

Submission to the Joint Standing
Committee on the National
Disability Insurance Scheme on
the NDIS National Workforce
Plan: 2021-2025

September 2021

Overview

This submission responds to the NDIS National Workforce Plan: 2021-2025. It aims to contribute evidence on the role of volunteers in the disability services workforce, and on the importance of including volunteer-supported programs in the initiatives outlined in the Workforce Plan. Volunteers make a unique contribution to disability services, facilitating a degree of social connection and cultural inclusion that paid workers alone cannot. They are a distinct, but essential, component of the disability services landscape, and must be considered as part of a comprehensive workforce strategy. The current Workforce Plan makes no reference to volunteers working in disability services. Volunteering Australia would like to highlight the following:

- Volunteers add unique value to a range of NDIS programs. The Workforce Plan should acknowledge and plan to support the contributions of volunteers as demand for volunteer-supported services grows.
- Volunteers do not operate independently, and need to be recruited, screened, trained, and supported continually by managers and coordinators of volunteers. Measures to facilitate appropriate support for volunteer involving organisations, including the promotion and resourcing of paid roles which support volunteer involvement in disability care and support, should also be included in the Workforce Plan.
- The priority actions outlined in the Workforce Plan have relevance to volunteer-supported programs. Volunteering can improve perceptions of the disability sector and facilitate pathways to employment within it. The administrative requirements of the NDIS, particularly worker screening processes, are also challenging for volunteer-supported programs. Volunteers needs to be explicitly considered in the proposed re-evaluation of administrative requirements under the NDIS.

About this submission

Volunteering Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme. The aim of this submission is to contribute evidence on the role of volunteers in the disability services workforce, and to highlight the potential of volunteering to contribute to the broader aims of the NDIS National Workforce Plan.

This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies. The peak volunteering bodies reached out to member organisations operating in disability services to seek their views on the role of volunteers. These views have been drawn upon in this submission.

Volunteers in the disability services workforce

Volunteers and the organisations that engage them contribute extensively to the disability services landscape. In a recent study of disability service organisations in Victoria, 78 per cent of respondents reported that their organisation had run some type of volunteer supported service within the past

five years.¹ These services add significant value to the disability services sector. To cite only one example, Inclusion Melbourne, an organisation that provides personalised support to people with disability, facilitated 20,247 hours of volunteering from 2014 to 2015.² At a cost of \$186,500 to operate the volunteering program, the work of the volunteers involved had a value of \$833,770 at the NDIS 1:1 support rate.³ These numbers illustrate the economic value of volunteering in disability services.

Despite the above example, information on the precise scale of volunteer involvement in the sector, and the kinds of work undertaken by volunteers, is scarce. Where data has been collected, for example by the National Disability Insurance Agency, the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics, data on volunteers in disability services is not included.⁴ Further, it is currently unclear how many of the country's 11,600 active NDIS-registered providers engage volunteers, or what kind of support their volunteers provide.⁵ This lack of data highlights the need for a review of the disability care and support workforce which includes volunteers. Effective and appropriate planning for volunteer involvement in the sector requires a comprehensive understanding of volunteer roles or the issues surrounding the management of volunteers within the NDIS workforce.

The unique value of volunteering in the disability sector

Volunteers perform a broad range of roles across the disability services landscape. A study of volunteer-supported disability services in Victoria revealed seven program models operating in the sector. These programs facilitate social support and community participation, supported activities, skills development, out of home support, practical support, organisational support, and advocacy.⁶ Many of these functions complement and support the work of paid staff.

Volunteers are often considered by service users and providers as separate from paid workers. Volunteer roles add unique value to programs and services in the disability space, and they are often integral to achieving the desired outcomes for participants. When asked about the value of volunteers, organisations often emphasise aspects of their programs that could not be achieved by paid staff alone. These include, among others, promoting genuine friendship, providing personalised

¹ <https://www.interchange.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Value-Added-Volunteer-Supported-Services-and-the-Challenge-of-the-NDIS.pdf>

² <http://inclusionmelbourne.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Volunteering-and-the-NDIS-Submission-Discussion-Paper-web.pdf>

³ *ibid*

⁴ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06_2021/ndis-national-workforce-plan-2021-2025.pdf; <https://www.acnc.gov.au/node/6191086>

⁵ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06_2021/ndis-national-workforce-plan-2021-2025.pdf

⁶ <https://www.interchange.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Value-Added-Volunteer-Supported-Services-and-the-Challenge-of-the-NDIS.pdf>

support, creating opportunities for community engagement, and facilitating the extension of program reach.⁷

Given their role in program and service delivery, it is critical that volunteers are considered in workforce planning for the disability sector. According to a staff member from one organisation,

“Volunteers provide real connections...they are not paid to be there; they want to [be] there. Some parents tell us that it is important and that the volunteer is the only person in their lives who is not a paid professional...Volunteers can integrate in the life of the person with a disability and their family - they attend the school function, come to birthday parties and step in when extra support is needed. The person with the disability knows them as a friend and support, not a worker, building self-esteem and confidence.”⁸

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies have received similar statements from other disability service providers which engage volunteers. According to Cerebral Palsy Alliance,

“Volunteers are an integral part of Cerebral Palsy Alliance, adding value to the client-facing programs we run, assisting families directly in the home (pre-COVID-19) and assisting our staff with administration, consulting, and training. Many of our services would not be sustainable without the support of volunteers, especially under the NDIS.”

Programs like these add value to the disability services landscape that paid staff alone could not achieve, particularly through facilitating social connection. A recent study found that people with disability are significantly more likely to experience loneliness, low perceived social support, and social isolation than people without disability.⁹ Access to volunteer-supported programs that connect people with disability to social opportunities are vital to improving their independence, autonomy, health, and wellbeing.

Much like paid roles, demand for volunteer roles in disability care and support is likely to increase in the coming years. Therefore, supporting and developing volunteer involvement in the sector will be crucial for service delivery in the future. This means ensuring that volunteer involving organisations have the resources necessary to attract and retain volunteers.

Volunteering and the NDIS National Workforce Plan

Planning appropriately for volunteer involvement in the disability sector will also support the priority actions outlined in the Workforce Plan. Volunteering plays an important role in improving community understanding of the benefits of working in disability care and support, and in

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Emerson, Eric, Nicola Fortune, Gwynnyth Llewellyn, and Roger Stancliffe, "Loneliness, Social Support, Social Isolation and Wellbeing among Working Age Adults with and without Disability: Cross-Sectional Study," *Disability and Health Journal* 14, no. 1 (2021): 5, doi:10.1016/j.dhjo.2020.100965

strengthening pathways to employment in the sector (Priority 1). The priorities and experiences of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations should also be considered in efforts to reduce red tape, including the reassessment of worker screening procedures (Priority 3).

Priority 1: Perceptions of the sector and pathways to employment

Volunteering offers avenues to the delivery side of disability care and support, which facilitates greater awareness of the career opportunities available in the sector. Volunteering also equips applicants with work-relevant skills and experience. Research undertaken by employment company SEEK found that 95 per cent of employers identify that volunteering is just as credible as paid work.¹⁰ Further, 92 per cent of employers identified that relevant volunteering experience gave a candidate an advantage in job interviews.¹¹ The potential of volunteer work to facilitate exposure to the sector and to address community misunderstandings is not explored in the Workforce Plan.

Volunteer experience with people with disability also greatly improves attitudes towards and confidence working with people with disability.¹² Further, because volunteers often work directly with the service recipients, volunteering may be more influential in breaking down prejudice than other activities, such as professional interning or work placement.¹³

Volunteering creates opportunities for people to gain exposure to the sector, and to develop the skills and attributes necessary to provide quality care. This potential should be acknowledged and utilised in the Workforce Plan.

Priority 3: Volunteers and worker screening

The administrative burdens of the NDIS identified in the Workforce Plan also create challenges for volunteer involvement. For example, the recent introduction of new national NDIS Worker Screening requirements has caused complications for volunteers.

Although NDIS Worker Screening is a national requirement, the process is implemented by state and territory governments. Volunteering Australia has heard that the handling of the process in some states and territories has created issues for volunteer engagement with disability service providers.

In Victoria, for example, the screening of volunteers in risk assessed roles with NDIS providers is a manual two-step process. Volunteers must first apply for a volunteer fee waiver and, once that is confirmed, apply for the NDIS screening check. Organisations have reported that this is often a disincentive for new volunteers to continue with the process. They have also expressed frustrations

¹⁰ <https://www.seek.com.au/career-advice/article/3-reasons-volunteering-can-put-you-ahead-of-the-pack>

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Sally Lindsay and Sara Cancelliere, "A Model for Developing Disability Confidence," *Disability and Rehabilitation* 40, no. 18 (2018): 2122-2130, doi:10.1080/09638288.2017.1326533

¹³ Juliá-Sanchis, Rocío, Ángela Sanjuan-Quiles, Miguel Richart-Martínez, and Julio Cabrero-García, "The Impact of Volunteering in Mental Health Settings on Nursing Students' Attitudes," *Nurse Education in Practice* 44, (2020): 4-5, doi:10.1016/j.nepr.2020.102726

with this, as organisations are unable to manage the process or assist their volunteers, other than to direct them to apply.

A significant issue with NDIS screening of volunteers in Victoria is that there was insufficient understanding of the workforce and the role that volunteers hold within the disability sector. Applications for the volunteer fee waiver are sent to a central help desk to be approved manually. This system does not account for the large number of volunteers who need the check, and a priority process is not in place to expedite clearances for volunteers in priority roles. Both decisions indicate a lack of understanding of the extent of volunteer involvement in the sector.

Volunteers are not able to volunteer without a check and, consequently, some have applied for the paid check simply to try and expedite the process.

“To wait up to 1.5 – 2 months for a prospective volunteer to receive the outcome of their NDIS check is just not sustainable. [For comparison], the Disability Worker Exclusion Scheme and CrimCheck method used to take approximately 24 – 48 hours for checks to be lodged and resolved.”¹⁴

Worker screening plays a critical role in protecting vulnerable communities, and Volunteering Australia supports the inclusion of volunteers in these processes. However, it is essential that the volunteering ecosystem is considered during both the planning and implementation stages. Actions to reduce red tape in the sector, particularly the alignment of worker screening addressed in initiative 10 of the Workforce Plan, should also consider how these requirements affect volunteers.¹⁵ Attention should be paid to the number of expected volunteer applicants, the waiver or reimbursement process for volunteers, and the accessibility of the process, particularly when an online application is required.

Inclusion of volunteering in workforce planning

Volunteers facilitate programs that are unique in the disability services landscape, and which support the participation of people with disability in all aspects of community life. They are crucial to achieving the NDIS’ aim to ensure the independence, mainstream community involvement, and social and economic participation of people with disability.¹⁶ Broader planning for the sector, including workforce planning, must therefore include provisions to promote, maintain, and develop volunteering in disability services. As outlined above, volunteer involvement in disability care and support faces similar challenges to the engagement of paid workers and demands similar consideration. Priorities 1 and 3 are particularly relevant to volunteering.

In addition, volunteering faces distinct challenges. Of particular concern for the future of volunteering in the disability sector is the decline in volunteering rates, and the challenge of restarting volunteering amid the ongoing risks of COVID-19. The proportion of Australians doing

¹⁴ Statement provided by Tess Lynch, Manager, Community Support, Inclusion Melbourne

¹⁵ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06_2021/ndis-national-workforce-plan-2021-2025.pdf, 6

¹⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2020C00392>

voluntary work fell from 36 per cent in late 2019 to 24.2 per cent in April 2021, amounting to an estimated loss of 2.3 million from Australia's volunteer force.¹⁷ Troublingly, almost half of those who stopped volunteering during COVID-19 had not resumed by April 2021, despite the easing of lockdown and physical distancing restrictions at that time in many jurisdictions since 2020.¹⁸

The decline in volunteering has profound implications for disability services, and research indicates that the sector has already been affected by this trend. In National Disability Services' annual survey of disability service providers, one in three organisations reported that they had fewer volunteers in 2020, compared to the rate of 14 per cent in 2019.¹⁹ The Workforce Plan should therefore ensure measures are taken to re-invigorate volunteering in the sector. This will require the design of appropriate supports for volunteer involving organisations to attract and engage volunteers, and revisions to policies on the funding and administrative requirements for volunteering programs.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence presented on volunteering in the disability services workforce, Volunteering Australia makes the following recommendations on the NDIS National Workforce Plan:

- 1. Consider volunteers in efforts to attract and retain staff in disability care and support.** Much like paid roles, demand for volunteer roles in disability care and support is likely to increase in the coming years. Planning to support the volunteer workforce means ensuring that volunteer involving organisations have the resources necessary to attract and retain volunteers. Volunteer roles should also be supported under initiative 1, to "promote opportunities in the care and support sector."²⁰
- 2. Include volunteering as a means of improving perceptions of disability care and support work (Priority 1).** Through their volunteering, volunteers develop the skills, values, attributes, and diversity of experience which are needed in the disability care and support workforce. This potential should be acknowledged and utilised in the Workforce Plan.
- 3. Consider volunteers in the proposed re-evaluation of administrative requirements under the NDIS (Priority 3).** Volunteer involving organisations and worker screening units in each state should be consulted as part of a comprehensive review of the screening process to provide feedback on the numbers of volunteers applying for checks and the issues they are facing. Attention should be paid to the number of expected volunteer applicants, the waiver or reimbursement process for volunteers, and the accessibility of the process, particularly when an online application is required.

¹⁷ https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/5/Volunteering_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic_-_April_2021.pdf

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ https://www.nds.org.au/images/State_of_the_Disability_Sector_Reports/SoTDS_2020.pdf

²⁰ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06_2021/ndis-national-workforce-plan-2021-2025.pdf, 24

Authorisation

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



Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer

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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