

Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability

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Overview

This submission concerns the role of volunteers in the disability services workforce. 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. Volunteering Australia would like to highlight the following:

- Data on the contributions of volunteers in the disability services sector is scarce. This makes it difficult to estimate the value of volunteering in the sector and to plan for its future.
- Changes in funding models introduced under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) have complicated volunteer engagement, which may contribute unintentionally to a decline in volunteering.
- Workforce planning for the sector must acknowledge and plan to support the contribution of volunteers, with the aim to safeguard their unique contribution and value proposition.
- Volunteers do not operate independently, and need to be recruited, screened, trained, and supported continually by managers and coordinators of volunteers. Volunteer management and coordination therefore require adequate and ongoing funding.

Introduction

About the Royal Commission

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability was established in April 2019 in response to community concern about widespread reports of violence against, and the neglect, abuse, and exploitation of, people with disability.

About this submission

Volunteering Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Royal Commission. This submission follows our previous response to the questions highlighted in the Promoting Inclusion Issues Paper, which focused on the benefits of inclusive volunteering for people with disability. While that submission highlighted how people with disability benefit as volunteers, this submission contributes evidence on the role of volunteers in the disability services workforce. A series of recommendations are proposed to promote more robust disability workforce planning, which considers and safeguards the unique contributions of volunteers.

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 the disability space 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 makes it difficult to estimate the extent of volunteers' contribution to the health and wellbeing outcomes of people with disability, and impossible to create a national strategy to ensure the sustainability of this contribution.

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 respondent 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."

Statements from participants' families also highlight the value of volunteers:

"[Volunteer] comes for 4 hours each week, and is an amazing help to me. She always goes the extra mile to fit her volunteering in around her uni commitments. I don't know what I'd do without her. She plays with the other children, she is almost like a family member. The kids love her and she's especially great with [my daughter] – she spends time one-on-one with her and chats to her like a normal child, which is the best therapy of all. She's an amazing human being."

The ability of volunteers to provide meaningful social connection is often central to programs in the sector. For example, Sydney-based organisation Gig Buddies matches volunteers with people with disability to build connections and support social opportunities by attending arts and sporting activities. The organisation emphasises that its volunteers are not support workers, thus ensuring a focus on friendship and social connection as the key program outcomes. Staff in the organisation manage training, induction, and screening processes, and provide support at initial meetings and group outings.⁹ However, participating in activities and maintaining the ongoing relationship is handled by volunteers.

In a study of the program, participants emphasised that having a sustained connection with someone other than a family member or care provider was greatly beneficial to their confidence,

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2018-06/apo-nid312547.pdf>

independence, and happiness.¹⁰ Others said that they felt regarded as adults in the program, had opportunities to expand their social circles, and felt part of a wider group. According to one participant:

*"My feelings for [volunteer] are that I feel like I can be myself. And have fun and go out and that. So, I'm not with Mum and Dad all the time... I always wanted to have a friend to hang out with and do things with and enjoy the world out there."*¹¹

Programs like this 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.¹² Access to volunteer-supported programs that connect people with disability to social opportunities are vital to improving their independence, autonomy, health, and wellbeing.

Volunteers and community engagement

Volunteers also facilitate community activities which extend beyond the services landscape. Sport is a prominent example. According to Sport Australia's AusPlay survey, 15.7 per cent of people over the age of 15 participate in a non-playing role in sport in Australia, with the most common roles being coach, instructor, trainer, official, administrator, and committee member.¹³

Participation in sport for people with disability has profound benefits,¹⁴ and as in the broader sports landscape, this participation depends on the work of volunteers in organisations and clubs. As an example, the Football Integration Development Association (FIDA) runs a football competition with the key aim to "initiate access for persons with an intellectual disability to the game of Australian Rules Football."¹⁵ FIDA has 25 member clubs and approximately 800 players. According to FIDA's manager, the clubs give people with intellectual disability the opportunity to make long-term friendships and:

*"[Just] to go out and play footy in that team environment... [In these ways] abled sport and disability sport, they're the same."*¹⁶

A player in one club, the Ringwood Spiders, said,

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Eric Emerson, 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

¹³ <https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/kb/volunteers-in-sport/statistics>

¹⁴ Beth Aitchison, Alison Rushton, Paul Martin, Andrew Soundy, and Nicola R Heneghan, "Experiences and perceived health benefits of individuals with a disability participating in sport: A systematic review protocol," *BMJ Open* 10, no. 11 (2020): doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2020-038214

¹⁵ <https://fida.org.au/about/the-fida-story/>

¹⁶ <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2018-06/apo-nid312547.pdf>

“What I like about [the club] is that it supports all the players. Not just in the club, but in their personal lives, the club sort of tries their best to support them as well.”¹⁷

Other players said their involvement with the club improved their independence, confidence, and sense of belonging to a wider community, and provided opportunities to be involved in non-playing roles themselves.¹⁸ Like most clubs, the Ringwood Spiders is run entirely by volunteers.

Volunteers perform an array of roles across the disability sector, from providing direct support to facilitating broader social opportunity. Consistent with the principles of the NDIS Act, these roles are fundamental to enabling independent social and economic participation of people with disability.¹⁹ A failure to acknowledge the crucial role of volunteers undermines the contribution of volunteering to Australian life, and the unique value it adds to disability services.

Volunteer-supported programs and the NDIS

The issue of funding

Although volunteers offer their time without financial gain, there is a cost associated with running volunteer-supported programs. It is therefore important for volunteering programs to be appropriately funded to ensure their viability. It is crucial to note that just as paid staff cannot replace the contributions of volunteers, volunteers must not substitute paid workers and the role they play in an organisation. This means acknowledging the difference between the types of work which can be expected of voluntary and paid roles respectively, and ideally ensuring that service users do not pay directly for programs delivered by volunteers.

The NDIS funding model creates some difficulties in this respect, which must be re-examined in future strategic planning for the disability services workforce. Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies have heard from disability service providers that involve volunteers that the transition to individual NDIS funding has created challenges for volunteer engagement. These include concerns that the requirement to charge for services delivered by volunteers is antithetical to the volunteering premise, that the model excludes participants whose plans do not cover their services, and that the accompanying administrative requirements are onerous and increase volunteer turnover.

Research on volunteer-supported disability services has found that the outcomes reported of most programs align with those outlined in the Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) framework.²⁰ This framework aims to ensure that the NDIS supports capacity building activities for people with disability and their families and carers which are not tied to individually funded packages.²¹ Despite this, a study of NDIS-funded volunteer programs in Victoria found that only a

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2020C00392>

²⁰ <https://www.interchange.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Value-Added-Volunteer-Supported-Services-and-the-Challenge-of-the-NDIS.pdf>

²¹ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/10_2020/ndis-website-ilc-policy-framework.pdf

small minority—8 of the 152 programs detailed by organisations in the study—received any funding through ILC.²² Most NDIS-funded programs are funded through individual NDIS packages.

A more comprehensive understanding of how volunteering programs are funded under the NDIS will be necessary to ensure that the model recognises volunteering as *time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain*.²³ Further consideration must also be given to the funding of volunteer-supported programs through individual packages, and the possibility of expanding ILC to cover these programs.

Volunteers and worker screening

The recent introduction of new national NDIS Worker Screening requirements has also 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, then apply for the NDIS screening check once confirmed. Organisations have reported that this is often a disincentive for new volunteers to continue with the process. They have also expressed frustrations with this system, 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."*²⁴

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

²² <https://www.interchange.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Value-Added-Volunteer-Supported-Services-and-the-Challenge-of-the-NDIS.pdf>

²³ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/definition-of-volunteering/>

²⁴ Statement provided by Tess Lynch, Manager, Community Support, Inclusion Melbourne

volunteering ecosystem is considered during the planning and implementation stages. 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.

Concerns about the funding model and administrative requirements, and how they affect volunteer engagement in disability services, are reflected in the experience of HorsePower Australia.

Case study: HorsePower Australia²⁵

About HorsePower Australia

HorsePower Australia is a niche community based charitable sport, recreation, and disability service provider, servicing individuals with diverse abilities across Western Australia. There is an opportunity for everyone at HorsePower, whether it is a child diagnosed with autism, cerebral palsy, or Down syndrome; a young teen struggling with emotional stress or from the effects of abuse; an adult recovering from a stroke, decreased muscle tone, dementia, or depression.

HorsePower Australia has been a Disability Service (DS) provider for over 23 years and until 30 June 2016 received \$329,837 per annum in block funding to facilitate access to a range of meaningful active recreation and/or leisure options that maximise involvement in everyday community life, while providing enjoyment and satisfaction for people with disability. At the beginning of 2015, HorsePower Australia applied for and was successful in being awarded an Individual Panel Contract with DS. We were advised that this process was necessary and would allow us to access the individual funding under the WA NDIS (then My Way) Model. We were then also successful in our application to become a registered NDIS provider, although it was a bit of a fight to be recognised.

The transition to NDIS funding

Our experience with the NDIS to date has been one of frustration. We struggled in the first place to be registered, and then with getting funding for our programs in participants' plans. It is a constant struggle to manage the day-to-day administrative and reporting requirements for the scheme, let alone to keep up to date with the ever-changing landscape.

This new individualised funding model has seen session fees for participants increase from \$20 per session to that currently provided under the NDIS price guide (\$58.80 per session). Parents and individuals over the years have seen this increase as rather steep and questioned why they should pay such a fee for a program provided by volunteers. The NDIS have also asked this question, with planners stating that it should be a free service if provided by volunteers. We would love to provide services free to all who need them. However, we still have overheads to

²⁵ This case study was provided by HorsePower Australia to Volunteering WA on 27 May 2020

cover, which with horses to care for are rather substantial (\$3,000 per year per horse for feed, vet, dentistry, and farrier costs).

It is now often the case that individuals who are not eligible for NDIS funding or who have not been successful in securing enough funding in their plans for our programs are missing out, as they can no longer afford the services.

The administrative burden and volunteer retention

HorsePower is largely managed and run by volunteers (96 per cent), and they were already overworked assisting participants in sessions, caring for our 120 horses 52 weeks of the year, and maintaining properties before the introduction of NDIS. They are now feeling very overwhelmed trying to keep up to date with all the changes and stressed by the financial impact on the organisation and the administrative burden it is placing on volunteers, staff, participants, and their families.

In our experience, the administration and reporting requirements under the NDIS have already increased the workload of our voluntary and paid personnel by at least 50 per cent.

The process for accessing HorsePower programs is also lengthy. There is a lack of understanding of these requirements and the process currently in place with the NDIS does not fit our procedures well. This is resulting in a lot of frustration and time managing each individual's access to our service, which as a largely voluntary organisation could result in us losing good volunteers who do not want to have to deal with the increased administration. This leads to increased turnover in volunteers and staff and increased costs of training for HorsePower.

The process in place for Volunteer Worker Screening creates similar problems. While we understand the need for screening protocols, the current process is putting volunteers off as it is too onerous. Many potential volunteers are advising that the system is hard to deal with and that it requires them to take a fair bit of time out of their week. As a result, many choose to volunteer their time in other industries.

We understand that the NDIS is set up with paid employees in mind and that these systems are necessary. However, it is a lot to expect that volunteers and volunteer-led organisations can cover the costs of developing and implementing new systems, processes, and training, especially with little to no support to do so.

*HorsePower Australia volunteers contribute over 45,000 hours per year, providing support in sessions, maintaining properties and equipment, caring for horses and ponies, managing centres including the administration of NDIS, and fundraising. In the arena the team required to deliver services consists of Coach, Participant, Horse, Horse Handler, and 2 Support Assistants. If we were to employ support workers to undertake the support roles in delivering sessions it would cost participants approximately \$225 per session, which is almost 4 times that of the current NDIS rate of \$58.80. **We feel that the NDIS and the Government do not value and recognise the contribution of volunteers in our community.***

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.²⁶ Broader planning for the sector must therefore include provisions to promote, maintain, and develop volunteering in disability services. However, volunteers are not included in current strategic initiatives for the sector, including the NDIS National Workforce Plan: 2021-2025. Consequently, government planning for the sector does not currently examine challenges for volunteering or plan measures to overcome them.

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 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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 2019.²⁹ Workforce plans must therefore ensure measures are taken to reinvigorate volunteering in the sector. This will require research into the causes of declining volunteer numbers, the design of appropriate supports for volunteer involving organisations to engage volunteers, and revisions to policies on the funding and administrative requirements for volunteering programs.

Volunteering should be incorporated into existing strategies for the sector, including the National Disability Strategy and the NDIS National Workforce Plan. Both must also acknowledge the differences in expectations, motivations, availability, and the type of work undertaken by volunteers compared to paid staff.

National Strategy for Volunteering

Work has recently commenced on a sector-led National Strategy for Volunteering, funded by the Department of Social Services and facilitated by Volunteering Australia. The National Strategy for

²⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2020C00392>

²⁷ https://csrm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/5/Volunteering_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic_-_April_2021.pdf

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ https://www.nds.org.au/images/State_of_the_Disability_Sector_Reports/SoTDS_2020.pdf

Volunteering will provide strategic direction for the sector and enable volunteering across Australia to be effective, inclusive, and sustainable.

It will provide a blueprint to support a reimagined volunteering ecosystem, and will be inclusive of the interests of volunteers, volunteering support services, and volunteer involving organisations across Australia. The National Strategy for Volunteering will be inclusive of the needs and goals of people with disability and volunteer involving organisations that provide services and programs for people with disability. However, it is only one piece of a larger puzzle that requires strategic consideration of the intersection between volunteering and disability.

Recommendations

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

- 1. Commission a Disability Services Workforce Census which collects data on volunteering in the sector.** As in the Aged Care Workforce Census 2020, this should include the number of volunteers and information on the kinds of voluntary work undertaken. In addition, information should be collected on volunteer-supported programs, including which organisations provide them, how they are funded, and what human resources are contributed to them.
- 2. Reconsider the funding model and administrative requirements for volunteer involving organisations under the NDIS.** In particular, the suitability of individual package funding for programs that engage volunteers should be reassessed, in consultation with organisations. Given the premise of volunteering as *time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain*, Volunteering Australia suggests that block funding under the ILC may be the more appropriate model for most volunteer-supported programs, as it ensures that organisations are funded to support volunteer management rather than being paid by participants to provide services delivered by volunteers. However, this will vary among organisations, which must be consulted directly regarding the appropriate model to ensure the efficacy and sustainability of their specific programs.
- 3. Include volunteers in ongoing workforce planning for the disability services sector.** This should include ensuring that volunteer-supported programs receive adequate resources under an appropriate funding model, that administrative requirements do not place unreasonable obligations on volunteers, and that volunteers are considered in ongoing decision-making in relation to the COVID-19 response.
- 4. Commission research on the contribution of volunteering to program outcomes in disability services.** Although program coordinators and participants consistently report that volunteers improve outcomes for participants, academic research on the relationship between volunteer involvement and the attainment of key program outcomes is scarce. Research with a national focus would be especially informative.

Conclusion

Volunteering creates opportunities, facilitates social inclusion, brings unique value to services, and connects people to their communities. In the face of ongoing challenges, the value of volunteers and volunteer-supported services in the disability services sector must be acknowledged, celebrated, and

Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect
and Exploitation of People with Disability

safeguarded. A lack of clear data on volunteering in the sector, complications surrounding the resourcing of volunteer-supported programs, and the ongoing challenges of COVID-19 necessitate more comprehensive national planning for volunteering in disability services. Ongoing work in the disability services sector must acknowledge and plan to support the involvement of volunteers, with the aim to preserve their unique contribution to the lives of people with disability.

Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect
and Exploitation of People with Disability

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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