exposed to risk, injury, discrimination or prejudice while others carry huge financial responsibility or are exposed to legal liability.

The critical role that volunteers could and will be expected to play in response to such events as an influenza pandemic, a large natural disaster or even a terrorist attack will be seriously undermined by lack of adequate legislative protection for volunteers. Before such events occur is the correct time to ensure that legislation is an incentive not a disincentive to participation.

On the flip side volunteer involving organisations report feeling weighed down by 'bureaucratic red tape' and that they are wasting limited resources on often onerous compliance activities rather than allowing organisations and their volunteers to remain focused on the organisational purpose.

Government administrative policies, such as competitive tendering, also have real implications for not-for-profit organisations and the sustainability of their funding. They create a risk that organisations themselves come to regard volunteers merely as 'cheap' inputs into service delivery rather than

recognising the unique contribution volunteers make to broader social outcomes.

Resource Issues

Volunteers are unpaid. This fact often results in the false assumption that the involvement of volunteers has no financial resource implications on either the volunteer involving organisations or volunteers themselves. While we as a community applaud the financial contribution volunteers make to individual organisations and the economy generally, insufficient attention is given to calculating and recognising the financial overheads needed to support volunteers in their work or the financial burden that volunteers themselves bear

Specific examples of organisational resources need to support volunteer involvement and provide a quality volunteering experience include access to adequate and affordable insurance, training for volunteers and managers of volunteers and reimbursement of volunteer out-of-pocket expenses and affordable police checks.

Supply and Demand Issues

Perhaps the most critical issue facing the sector is the disparity between supply of, and demand for, volunteer labour. As stated earlier there is no shortage of prospective volunteers but there is a current paucity of roles to suit the needs of the volunteer population.

Changing demographics and a trend towards short-term, project based volunteer commitment among young people, baby boomers and people of working age through employee volunteer programs are providing significant challenges for organisations that continue to rely on regular volunteer commitment in order to deliver services. As well the benefits of participation through volunteering for people from marginalised groups are increasingly being recognised, causing strain on organisations that are under-resourced to provide the additional supports and roles these groups may need.

Support is needed to promote and foster change in volunteer involving organisations so that new roles are developed, new approaches to encouraging diversity are implemented and new ways of delivering services are explored. If volunteering cannot meet these challenges, the currently high levels of interest will wane and significant momentum and resources for the community will be lost.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Having identified some of the critical and emerging issues and challenges facing volunteering the role of government in addressing these must be examined.

Implicit in the Australian definition of volunteering is the notion that volunteering gains strength only if it remains a non-exploitative expression of citizenship based on free will. Therefore any government action must always take account of this fundamental principle. The United Nations recognised this when in its resolution to proclaim 2001 the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) it specifically invited governments to collaborate with volunteers and organisations to “identify ways and means of enhancing the recognition, facilitation, networking and promotion of volunteer(ing)”ⁱⁱ

The evaluation of the International Year undertaken by the Institute for Volunteering Research found that one of the key lessons from the year ‘...is that for volunteering to flourish, government has to be engaged’ⁱⁱⁱ but at the same time recognises the sector ‘must retain its independence and its ability to challenge as well as work alongside government.’^{iv}

The IYV evaluation suggests that there are a number of critical and appropriate roles for Government:

1. Funding the developing of volunteering infrastructure at national and local levels.
2. Establish a policy (and legislative) framework which creates a facilitating and enabling environment in which volunteering can flourish.
3. Be a role model by encouraging public sector staff to become involved in volunteering and by stimulating public debate on the importance of volunteering.
4. Form partnerships with the not for profit and private sectors and foster conditions that will encourage community–business partnerships that are mutually beneficial

5. Gather intelligence and knowledge on volunteering through research and use this to generate publicity and promotion of volunteering.
6. Provide public recognition of the contributions volunteers make to national life.

These roles are consistent with those identified during the *National Agenda* consultation process.

Support by the Australian Government

The Australian Government is well positioned to more fully harness the community benefits of volunteering by increasing and refocussing the level of support provided to volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

It needs to be recognised that successful volunteering outcomes depend on an appropriate balance between the needs of volunteers and those of the organisations that involve and support them. In Australia, there is no general lack of willingness of individuals to become involved as volunteers. However there are a number of real and perceived barriers that frequently deter or prevent this. The most successful and enjoyable volunteering outcomes occur when volunteers are able to easily access suitable volunteering opportunities and are well supported in their work.

To this end, much of the Australian Government's support for volunteering should be focused on the 'demand' side – supporting the infrastructure and individual volunteer involving organisations that create the opportunities for individuals to become involved. Whether this is to develop new roles for young people or baby boomers wanting shorter term project roles or new approaches to involving income support customers or people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (CALD) who have often been denied opportunities in mainstream organisations. To achieve this requires a fundamental re-think of current funding sources which tend to focus on the 'supply' side of providing services to individual volunteers. While brokerage remains a core function of the volunteering infrastructure and needs to be funded, increased gains for the sector are possible if greater emphasis is given to sector and consequently community capacity building.

Support from the Australian Government should be primarily channelled through the Department of Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FACCSIA), recognising that a central point of contact on volunteering within Government facilitates greater partnering opportunities and more 'joined-up' and whole-of-government approaches. This would involve

returning the Voluntary Work Initiative to FACSIA and redirecting it to emphasise capacity building with the volunteer involving sector as previously suggested to both DEWR and FACSIA in 2005 and again in 2006.

Government support should have four tenets: support for volunteering infrastructure; support for volunteer involving organisations, support for volunteers and support for an information technology system that would support the other three.

Support for volunteering infrastructure should be provided as a discrete funding source, recognising the significant multiplier benefits to the sector as a whole through funding a set of organisations whose core business is to support and resource the volunteering sector with knowledge and expertise, as well as promoting volunteering to the community generally.

Countries around the world have recognised the importance of supporting the volunteering infrastructure in order to advance volunteering and halt declining volunteer numbers. Canada and the countries that form part of the United Kingdom committed significant resources and developed far-reaching volunteering strategies in order to support the volunteering sector and volunteers. Models of support, such as that provided through the Home Office and its Active Communities Unit, demonstrate that the outcomes of volunteering are greater and more robust when supported by a strong and independent volunteering infrastructure. Regrettably, whilst this support continues to grow in the UK, it has ceased in Canada. It remains to be seen whether the gains made through support of volunteering are sustained in Canada or whether volunteer numbers return to a decline.

Support for volunteer involving organisations and volunteers should be provided within the framework of the six strategic goals outlined in the *National Agenda* to ensure that the community's vision for volunteering in Australia is realised.

Support for Volunteering Infrastructure

Government can support the sector by direct and explicit funding of the volunteering infrastructure for its core functions. It is proposed at a minimum that the existing funding received by the volunteering infrastructure is maintained but refocussed to merge the Voluntary Work Initiative and the Volunteer Management Program under the management of FACSIA to better support the needs of volunteer involving organisations.

Base infrastructure funding

Recognition must be given to the multiplier effect of funding the infrastructure organisations whose activities are intrinsic to building community capacity by enhancing the sector's ability to involve and engage with volunteers and increasing general community awareness of volunteering and the benefits and opportunities it affords.

While a key function, it must be recognised the volunteering infrastructure does much more than provide brokerage services to prospective volunteers. Volunteer centres at all levels provide expert advice and consultancy to organisations on best practice in volunteer involvement, provide training and professional development for managers of volunteers, create, facilitate and maintain key information and professional networks and above all, identify and advocate on issues affecting volunteering.

The volunteering infrastructure organisations have a critical role to play in supporting the sector to develop new and more diverse volunteering opportunities and engage more effectively with people of all backgrounds, including those with disabilities, from CALD backgrounds or in receipt of income support payments.

A minimum level of explicit infrastructure funding, independent of any other program-related funding, would allow the volunteering infrastructure to increase its own capacity to provide the above services to the community in an affordable and sustainable way.

The infrastructure funding could be provided to organisations that meet an agreed set of standards and should provide a minimum level of funding for the core functions identified, with additional levels of funding provided according to a designated formula. Such a formula could be developed taking into account such factors as: geographical area serviced – including size, location – metropolitan, regional, rural or remote; volunteer / prospective volunteer population – including demographics of age, gender, cultural diversity, and socio-economic indicators; and distribution, size and numbers of volunteer involving organisations.

On-going Program Funding

‘On-going’ program funding should be provided when the volunteering infrastructure organisation is identified as a key stakeholder in the successful implementation of a government program or policy. This funding should be additional to the minimum level of base infrastructure funding, but would be directed for a specific purpose to those infrastructure organisations identified as best able to achieve the stated policy objectives, without taking resources away from the infrastructure’s core functions.

This would have the effect of continuing to build the infrastructure’s capacity to support the sector and volunteers in responding to emerging issues on an on-going basis. Volunteer Centres may well have a critical role to play in the event of disaster and their potential in managing unaligned volunteers who are responding to such unwelcome events as pandemics, natural disasters or terrorist attacks should be nurtured.

Examples of recent programs where this might apply include *Australians Working Together* and the *Stronger Families and Community Strategy*.

Support for Volunteer Involving Organisations and Volunteers

The *National Agenda* developed in 2001 was much more than a 'log of claims' to government. It was, and is, recognised that for the full aims of the agenda to be achieved it will take the community, volunteer involving organisations, business and government working together. However the following section outlines those specific outcomes that Government must take the lead on for them to be achieved.

Not all initiatives proposed require a significant investment of funding. Instead they require strong leadership and influence, together with a public and sustained commitment to their achievement in partnership with the sector.

Strategic Goal 1: Publicly respect and value, in enduring, formal and tangible ways, the essential contribution that volunteers make to building and sustaining the Australian community.

One of the strongest ways in which volunteers seek to be recognised is through the measurement and valuing of their contribution. Measurement of volunteer effort can be achieved by Government in the following ways:

1. Commit to, and fund, a regular collection of volunteer data by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.
2. Quantify the economic value of volunteering and include in the quarterly national accounts.
3. Fund research into issues that affect volunteers and volunteering – include 'volunteering' among Government research priorities and provide a pool of funding to enable research to be undertaken. [See Volunteering Research Framework (Attachment F)]
4. Introduce a specific Volunteer Medal into the Order of Australia Awards.

Strategic Goal 2: *Ensure that volunteers have legal status and are afforded protection through every piece of legislation and public policy that affects them and their work.*

Legal status and protection for volunteers remains an on-going area of concern for individual volunteers and the sector generally. In unsettled times when the services of volunteers may be heavily relied upon to ensure the continuation of business and community life, lack of adequate or sensible legislation may prove to be an impediment to the types of volunteer support we as a community may hope for. The Australian Government can address this by taking the following steps:

5. Take the lead among government agencies in enshrining and protecting the rights of volunteers in appropriate legislation. This leadership role would encompass convening an inter-departmental working group to review Commonwealth legislation to ensure that it provides the relevant protections for volunteers.

6. Committing to and leading the development of an intergovernmental working group to identify all relevant legislation across jurisdictions and develop a process to achieve legislative change and amendments – particular legislation would include workers' compensation, occupational health and safety, anti-discrimination and equal employment opportunity.

Strategic Goal 3: *Ensure that all new legislation, by-laws and public policies, developed at any level of government, which may affect volunteers and their work, works only to facilitate and sustain volunteering.*

While the issue of volunteer protection is being addressed, Government must also concurrently address the manner in which new legislation and policy is developed and the sector's involvement at the outset of such processes to ensure that new areas of policy development only enhance the environment in which volunteering occurs. Government should:

7. Take the lead among all government agencies to publicly commit and subscribe to the *Principles of Volunteering* and guarantee that any new legislation or policy will not undermine these principles and the activity of volunteering.
8. Commit to a formal process for consulting with the volunteering sector on new and emerging policy matters to ensure this guarantee – overseas models should be considered and reviewed, but a uniquely Australian model must be developed in partnership with the sector.

Strategic Goal 4: *Acknowledge that the activity of volunteering is not without cost and develop means by which Australian volunteers and volunteer involving organisations are supported and funded to provide valuable services.*

When working to create the enabling and facilitating environment in which volunteering can flourish Government must recognise the need to ensure that volunteers and volunteer involving organisations are adequately resourced for their tasks. Volunteers must never be regarded as a 'cheap' input or a money-saving device, instead the costs of supporting their work should be considered as an investment in Australian society.

To this end, the Australian Government should:

9. Continue to seek improved solutions to the issue of adequate and *affordable* volunteer and public liability insurance.
10. Address the issue of the costs of volunteering to the individual. [See Rising Costs of Volunteering in Australia report] in an equitable manner.
11. Formally recognise that service providers that rely on volunteers explicitly require funds for volunteer involvement, management, reimbursement and recognition and provide a specific and adequate budget allocation for this purpose in any funding agreements.

Strategic Goal 5: *Ensure excellence in all levels of volunteer involvement and volunteer management to encourage, protect and enhance the work of volunteers.*

Factors such as our ageing population, the rapidly growing range and impact of technology and the increasing diversification of the volunteer role are profoundly influencing the way in which volunteers are involved and managed. Government must support the sector to ensure that it is not only able to respond to these challenges, but is skilled and robust enough to anticipate and develop solutions to future challenges. It can do this in the following ways:

12. Support the development of an *affordable* uniform, efficient and effective national system for pre-employment reference checking.
13. Recognise the ongoing investment required to support training in volunteers and volunteer management professionals, thus ensuring growth and development of the sector, by making an ongoing financial commitment to the development of training, information, education and qualifications. Funding should be

focused on the continued development of materials to support both volunteer and volunteer management training, as well as access to affordable training delivery.

14. Lead work with the education sector to include 'working with volunteers' as part of the curriculum of relevant tertiary courses, for example, social or community work, sport and recreation, and youth development work.

Strategic Goal 6: *Ensure that volunteering is a potent, dynamic and unifying social force for community benefit by acknowledging and accepting that it is a diverse and evolving activity.*

Although community interest in volunteering is growing, stereotypes remain. Government is a key partner in helping the sector to refashion the image of volunteering and build an awareness of its true scope, scale and potential for common good. The Australian Government can support the sector by focusing on the following areas:

15. Continue to promote and recognise the concept of employee volunteering as a legitimate way in which skills are transferred from the business sector to the voluntary sector for community benefit and in particular identify ways in which small to medium-size business can be supported to develop employee volunteering programs.
16. Recognise that the sector must be supported in the process of change management if volunteering is to continue to evolve. Allocate significant and ongoing funding for grants to projects and initiatives that will enable the volunteering sector to respond to community need in innovative and dynamic ways.

Support for an Information Technology System

One area of development that spans the layers of funding suggested for the volunteering infrastructure and provides direct support to volunteer involving organisations and volunteers, is an appropriate information technology platform that harnesses the potential of current and future technology to connect people and organisations, add to the body of knowledge on volunteering with new and expanding data, and generate efficiencies in administration of government funding and reporting.

It is proposed that Government support the development and implementation of an integrated IT system to facilitate the growth of volunteering in Australia.

The system would involve developing an on-line national database designed to capture all information necessary to enable people looking for volunteer work to be effectively matched with volunteer involving organisations. This single database could provide a common 'back-end' for the volunteering infrastructure organisations and internet-based 'front-ends'.

The system would be flexible enough to meet the demands of potential partner organisations who could develop independent 'front-ends' to target specific sectors or regions of the community.

The benefits of such a purpose-built system include:

- Eliminating duplication and data base fatigue within the sector and free-up more resources for services delivery.
- Exposing more people to a more diverse range of volunteering opportunities.
- Fostering organisational adherence to accepted standards in volunteer involvement
- Enabling volunteer brokerage to be managed in a consistent way.

- ❑ Capturing data about volunteers and volunteer involving organisations for research, planning, reporting and evaluation purposes.
- ❑ Fostering the development of corporate volunteering projects and partnerships
- ❑ Adaptability to future changes in technology and community need.

As well as benefiting the volunteering infrastructure, volunteer involving organisations and volunteers, an integrated IT system for volunteering would also provide significant benefits to government and the corporate sector and as such would be a critical investment in the strategic future of volunteering.

A scoping study funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (as it was then known) and undertaken by Volunteering Australia in 2004 demonstrated a high level of support for the development of such a system across a range of key stakeholder groups.

CONCLUSION

This paper outlines 18 major steps for Government to take to further develop, support and strengthen volunteering in Australia. These steps comprise the 16 supports for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations emerging from the *National Agenda on Volunteering*, new and specific funding for the network of volunteering infrastructure organisations to facilitate their core business and investment in a purpose-built information technology system that will support the volunteering infrastructure, volunteer involving organisations and volunteers.

The potential for reform is great. The potential gains enormous.

Government is urged to take these steps and immediately begin the process of reforming and strengthening volunteering in Australia. As the national peak body, Volunteering Australia considers it has a critical role to play in leading the sector to work in partnership with the Australian Government to realise the vision of a dynamic and sustainable future for volunteering in Australia.

Endnotes

ⁱ UNVolunteers *Volunteers and the Millennium Development Goals*

ⁱⁱ UN Resolution – 52/17 International Year of Volunteers

ⁱⁱⁱ p. 70 Justin Davis Smith Government and Volunteering *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, Vol. 9 No.1, Volunteering Australia

^{iv} p. 71 *ibid*