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ROOM MC47  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

CC: Dennis Trewin  
Australian Statistician  
Australian Bureau of Statistics

6 September 2005

Dear Treasurer

The inclusion of a question on volunteering in the 2006 Census is an historic recognition of the massive contribution volunteers make to Australian society each year - economically, socially and culturally. We acknowledge your valuable personal commitment to the volunteering movement.

While we are pleased that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has included a question on volunteering in its suite of questions on unpaid work, we are disappointed that the structure of the question and explanatory notes will result in important exclusions in the volunteer count. We would like to see changes made to the question on volunteering and to the instructions accompanying the question, to ensure that the most accurate figures on volunteering emerge from the census. Volunteering Australia was involved in the working group for the new questions on unpaid work, and we have communicated our concerns with the question through the working group. In this context it is disappointing that the question remains inadequate in several ways. We have also been in contact with other nonprofit organisations who share our concerns.

We understand that the 2006 ABS census question on volunteering is, "in the last twelve months did the person spend any time doing voluntary work through an organisation or group". The question includes the note "exclude anything you do as part of your paid employment or to qualify for a government benefit".

The question creates exclusions for two sets of volunteers. Our concerns with these are outlined below:

*Australians who volunteer in employee volunteering programs*

The exclusion of workers who volunteer as part of their paid employment means that the increasing number of Australians who volunteer through a company employee volunteering program will not be included in the total number of volunteers.

innovative and flexible responses to allow Australians to respond to changes such as shifts in work/life balance and the desire for corporations to be socially responsible. Corporate volunteering programs are an important strategy in achieving this outcome, and so, counting these volunteers in the census is important.

Our preference is that this exclusion is removed or at a minimum changes to the accompanying instructions made encouraging respondents to include any volunteering that is facilitated by a company employee volunteering program.

*Australians who volunteer and who are in receipt of Centrelink payments.*

Many unemployed Australians and other Australians in receipt of Government benefits volunteer irrespective of whether their volunteering will count toward an activity test at some point. Unfortunately the wording of the census question on volunteering (‘exclude anything you do í to qualify for a Government benefit’) means that many of these volunteers will not be counted as volunteers.

There is an important distinction between Australians who use a mutual obligation activity to *qualify* for a Government benefit (ie Work for the Dole), and those who use their volunteering activity to *count toward* meeting a Centrelink activity test. While Volunteering Australia is keen to ensure that Work for the Dole participants are not counted as volunteers because of the compulsory nature of this activity, we believe that the many thousands of volunteers who count their work toward an activity test should be included in the question.

Our correspondence with the ABS suggests such volunteers can legitimately answer that they do volunteer. However, it is our belief that the subtlety of the distinction (between qualifying for payments, and counting toward activity tests) means that the question, as it is currently framed, will lead many respondents using volunteer work to count towards an activity test, to answer that they do not volunteer.

A second concern is that some volunteers in receipt of payments for which there is no activity test or mutual obligation activity (for example family payments) may misunderstand the question and answer that they do not volunteer.

Volunteering Australia has several motivations for wishing to see the explanatory note on the question removed. Firstly, we seek this change in order to arrive at the most accurate figure on volunteering. A second, more philosophical point is that the question suggests the existence of two groups of volunteers, with one group distinguished by being income support recipients. This distinction serves to devalue the concept of volunteering.

If the question on volunteering cannot be changed, a clarification of this issue on the instructions would be desirable, in order to encourage this group of volunteers to identify as volunteers. However, this would be an incomplete measure to address the underlying



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figure as it would only assist where respondents choose  
ng the Census.

We would be pleased to work further to assist the ABS in resolving these issues.

Sincerely

Sha Cordingley  
Chief Executive Officer  
Volunteering Australia