



Submission to the consultation on the National Disability Employment Strategy

May 2021

## Submission to the National Disability Employment Strategy

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### Overview

- We welcome the inclusion of volunteering under the proposed priority areas 2. and 3. of the National Disability Employment Strategy (the Employment Strategy). Volunteering can be an important pathway to employment for people with disability.
- The further development of the Employment Strategy needs to be mindful of the challenges being faced within volunteering (ongoing and as a result of COVID-19) and the barriers that people with disability can face in accessing volunteering.
- If the potential of volunteering (in supporting pathways for people with disability into employment) are to be realised, further consideration needs to be given to addressing the costs that are associated with securing positive volunteering experiences.

### Introduction

#### About the National Disability Employment Strategy

The Consultation Paper<sup>1</sup> that will inform the National Disability Employment Strategy (the Employment Strategy) is seeking feedback on the proposed vision, priority areas and ideas of what could improve employment outcomes for people with disability.

The Employment Strategy will sit under the National Disability Strategy. The proposed vision for the Employment Strategy is “an inclusive Australian society where all people have access to meaningful work opportunities.” The four draft priority areas are:

1. Lifting employer engagement, capability and demand
2. Building employment skills, experience and confidence of young people with disability
3. Improving systems and services for jobseekers and employers
4. Changing community attitudes

The consultation paper refers to the role of volunteering under priority areas 2. and 3., recommending that the Employment Strategy could include measures to:

- *Improve career development opportunities (e.g., tools to understand potential career interest areas, work experience, volunteering or job readiness programs) for young people with disability while they are at school; and*
- *Reconsider the design of Government disability employment programs to ensure they meet the needs of both jobseekers and employers, including providing opportunities for people to access mainstream services to support their employment journey (e.g., mainstream recruitment companies, volunteering and self-employment).*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/national-disability-employment-strategy-consultation-paper.pdf>

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### About this submission

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the consultation on the Employment Strategy.

This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies.

As the Employment Strategy is developed further and implemented, we would encourage the department to engage further with the volunteering sector to maximise the opportunities for people with disability.

### The power of volunteering

Many people with disability are already active members of the volunteering community. This is both through 'formal volunteering' (through an organisation or group) and 'informal volunteering' (which takes place in the community outside of an organisational setting). Official ABS statistics estimate that in 2019<sup>2</sup>:

- around 1.5 million people with a disability volunteered through an organisation in Australia (this is 24% of all volunteers.)
- around 1.8 million people with a disability volunteered informally in their communities (27% of all volunteers who volunteer informally) in the four weeks prior to the 2019 General Social Survey (GSS) being undertaken.

Part of the appeal of volunteering is its diversity – in the types of activities, settings and organisations. Volunteers are involved across health, aged care, disability and community services, sports and the arts, environmental protection, and disaster resilience, response, and recovery. The types of volunteering activities undertaken are also diverse and include committee work, fundraising, sales, sport coaching, team management, teaching, administration, food preparation and delivery, counselling, mentoring, information management, repairs, gardening, emergency support and environmental work. Volunteering provides a wealth of opportunities to develop skills and experience in a variety of workplace settings.

Research evidence consistently demonstrates that volunteering has a wide range of positive benefits for those who volunteer, including significant mental and physical health benefits<sup>3</sup> and supporting

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<sup>2</sup> See Table 4 of GSS 2019 data downloads <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/latest-release#data-download>

<sup>3</sup> For example, see literature review and recent research by Kim et al (2020). Volunteering and subsequent health and well-being in older adults: an outcome-wide longitudinal approach. American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

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pathways to paid employment<sup>4</sup>. Research<sup>5</sup> specifically with people with disability has demonstrated that volunteering among people with disabilities can reduce feelings of alienation and loneliness and allow an individual with disability to shift from being a recipient of welfare services into an empowered provider of services to others.

### Facilitating volunteering

The volunteering sector endeavours to support the full inclusion of people with disability. Various initiatives support this commitment, for example:

- The 'Victoria ALIVE Project'<sup>6</sup> aimed to improve disability inclusion in the volunteering community sector, through supporting organisations to be welcoming, inclusive and accessible for people with disability. The activities included: developing tools and resources, holding community forums, promoting positive change through media, and creating an evidence base around disability volunteer inclusion. The Victoria ALIVE (Ability-Links-Inclusive-Volunteering-Everyday) project was delivered in partnership with Volunteering Victoria and Neighbourhood Houses Victoria.
- The 'Inclusive Volunteering Program'<sup>7</sup> run by Volunteering ACT is designed to help people with barriers to volunteering find meaningful volunteering opportunities. Participants include people living with disability. Volunteering ACT work with organisations to create inclusive volunteering environments for participants of the program.
- The 'Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program'<sup>8</sup> is offered by The Centre for Volunteering (NSW), Volunteering ACT and Volunteering Tasmania. It aims to reduce and remove barriers to volunteering and employment for people living with disability and those on a mental health recovery journey. The Program supports participants to engage in volunteering as a pathway to employment and works with organisations to help them become more inclusive.
- 'Volunteerability' is a new program recently launched in South Australia, run by Volunteering SA&NT in partnership with Orana Disability Services. The program supports people with disability find meaningful volunteering opportunities, with the support of trained volunteer buddies. Every stakeholder will have access to free training, support, and resources.

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<sup>4</sup> See for example,

[https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/employment\\_research\\_report.pdf](https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/employment_research_report.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> For a recent summary of literature, see Yanay-Ventura, G. (2019). "Nothing About Us Without Us" in Volunteerism Too: Volunteering Among People with Disabilities. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 30(1), 147-163.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.victoriaalive.org.au/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/services/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.volunteering.com.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

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In addition to these specific initiatives, all the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies provide guidance, support, and resources<sup>9</sup> to volunteer involving organisations to enable more people with disability to access volunteering.

### The changing nature of volunteering

The future potential for volunteering to provide a pathway to employment for people with disability needs to be seen in the wider context of trends and challenges in volunteering.

Volunteering is facing many challenges, which include the recent profound impact of COVID-19 and ongoing problems resulting from, inter alia, weak resourcing of volunteer management, poor recognition of volunteering, and an overall lack of strategic development and investment.

Rates of formal volunteering have been declining over time. The latest General Social Survey data<sup>10</sup> (2019) shows that the rate of Australians volunteering and the time they give, was declining pre-COVID. The rate of formal volunteering fell from 36.2% in 2010 to 28.8% in 2019. Although the almost six million Australians who volunteered in 2019 contributed almost 600 million hours to the community, this is a 20% decrease from 2014 (743.3 million hours).

Recent Volunteering Australia data<sup>11</sup> shows volunteering is not 'snapping back' as COVID restrictions lift, with nearly three quarters (72%) of survey respondents saying their volunteer programs were not fully operational. Although COVID restrictions have eased considerably across Australia, over half of the 600 respondents surveyed (56%), said their organisations needed more volunteers, with four out of ten (41%) finding it difficult to re-engage or recruit volunteers.

During the height of the COVID pandemic in 2020, two out of three volunteers (65.9%) stopped volunteering, equating to an estimated loss of 12.2 million hours per week<sup>12</sup>. Recent follow-up research<sup>13</sup> has found that in April 2021, 24.2 per cent of Australians had done voluntary work in the previous 12 months, down from 36.0 per cent in late 2019. Only slightly more than half (56.4 per cent) of those who in April 2020 said that they stopped volunteering due to COVID-19 had said that they had volunteered in the 12 months leading up to April 2021. An estimated 2.3 million less Australians volunteered in the 12 months prior to April 2021 compared to late 2019. All age groups experienced a decline in volunteering. The age group that had the largest fall in volunteering is the 45 to 54 year old age group.

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<sup>9</sup> See for example, <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Building-Inclusive-Bridges.pdf> and <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Lets-Talk-About-Inclusion-Promoting-inclusion-in-your-volunteer-involving-organisation.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/latest-release#voluntary-work-and-unpaid-work-support>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/re-engaging-volunteers-and-covid-19/>

<sup>12</sup> See <https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/experience-volunteers-during-early-stages-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/research-briefing-volunteering-during-the-first-year-of-covid-19/#/>

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Data is not available for the impact of COVID-19 on volunteers with disability, but wider evidence<sup>14</sup> suggests that the impact was likely to have been more severe than those not living with disability.

We also know that people with disability face long-standing barriers to participating in volunteering. Research has demonstrated that many organisations do not offer volunteering positions to people with disability and those individuals who do manage to secure volunteer roles can face many challenges, owing to prejudice or lack of awareness and support.

Research commissioned by Volunteering Tasmania highlighted three key themes to understanding how people with a disability can volunteer: Physical accessibility; Attitudes and management; and Support requirements. The authors argued that for volunteering to be successful for a volunteer with a disability all three need to be considered.

The Employment Strategy consultation paper refers to the changing nature of work and how this poses both challenges and opportunities for people with disability. We also know volunteering is changing, for example with an increase in online volunteering opportunities<sup>15</sup> and more demand for episodic volunteering<sup>16</sup>.

### Creating inclusive and sustainable volunteering

In the current redesign of the \$6million p.a. Volunteer Management Activity<sup>17</sup>, we are working with the Australian Government to build the capacity of volunteer involving organisations to break down barriers for ‘priority groups’, which includes First Nations people, recent migrants and people with disability.

This is an important development, but the potential of volunteering for people with disability will not be realised without further policy change and additional investment. We have long argued for a national volunteering strategy, which would complement existing State and Territory volunteering strategies, and consider how to put volunteering onto an inclusive and sustainable footing for the future. As part of taking this work forward, and in the context of the National Disability Employment Strategy, we need to:

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<sup>14</sup> See evidence presented at the disability Royal Commission and here <https://www.smh.com.au/national/covid-has-revealed-some-uncomfortable-truths-about-australia-and-people-with-disability-20200915-p55w00.html>

<sup>15</sup> See statistics re online volunteering here <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/household-impacts-covid-19-survey/mar-2021#voluntary-work-and-unpaid-help>

<sup>16</sup> For example, see <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/blog/1977-the-inaugural-state-of-volunteering-in-queensland-report>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.dss.gov.au/communities-and-vulnerable-people-programs-services-volunteer-management/volunteer-management-activity-summary>

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- Clarify and measure the breadth of outcomes and government priorities to which volunteering is currently contributing, which includes supporting more people with disability into employment<sup>18</sup>.
- Better understand the costs of volunteering – that fall on individuals, volunteer involving organisations and volunteer support services<sup>19</sup>. For some people with disability, there are additional costs to the individual and to the volunteering infrastructure in ensuring a positive volunteering experience.
- Think holistically about how these costs are shared, including the additional investment needed from Federal and State/Territory governments.

## Conclusion

In the context of the Employment Strategy, we welcome the inclusion of volunteering under priority areas 2) and 3).

Volunteering is time freely given, but enabling volunteering is not free. Like paid employment, volunteering involves induction, training, and ongoing management. Funding needs to be available to support volunteering programs and to comply with sector standards and legislative requirements. None of this comes for free.

If the potential of volunteering (in supporting pathways for people with disability into employment) is to be realised, further consideration needs to be given to addressing the costs that are associated with securing and maintaining positive volunteering experiences.

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<sup>18</sup> It also includes the role of volunteers in key government-funded services such as aged care, mental health and disability services.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the costs of volunteering, see the SOV Victoria <https://stateofvolunteering.org.au/>

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### Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.



Mr Mark Pearce  
Chief Executive Officer

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### Endorsements

This position statement has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.



### About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

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### Volunteering Australia Contacts

Mark Pearce  
Chief Executive Officer  
[ceo@volunteeringaustralia.org](mailto:ceo@volunteeringaustralia.org)  
0428 186 736

Sue Regan  
Policy Director  
[policy@volunteeringaustralia.org](mailto:policy@volunteeringaustralia.org)  
0480 258 723

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### State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies

#### **Volunteering ACT**

[www.volunteeringact.org.au](http://www.volunteeringact.org.au)  
02 6251 4060  
info@volunteeringact.org.au

#### **The Centre for Volunteering (NSW)**

[www.volunteering.com.au](http://www.volunteering.com.au)  
02 9261 3600  
info@volunteering.com.au

#### **Volunteering Queensland**

[www.volunteeringqld.org.au](http://www.volunteeringqld.org.au)  
07 3002 7600  
reception@volunteeringqld.org.au

#### **Volunteering Tasmania**

[www.volunteeringtas.org.au](http://www.volunteeringtas.org.au)  
03 6231 5550  
admin@volunteeringtas.org.au

#### **Volunteering SA&NT**

[www.volunteeringsa-nt.org.au](http://www.volunteeringsa-nt.org.au)  
08 8221 7177  
reception@volunteeringsa-nt.org.au

#### **Volunteering Victoria**

[www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au](http://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au)  
03 8327 8500  
info@volunteeringvictoria.org.au

#### **Volunteering WA**

[www.volunteeringwa.org.au](http://www.volunteeringwa.org.au)  
08 9482 4333  
info@volunteeringwa.org.au