

# Incoming Government Brief

June 2025



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## Overview

### Introduction

Volunteering is essential to the fabric of Australian society. It brings social, cultural, and economic benefits to the nation. Investing in the activities, resources and frameworks that sustain volunteering, while seeking to remove barriers to participation, will build on our strong history of volunteering in Australia. Federal responsibility for national volunteering policy and programs sits within the Australian Government's Social Services Portfolio and Volunteering Australia is the national peak body.

### About this Submission

This Incoming Government Brief (IGB) builds on our election platform [\*Volunteer Nation: Positive Impact, Strong Communities\*](#) to provide a broad overview of volunteering in Australia and ecosystem level considerations for the returned Government, while outlining key policy and advocacy areas and challenges. It also highlights some of Volunteering Australia's current engagement across Australian Government portfolios.

This brief was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with our Foundation Members, the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies.

The IGB will be provided to all relevant Ministers and agencies.

### Volunteering in Australia in 2025

Australia's communities and lifestyle are underpinned by the contributions of volunteers. Volunteers are an essential workforce, spanning major sectors, including aged care and disability care; community welfare; sports and the arts; crisis preparedness, response, and recovery; and environmental sustainability and protection.

Volunteering Australia defines volunteering as 'time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain'. This definition was introduced in 2015. Since then, it has been widely adopted across Australia and is consistent with international definitions. Importantly, this definition captures both 'formal' and 'informal' volunteering, i.e., it recognises that while many volunteers offer their time formally through organisations, others self-organise and volunteer informally in the community.

Around 6 million people volunteer formally in Australia, and millions more volunteer informally. Many people do both, and in April 2022 over half the population (57 per cent) had undertaken either informal or formal volunteering.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf> 14. Data is collected for formal volunteering with a 12 month reference period and for informal volunteering with a four week reference period.

Formal volunteering has been recovering since COVID-19 (from 24.2 per cent in April 2021 to 26.7 per cent in 2022 and 36.0 per cent in 2023).<sup>2</sup> In addition, 46.5 per cent of people volunteered informally in the 4 weeks leading up to April 2022.<sup>3</sup>

## Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteering empowers people to make a positive impact and leads to more inclusive and flourishing communities by offering people opportunities for civic engagement and social, economic, and cultural inclusion. It is a uniquely good indicator of community wellbeing as it captures social connectedness, physical and mental health, sense of purpose, and connection to place. It can also be a pathway to skills development and employment.

Participation in volunteering can play an important role in supporting good mental health, both in prevention and recovery. The mental health benefits of volunteering were acknowledged in the final report from the [Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health](#)<sup>4</sup> in November 2020.

Research indicates that volunteering generates social capital for both the giver and the recipient. High levels of social capital, in turn, contribute to enhancing quality of life, and providing informal support in times of stress.<sup>5</sup>

Volunteering reduces social isolation by keeping people connected to their communities. For example, according to a submission by Meals on Wheels in 2020, 76,000 volunteers prepare and deliver 10 million meals a year to more than 120,000 older people across regional, rural, and metropolitan Australia. Meal service visits not only cater to the nutritional needs of older people, but also combat loneliness by enabling social connection and encouraging contact with peers at community-based meal locations.<sup>6</sup>

Ensuring volunteering is inclusive is important to maximise the benefits. In particular, culturally and linguistically diverse and First Nations' communities must be considered in volunteering policy and outreach, to achieve inclusion and learn from differing concepts of volunteering, such as community giving.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Productivity Commission 2020, Mental Health, Report no. 95, Canberra available at <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report>

<sup>5</sup> Onyx, Jenny & Warburton, J. (2003). Volunteering and Health Among Older People: A Review. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*. 22. 10.1111/j.1741-6612.2003.tb00468.x.

<sup>6</sup> <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/submission/AWF.660.00126.0001.pdf>

## Data and Research Landscape

As the national peak body, one of Volunteering Australia's key roles is to advise on research and data to inform both its own evidence-based policy work and the work of the Australian Government and the ecosystem.

The volunteering data landscape is extensive and diverse, providing insights into volunteering in the general Australian population. The data landscape consists of government and sector-owned data, as well as data produced by research institutions, such as the Australian National University (ANU).

These datasets provide for analysis of volunteering trends over time and enable robust analysis of causal relationships when considered collectively as complimentary sources.

Volunteering Australia draws on a wide range of national authoritative data to inform its policy positions and recommendations. On Federal-level issues, it draws on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), particularly the General Social Survey (GSS)<sup>7</sup> and the Census<sup>8</sup>, as well as longitudinal data sets, the ANUpoll<sup>9</sup> series of surveys collected by the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods and the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA)<sup>10</sup> series of surveys collected by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research. We also use state and territory 'State of Volunteering' reports produced by the state or territory Volunteering Peak Bodies for more granular data, particularly in relation to volunteer managers.

Volunteering Australia works closely with organisations, such as the ABS and the Australian National University, on research and survey programs. For example, after lengthy positive consultation, the ABS has advised that it has made significant improvements to the voluntary work data module for the 2025 GSS. This important new data will be available in the first half of 2026 and invaluable to policy makers.

The Australian Government also uses volunteering data from the GSS as part of the Measuring What Matters Framework, again following lengthy positive consultation with Volunteering Australia.<sup>11</sup> Volunteering is one of 50 indicators under the Measuring What Matters Framework.

Volunteering Australia convenes the National Volunteer Research Network. With over 100 members, the network aims to facilitate the sharing of information and knowledge between researchers and members of the wider volunteering ecosystem across Australia.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/latest-release>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/census>

<sup>9</sup> <https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/surveys/anupoll>

<sup>10</sup> <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/hilda>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/measuring-what-matters/measuring-what-matters-themes-and-indicators> Theme: cohesion, dimension: social connection.

## A Strong Volunteering Ecosystem

Volunteering does not just happen; it requires investment. This section outlines priority actions to strengthen the infrastructure that enables the volunteering ecosystem to function efficiently, inclusively and sustainably, as set out in our election platform [Volunteer Nation: Positive Impact, Strong Communities](#).<sup>12</sup>

### Implementing the National Strategy for Volunteering

The [National Strategy for Volunteering \(2023 – 2033\)](#) is Australia's ten-year roadmap to make volunteering the heart of Australian communities. Ownership and responsibility for the National Strategy is shared across the entire ecosystem engaged in volunteering, including government and non-government organisations such as charities and the private sector. With continued support and coordination, the National Strategy will deliver a bright future for volunteering in Australia.

Volunteering Australia, with support from the Department of Social Services, led the development of the National Strategy through an award-winning<sup>13</sup> co-design process that saw participation from hundreds of stakeholders across the country. The National Strategy's focus on open participation and shared responsibility has been maintained through its first-year 'Establishment Phase' and the delivery of its first Action Plan.

The National Strategy for Volunteering is currently in its first [three-year Action Plan](#) phase, running to mid-2027. This phase will see the delivery of 22 actions (7 led by the Australian Government) that were co-designed to address priorities identified by the volunteering ecosystem. Other lead stakeholders include Volunteering Australia, state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies, researchers and the [Coalition of Support](#): a network of more than 200 volunteer involving organisations who have made a public commitment to implement the National Strategy. The Action Plan also provides opportunities for other stakeholders, including smaller groups and individual volunteers, to contribute to the implementation of the National Strategy.

Activities are not limited to the Action Plan. Many members of the volunteering ecosystem have taken action independently, using the National Strategy to achieve positive change within their organisation or community. This includes establishing new processes to improve recruitment and retention, forming new partnerships, and enhancing the role of volunteer managers.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-Australia-Election-Platform-2025.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> The National Strategy was recognised in Australia's International [Good Design Awards](#) for Excellence in Design and Innovation.

Additionally, many local, state and territory governments have developed volunteering strategies in alignment with the National Strategy. Following the upcoming release of a volunteering strategy for Tasmania, all jurisdictions except the Northern Territory will have active strategies at the state/territory and national level. This provides an unprecedented opportunity for positive outcomes for the volunteering ecosystem.

The National Strategy for Volunteering has also informed the development of other relevant strategies, such as the [Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint](#), state government disaster response strategies, and the work of the federal Jobs and Skills Council. Internationally, the National Strategy is well-regarded, with Canada and the United States both currently using it as a model to work towards. In recent research, the United Kingdom's government noted the National Strategy's value for money and that many "*saw Australia as leading the way in volunteering policy globally, with many citing the National Strategy for Volunteering 2022-2032 as evidence of this*".<sup>14</sup>

Volunteering Australia regularly engages with the Department of Social Services to discuss the National Strategy, its implementation and next steps. The Department and Volunteering Australia have several complementary roles in relation to the National Strategy for Volunteering, including being key advocates to their networks, membership of the National Strategy's oversight body (the Council), and serving as lead stakeholders in Action Plan 2024-2027.

Recently and prior to the 2025 Federal election the former Minister for Social Services, the Hon. Amanda Rishworth MP, approved funding for targeted activities for specific vulnerable priority groups that may face barriers to accessing the National Strategy for Volunteering.

Although the National Strategy is co-owned by many stakeholders, central coordination is required to support stakeholder uptake and engagement, evaluate the National Strategy's impact and outcomes, and produce key documents required for future phases.

Currently, overall resourcing for coordination and implementation is not funded beyond June 2025.

Without funding for a coordination role, the National Strategy risks losing the momentum, progress and positive reputation that has been achieved since its launch in 2023. By embracing, resourcing and fully implementing the National Strategy for Volunteering over its ten-year lifespan, there is an opportunity to sustain and build towards achieving the ecosystem's vision of volunteering being the heart of Australian communities.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/comparing-national-enabling-environments-for-volunteering/comparing-national-enabling-environments-for-volunteering>

## A Stable Funding Environment

Volunteering is not free. There are costs associated with recruiting, training, managing and supporting volunteers. A sustainable volunteering ecosystem therefore requires a funding environment that provides stable, ongoing support to address these costs. A stable funding environment, including for volunteering, is a key recommendation of the [Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint](#) launched in November 2024.

### Cost-of-living relief to volunteers

Financial pressures are a significant barrier to volunteering, especially among younger people. 25.5 per cent of people aged 18 to 34 years indicated ‘financial reasons’ as a reason they did not volunteer in 2022.<sup>15</sup> Just over half (54 per cent) of all volunteers incur out-of-pocket expenses through their volunteering role.<sup>16</sup>

Amid the current cost-of-living crisis, many people find it difficult to prioritise volunteering, or to afford the costs that can be associated with it. Volunteer involving organisations are also under significant financial strain, which affects their capacity to deliver services and safely and effectively engage their volunteers. At the same time, demand for volunteer run services such as food relief and community welfare – and therefore demand for volunteers – has increased.

As outlined in our election platform [Volunteer Nation: Positive Impact, Strong Communities](#), we recommend that the Government adapt and expand eligibility for the Volunteer Grants program managed by the Department of Social Services to better reflect the true costs of volunteering and the barrier to participation they impose. Volunteer Grants assist volunteer involving organisations with some of the costs associated with volunteering, providing a very large number of small grants every year that make a big difference to recipients. We would like to see funding categories expanded to include insurance, licenses and certification, volunteer management salaries and necessary consumables that volunteers use to perform their roles. In addition, we propose more forms of volunteer reimbursement than have previously been funded, addressing the out-of-pocket expenses incurred by volunteers.

The possibility of alleviating the costs associated with volunteering through the tax and transfer system warrants further exploration, even though it has been considered in a number of recent reviews. While the final report from the [Productivity Commission Inquiry into Philanthropy](#) preferred government grants over tax incentives to support volunteers with the costs incurred from their volunteer roles,<sup>17</sup> tax deductions for volunteering-related expenses may be an effective way to support volunteers in particular types of organisations or roles. For example,

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<sup>15</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 38

<sup>16</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective> 62. Of these, only 14.5 per cent were reimbursed in full and 13.0 per cent were reimbursed in part while 41.0 per cent indicated that reimbursement was not available or offered.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/philanthropy/report/philanthropy.pdf>, 147



the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience recently recommended tax deductions for training costs incurred by volunteers in State Emergency and Rural Bushfire Services, where they are not covered by the host organisation.<sup>18</sup>

### Increase funding for the Volunteer Management Activity

The Volunteer Management Activity (VMA), managed by the Department of Social Services, aims to increase opportunities for people to participate in the social and economic life of their broader community through volunteering. The VMA focuses on the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies developing and implementing strategies to build the capacity of volunteer involving organisations, through online volunteer management services, and breaking down barriers to volunteering for identified priority groups.

Current grant agreements with the state and territory Volunteer Peak Bodies are due to expire in mid-2026 and a review of the VMA is underway. We look forward to engaging on the future of this important program for the ecosystem.

We are also seeking increased investment in the VMA, as demand has outpaced funding and the depth and breadth of priority groups is not matched by the current funding envelope.

### Fund the Full Cost of Quality Service Delivery

The Productivity Commission [Future Foundations for Giving](#) report notes that organisations engaging volunteers can achieve “better and more valued outcomes at lower cost compared with government provision”.<sup>19</sup> To ensure grant agreements reflect the real cost of delivering quality services, costs associated with engaging volunteers must be covered under grant agreements in all portfolios. This means ensuring that management, equipment, administration, and other costs associated with engaging volunteers are fully covered, that grant agreements allow organisations to fund volunteer management roles, and that indexation keeps pace with increases in the costs of service delivery.

Volunteering Australia welcomes the [Community Sector Grants Engagement Framework](#) released in March 2025 by the former Minister for Social Services, the Hon. Amanda Rishworth MP and the Minister for Finance, Senator the Hon. Katy Gallagher.<sup>20</sup> In particular, we look forward to action under Pillar 2 ‘Greater certainty and sufficiency of funding’ under which ‘the Australian Public Service is committed to consideration of indexation, longer-term grant agreements, cost of delivering quality services and provision of earlier notification for renewal/cessation of grants when designing grant activities...’.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>[https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/RB000053/toc\\_pdf/BootsonthegroundRaisingresilience.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/RB000053/toc_pdf/BootsonthegroundRaisingresilience.pdf), xiii

<sup>19</sup><https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/philanthropy/report/philanthropy.pdf>, 5

<sup>20</sup><https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/17836>

<sup>21</sup><https://www.dss.gov.au/system/files/documents/2025-02/community-sector-grants-engagement-final.pdf>,

## Strengthening Charities and Non-profits

The charities sector employs 1.54 million people (or 10.7 per cent of the Australian workforce) and engages nearly 3.77 million volunteers.<sup>22</sup> More than half of all charities (52%) are entirely volunteer-run and operate without any paid staff.<sup>23</sup>

As part of the Government's (2022 election) commitment to strengthening the community sector, the CEO of Volunteering Australia was a member of the Blueprint Expert Reference Group which oversaw the development of the [Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint](#) (NFP Blueprint). Volunteering Australia supports an early response from the Government and the implementation of the NFP Blueprint in full. The implementation of the National Strategy for Volunteering is a key initiative of the NFP Blueprint.<sup>24</sup> The NFP Blueprint also calls on the Australian Government to invest in volunteer leadership and management and in volunteering infrastructure and knowledge systems that support volunteers and volunteer-based organisations across Australia.<sup>25</sup>

Volunteering was also included in the scope of the Productivity Commission inquiry into philanthropic giving. The final report, [Future Foundations for Giving](#), includes a number of recommendations on volunteering.

Critically, it requires governments at all levels to explicitly consider the effects on volunteers when designing policies and programs (7.7) and for the ABS to improve the usefulness of public information sources on volunteering (9.4).<sup>26</sup>

More broadly, across both these processes, the single most important reform sought by the NFP sector is a simpler, deductible gift recipient (DGR) system. The Productivity Commission estimates this would result in around 6,000 additional volunteer-run charities having easier access to DGR status, helping them to meet operating costs, including the costs associated with volunteering.

Volunteering Australia looks forward to supporting and informing the implementation of these recommendations.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/reports/australian-charities-report-11th-edition> 19 It should be noted that the figure of 3.77 million volunteers does not reflect the total number of individual volunteers across Australia. This is because people may volunteer for more than one charity, and many more people volunteer for not-profits that are not charities – for example, those who volunteer for local sporting clubs.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Initiative 12 is: 'Support the priorities of the co-designed National Strategy for Volunteering (NSV) and government and NFP involvement in the development of its action plans.'  
<https://www.dss.gov.au/system/files/documents/2024-11/d24-1528640-not-profit-sector-development-blueprint-web-accessible.pdf>, 16

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/philanthropy/report> 29, 32

## Reform Volunteer Insurance

Insurance is a particular area of concern for the volunteering ecosystem and the charities and not-for-profits that rely on engaging volunteers.

Organisations owe volunteers a duty of care to provide a safe workplace, either under statutory work health and safety provisions or under the common law.<sup>27</sup> However, volunteers are not typically covered by workers compensation<sup>28</sup> so an organisation needs to take out volunteer personal accident insurance to cover volunteers when they suffer injuries in their role. It is not compulsory to take out this type of insurance and an alarming one in four organisations reported they did not provide insurance to their volunteers,<sup>29</sup> with cost being one reason this occurs.

Furthermore, such insurance typically does not cover volunteers for illness acquired in their role and legally cannot cover out of pocket expenses for Medicare-related costs, for example, where there is a gap.<sup>30</sup> The range of insurance products organisations may need to hold<sup>31</sup> coupled with rises in premiums mean many community organisations are struggling to cover insurance costs.

Building on early conversations led by Assistant Minister for Charities, Andrew Leigh, in November 2024, Volunteering Australia urges the Australian Government to open discussions and work with industry and the sector towards a model for more consistent and affordable volunteer insurance in Australia that better protects volunteers in the course of their duties.

This is a timely issue with several states already launching inquiries into insurance issues in the sector and we look forward to taking part in much needed Federal leadership on this challenge.

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<sup>27</sup> [https://content.nfplaw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Part-4-NVG-Volunteer-safety-with-annexures.pdf?\\_ga=2.7580402.1383132504.1745465344-1639385776.1745465344](https://content.nfplaw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Part-4-NVG-Volunteer-safety-with-annexures.pdf?_ga=2.7580402.1383132504.1745465344-1639385776.1745465344) 21

<sup>28</sup> Unless they are a part of special prescribed class in that jurisdiction's legislation. Definitions vary between jurisdictions. For example, in NSW only volunteers who are emergency service workers, volunteer firefighters and volunteer ambulance are covered by workers compensation.

<sup>29</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Organisation-Perspective.pdf> 31

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.volunteeringwa.org.au/assets/advocacy-policy/volunteers-in-western-australia-and-insurance-gaps.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> According to Aon, in addition to personal accident insurance for volunteers, volunteer involving organisations may need to hold public liability insurance, directors' and officers' liability insurance, professional indemnity insurance, building and contents, occupiers, and fraud insurance, motor vehicle insurance and cyber insurance. <https://www.aondirect.com.au/aon-partners/volunteering-australia>

## Key Policy and Advocacy Areas

Volunteering reaches almost all areas of public policy and the remit of Volunteering Australia is wide. This section highlights and provides background to key policy areas where work or advocacy is already underway.

### Social Services

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for the volunteering ecosystem and the Social Services Portfolio has the lead on volunteering for the Australian Government. However, only one fifth of Australia's formal volunteers are involved in community services, welfare, and homelessness<sup>32</sup>, meaning volunteering is highly relevant to a number of other portfolios. That is why the Department of Social Services is responsible for an action under the National Strategy for Volunteering to "Scope a whole of Australian Government approach to volunteering".<sup>33</sup> Implementing this action as a matter of priority is crucial to the volunteering ecosystem and to ensuring that issues such as insurance and child safe volunteering that affect multiple sectors are handled in a coordinated and consistent fashion.

The Department of Social Services funds Volunteering Australia as a peak body under the Families and Communities Service Improvement activity, to provide policy advice, research and extensive outreach to the sector. In this capacity the CEO of Volunteering Australia is also a member of the Community Services Advisory Group.

Volunteering Australia receives funding each year to deliver National Volunteer Week (NVW) activities, including this year a function hosted by our patron the Governor-General at Government House and a highly successful NVW communication campaign. Project funding has enabled Volunteering Australia to create the successful Volunteering Gateway website, a one stop shop for resources to assist volunteer involving organisations and volunteer managers. The Department has also periodically provided funding to support the National Volunteering Conference.

The Government provided \$1.2m to support the development and initial implementation of the National Strategy for Volunteering and the first Action Plan. Volunteering Australia has used this money to deliver nation-wide co-design of the first Action Plan, promote the Strategy widely, and provide secretariat support for governance and working groups. The greatest impact has been our engagement with a wide range of private sector, government and non-government organisations, with over 200 joining the Coalition of Support for the Strategy. These supporters are providing in-kind support to implement the Strategy in big and small ways. Volunteering

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<sup>32</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf> 42

<sup>33</sup> Action 14 [https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/NSV\\_Action-Plan-2024-2027.pdf](https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/NSV_Action-Plan-2024-2027.pdf) 24

Australia has recently received a \$0.6m grant over three years for targeted engagement, as mentioned in the National Strategy section previously.

The Department is also responsible for the two main volunteering programs, Volunteer Grants and the Volunteer Management Activity. The Government has provided transition funding to Volunteer Resource Centres (VRCs), administered by the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies, for four years with this funding ceasing in June 2026.

Volunteering Australia also engages on wider priorities of the Department where volunteering is a key element. For example, community sector reform, the [Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint](#) and doubling philanthropic giving by 2030. In addition, volunteers are a crucial part of the operating model for most not-for-profits delivering government services, including those delivering the Financial Wellbeing and Capability programs in the Social Services Portfolio.<sup>34</sup> Finally, volunteering and support for the local volunteering infrastructure should also be considered in place-based initiatives such as Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment.

Any major strategy developed by the Department across any area of social policy should consider the role of volunteers and volunteering, both as a work force and as a means for participation and inclusion in society.

## Child Safe Volunteering

The [National Principles for Child Safe Organisations](#) set out a nationally consistent approach to promoting a culture of child safety and wellbeing within organisations. The ten principles give effect to the child safe standards recommended by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Royal Commission) and bring attention to general child safety and wellbeing issues.<sup>35</sup>

In 2022, 32.5 per cent of formal volunteers identified that their volunteering primarily aimed to assist children and youth.<sup>36</sup> This suggests an estimated 2.2 million people may volunteer with children and young people in Australia, from sporting to health settings.<sup>37</sup>

Principle 7 emphasises the importance of information, ongoing education and training for staff and volunteers.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See our Submission to the Review of Financial Wellbeing and Capability programs from February 2024 <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/policy/submissions/>

<sup>35</sup> [https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final\\_report\\_-\\_recommendations.pdf](https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_recommendations.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 46

<sup>37</sup> Estimate based on a population of 25,422,788 as reported in the 2021 Census. Note: no weighting of survey responses was applied in calculating this figure.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.childsafety.gov.au/system/files/2024-04/national-principles-for-child-safe-organisations.PDF>

Volunteering Australia works closely with the National Office for Child Safety (NoCS) within the Attorney-General's Department on this issue and through membership of its Child Safe Sectors Leadership Group and related fora.

The importance of considering volunteering in the work of NoCS as it implements the principles should not be underestimated and Child Safe Volunteering should be listed as a separate action in the next three-year action plan with a view to supporting the ecosystem overall to implement these principles in practice.

## Care and Support Economy

Care and support work is a major component of the Australian economy and volunteers are critical to all sectors within it. The Health Care and Social Assistance industry is Australia's largest by employment, accounting for 15.8 per cent of Australia's total workforce in February 2025.<sup>39</sup> Data collected as part of the Volunteering in Australia research in 2022 found that nearly 600,000 people volunteered in aged care organisations and around 320,000 volunteered in disability organisations, with health services (hospitals etc), veterans services, mental health and other sub-sectors taking these numbers well beyond 1.5 million volunteers.

The sustainability and productivity of the care and support economy is vital to the wellbeing and quality of life of Australians.

## Health

Volunteers are a critical part of the health workforce. Some 570,000 volunteers are engaged in health settings from hospital emergency rooms and Intensive Care Units to health promotion and education programs, with advocacy and charitable work related to medical research and disease and condition-based initiatives (such as the National Breast Cancer Foundation and Parkinsons Australia) representing a sizable proportion of the national charities sector. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a decline in health-related volunteering, particularly in formal settings, and recovery in this area has yet to stabilise.

Understanding the specific motivations, needs, and barriers related to health volunteering is crucial for fostering a thriving health sector, particularly in the continued wake of the pandemic's impact and with the added challenge of cost-of-living barriers.

We have previously proposed a mapping and enabling initiative focused on targeted and scalable capacity building in health-related volunteering, modelled on and leveraging the Department of Health and Aged Care's successful activities in aged care volunteering and related reforms. This is in line with the Australian Government's commitment towards a whole of Australian Government approach to volunteering in public policy as outlined in the National

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<sup>39</sup> ABS, *Labour Force Survey, Detailed, February 2025, Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) trend data*.  
<https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/occupation-and-industry-profiles/industries/health-care-and-social-assistance#:~:text=Health%20Care%20and%20Social%20Assistance%20is%20the%20largest,lower%20than%20all%20industries%20median%20earnings%20of%20%241%2C700>.

Strategy for Volunteering's [first Action Plan](#). While Volunteering Australia has undertaken advocacy in this space, it has not been progressed.

The overall policy rationale of our effort in this sector is to enhance participation in health-focused volunteering, contributing directly to improved community health outcomes.

### Mental Health

The contribution of volunteers in the mental health workforce, such as Lifeline Australia which alone engages 10,000 volunteers, needs to be better understood and strategically considered in workforce planning and development. The National Mental Health Workforce Strategy Taskforce has acknowledged the valuable role of volunteers in the mental health workforce, and that volunteering should be supported as part of the implementation of the National Mental Health Workforce Strategy 2022-2032.<sup>40</sup> In line with the recent call from the House of Representatives Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, volunteers should be explicitly included in strategic initiatives.<sup>41</sup>

Volunteers also need to be included in proposed data collection efforts for the sector. Key service areas such as suicide prevention, targeting loneliness and social isolation, mental health education and peer support need to acknowledge and plan for the involvement of volunteers in service delivery.

### Aged Care

Volunteers are an essential, but distinct component of Australia's aged care workforce, with nearly 600,000 volunteers engaged in the sector across Australia. We welcome the considered inclusion of volunteers across the range of aged care reforms currently being implemented by the Australian Government, the most significant of which come into effect on 1 November 2025.

The [Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety](#) recommended the Australian Government develop a new Aged Care Act and made a specific recommendation (recommendation 44) about volunteering, setting out how the Government should promote volunteers and volunteering in aged care to support older people to live meaningful and dignified lives.

The new Aged Care Act sets out the rules for the Australian Government-funded aged care system and includes services delivered to older people in their homes, in community settings and in residential care.

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/national-mental-health-workforce-strategy-2022-2032.pdf>, 21

<sup>41</sup> [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Former\\_Committees/Mental\\_Health\\_and\\_Suicide\\_Prevention/MHSP/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Former_Committees/Mental_Health_and_Suicide_Prevention/MHSP/Report)



We have worked with the Australian Government, through the Department of Health and Aged Care, both directly and through the formal submission process<sup>42</sup> to represent the needs of the volunteering ecosystem on these reforms, with positive outcomes.

The closely linked model for regulating aged care, which we have previously advised on, provides a risk-proportionate approach to key issues affecting volunteering and has been the subject of extensive consultation.

Volunteering Australia continues to work closely with the Department of Health and Aged Care in the lead-up to the initiation of the new laws and regulations, with regular meetings, information sharing and ecosystem feedback sought.

Critically, volunteers have been recognised in the legislation, and we continue to advocate for both consideration of the volunteer workforce, differentiation between paid and volunteer roles and a risk-proportionate approach to regulation.

### Disability

The Volunteering in Australia 2022 research found that 4.7 per cent of volunteers were engaged by organisations in the disability sector.<sup>43</sup> This equates to around 320,000 volunteers, who perform a broad range of roles across the disability services landscape. 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 promoting genuine friendship, providing personalised support, creating opportunities for community engagement, and facilitating the extension of program reach.<sup>44</sup> While volunteers are acknowledged as workers by the NDIS Commission, they are overlooked in key workforce planning initiatives for the sector, such as the NDIS National Workforce Plan: 2021-2025.

There are many similarities with the Aged Care sector, meaning volunteers must be considered in any workforce planning, as well as initiatives across the care economy.

Participation in volunteering can also play an important role in the lives of people with disability, offering opportunities for social, economic, and cultural inclusion. According to the GSS, 26.0 per cent of people with disability volunteered formally in 2020.<sup>45</sup> This is slightly higher than the general population of people in Australia aged 15 years and over, of which 24.8 per cent volunteered formally in 2020 according to the GSS.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> All our submissions are available at <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/policy/submissions/#199-199-2023-p1>

<sup>43</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 42

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.interchange.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Value-Added-Volunteer-Supported-Services-and-the-Challenge-of-the-NDIS.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/latest-release> Table 3.3

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*



The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability includes many positive stories of the benefits of volunteering and the impact that people with disability have on their communities as volunteers. However, it also shows that when appropriate volunteering roles and relevant supports to transition into paid work are not available, people with disability can feel ‘stuck’ in volunteering, leading to poor experiences.<sup>47</sup> It is essential to ensure that volunteering is accessible to people with disability and empowers people to contribute to their communities on their own terms. For example, Volunteering ACT receives funding from the Department of Social Services for the Inclusive Volunteering Program delivered in consortium with the volunteering peak bodies in NSW and Tasmania.<sup>48</sup>

## Emergency Management

There is a myriad of ways in which people act in a voluntary capacity during crises, ranging from highly formalised roles (such as volunteers in State and Territory Emergency or Fire Services) to informal volunteering activity that occurs spontaneously in the community.

The majority of personnel in State and Territory Emergency Services are volunteers. In 2023-24 there were 24,357 emergency services volunteers and 3,082 paid staff nationally.<sup>49</sup> In fire services organisations, nationally, the numbers of volunteer personnel (both firefighters and support staff) have decreased by 14.3 per cent between 2014-15 and 2023-24.<sup>50</sup> The Fire and Emergency Services Workforce Plan 2024, developed by Public Skills Australia<sup>51</sup>, highlights challenges recruiting, retaining, and training volunteers in emergency management, and that the increasing frequency and severity of disasters puts greater strain on existing volunteers. A proposed National Volunteer Incentive Scheme that aims to address these issues was also recently considered by the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee and Volunteering Australia the Volunteering Peak Bodies made a [Submission on the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme](#) in February 2025.

Volunteering in a disaster relief scenario requires deliberate and ongoing strategic consideration, underpinned by adequate resourcing. National oversight and coordination of volunteers during national crises in which Commonwealth capabilities are engaged is being improved.

Volunteering Australia regularly takes part in various National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) taskforces and activities, such as extreme weather preparedness briefings, and the recent NEMA Exercise Convergence. Volunteering Australia took part in the exercise with approximately 350 participants from all levels of government, emergency services, charities and

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<sup>47</sup> [https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2023-09/Final%20Report%20-%20Volume%201%2C%20Voices%20of%20people%20with%20disability%20-%20Book%201\\_0.pdf](https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2023-09/Final%20Report%20-%20Volume%201%2C%20Voices%20of%20people%20with%20disability%20-%20Book%201_0.pdf) , 421

<sup>48</sup> Under the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Program.

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2025/emergency-management/rogs-2025-partd-overview-and-sections.pdf> 9

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*

<sup>51</sup> <https://publicskillsaustralia.org.au/fire-and-emergency-services>

volunteering involving organisations, critical infrastructure, supermarkets, health, telecommunications, animal welfare, welfare and logistics to work together to ensure all response systems are integrated and identify gaps for improvement.

Volunteering Australia is also a member of the National Coordination Group (NCG) which provides advice to the Minister for Social Services on Emergency Relief, Food Relief and Financial Counselling in response to cost-of-living pressures and natural disasters.

### National Volunteer Passport

Volunteering Australia has worked with NEMA on the barriers posed by credentialing and screening processes that vary between jurisdictions and are often not portable between them. One option NEMA is exploring is a National Volunteer Passport. The measure is also sought and supported in our election platform [\*Volunteer Nation: Positive Impact, Strong Communities\*](#).

Screening and credentialing requirements can be complicated and burdensome for volunteers who work across borders and for organisations that operate in more than one state or territory and have to manage different processes and criteria for their volunteers in different locations. In some states, volunteers are required to pay for their screening checks, and application processes are not always accessible or designed with volunteer applicants in mind.

Emergency services volunteers are not the only type of volunteers that may work across jurisdictions in a disaster, and while crisis situations highlight the impact of this issue on getting volunteers to where they are needed quickly, other sectors and organisations are also impacted.

Development of a National Volunteer Passport would need to take into account existing state and territory solutions in this space and draw on state and territory platforms to ameliorate jurisdictional differences.

Coordination between different volunteer credentialing projects at both a federal and state/territory level is essential to avoid unintended consequences and ensure compatibility. Ideally any solution would also be fit for purpose for all volunteering areas over time.

Progress on this initiative has stalled and we look forward to working with the Australian Government towards a solution.

### Protecting the environment and addressing climate change

The challenges presented by climate change and environmental issues require critical investment in prevention, education and resilience measures. Volunteers can and will play a leading role in this effort. They are already the backbone of environmental protection and action in Australia.

Volunteers are also at the heart of emergency response to climate-related extreme weather events for Australian communities, increasingly called on to react to the impacts of climate change and support community and environmental recovery. Climate change disproportionately affects low-income, vulnerable and minority groups and regional and remote communities,

including First Nations' communities. The opportunity to better align and grow this segment of Australian volunteering is significant. The 2022 Volunteering in Australia research found that 7.0 per cent of formal volunteers (around 475,000 people) are engaged in 'Environment' organisations in Australia.<sup>52</sup> However, interest in volunteering for environmental organisations was very high among non-volunteers, with 23.0 per cent of those who did not volunteer indicating that they would be interested in doing so for environmental organisations in the future – the second highest of any volunteering cause.<sup>53</sup>

The gap between action and interest continues to present a timely opportunity to engage and support not only current environmental volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, but to galvanise those with intent or interest in participating.

Volunteering Australia is also a foundation member of the COP31 Collaboration Group (Conference of the Parties, UNFCCC meeting) which met on 27 May 2025 with executives from the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water for an update and workshop on the proposed COP31 approach. We are engaged with COP31 on three levels: supporting broad community and community-sector inclusion, to amplify social license around climate change; to ensure volunteering and volunteers are considered in and engaged on climate policies and climate events that affect them (in adaption, preparedness, action or disaster response); and on the operational volunteer aspects of the event itself.

If Australia and the Pacific host the meeting, the event will be the largest international meeting Australia has ever held with some 85,000 delegates and 150 nations represented. Australia would also hold the Presidency which allows for a year of climate leadership and program implementation. Volunteers will be critical to the COP31's delivery and legacy.

## Sport

Volunteers are the backbone of sport in Australia, underpinning everything from local community clubs to high-performance sport on the international stage. According to the Australian Sports Commission's (ASC) AusPlay data, in 2022 an estimated 3.1 million Australians volunteered in sport.<sup>54</sup> These contributions not only sustain Australian sport in all its iterations, but also foster social cohesion, community identity, and population-wide health and wellbeing.

Volunteering is formally recognised in the [Sport Horizon: National Sport Strategy 2024 – 2034](#) as a cross-cutting enabler across all six strategic priorities. It is also essential to the success of other national frameworks, including [2032+ Australia's High Performance Sport Strategy](#) and [PlayWell Australia's Sport Participation Strategy](#). Without sustained and strategic investment in sport

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<sup>52</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 42; Estimate based on a population of 25,422,788 as reported in the 2021 Census. Note: no weighting of survey responses was applied in calculating this figure.

<sup>53</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 43

<sup>54</sup> [AusPlay Data Portal: Non-playing roles](#), Australian Sports Commission.

volunteering, these national sporting strategies are at risk. In response to longstanding challenges in sport volunteer recruitment, retention, and support, the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) developed and launched the [Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan 2022 – 2026](#) (SVCAP). Now in its third year, the SVCAP sets out a shared agenda to make sport volunteering more visible, accessible, supported, and sustainable. It reflects increasing recognition that without volunteers, sport delivery at all levels would be at significant risk in the lead up to the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games and beyond.

The Australian Sports Commission leads the implementation of the SVCAP, which is supported by a [Sport Volunteer Coalition](#) – a group of key stakeholders from across the sport and volunteering sectors. Volunteering Australia is a core member of the Sport Volunteer Coalition and has an active Memorandum of Understanding with the ASC. This partnership facilitates strategic alignment between the SVCAP and the National Strategy for Volunteering and enables coordinated cross-sector initiatives (e.g. knowledge-sharing, research alignment, and joint communications).

Volunteering Australia welcomes the opportunity to continue supporting the Australian Government’s vision for a thriving sport ecosystem and a strong sport volunteer workforce.

## Youth

Young Australians are a key volunteer cohort. Young people were disproportionately affected by the impacts of COVID-19 and similarly by current cost-of-living issues. While the rate of volunteering among young people decreased significantly at the start of the pandemic and has been slower to recover<sup>55</sup> it is important to note that there is very little difference in volunteering rates by age for those under 55 years of age, with 25 per cent of 18-24 year olds volunteering.<sup>56</sup>

There are many benefits to young people volunteering. Research demonstrates that volunteering can provide a protective effect against poor mental health.<sup>57</sup> Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children suggests that if by age 13 a young person was involved in volunteering, the odds of having ‘clinical levels’ of emotional symptoms two years later were reduced by approximately 28 per cent.<sup>58</sup> Volunteering can provide meaningful activity for young people when they are unemployed and help them to develop skills and capabilities that can support a pathway to employment. However, young people can also be more at risk of exploitation regarding requests for them to take on unpaid work through inappropriate placements being promoted as volunteer placements and unpaid internships. The Department

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<sup>55</sup> [volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-Australia-Key-Volunteering-Statistics-2024-Update.pdf](https://volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-Australia-Key-Volunteering-Statistics-2024-Update.pdf), 13-14.

<sup>56</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 21.

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Evidence-Insights-Volunteering-and-mental.health-Final.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> <https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-05/lsac-snapshot-9-prosocial-behaviours-and-mental-health.pdf>

of Social Services is delivering Action 9 under the National Strategy for Volunteering's First Action Plan. The Volunteering Awareness campaign, *Hanging Out to Help Out*, aims to raise awareness, interest and consideration of volunteering among young people 15-18 years of age.<sup>59</sup> Through volunteering, young people can make a positive impact on the community, meet new people, and develop professional skills and experience to add to their resume. The volunteering awareness campaign launched on 20 October 2024 and is due to continue until 30 June 2025. The Department reports that the campaign materials are performing well across all channels, with 3,413 applications from 2,399 applicants for volunteer roles (noting the aim of the campaign was to raise awareness, not to raise uptake of volunteer roles).<sup>60</sup>

## Workforce, skills and employment

Volunteering is valuable both as a pathway to employment and as a meaningful activity in its own right. Under the mutual obligations system, certain categories of jobseeker recipients can undertake voluntary work to meet their obligations in full or in part. Volunteering can provide the opportunity for people to learn new skills and gain experience or to put their existing skills to use in a new way. Given this, volunteering should be included in the development of the proposed national skills passport. This would allow the skills and credentials of volunteers to be recognised and applied to both voluntary and paid roles, and to transfer between organisations and across jurisdictions. In addition, the volunteering ecosystem should be consulted and considered in workforce and relevant employment policies, especially where unintended consequences could result or volunteering provides an enabling force in a sector.

## The Way Forward

The Australian Government is a critical enabling partner within and for the volunteering ecosystem, providing the policy settings, laws, consultation, investment and sustainability that volunteering, volunteers and the myriad organisations that rely on them require to thrive.

As outlined in our election platform [Volunteer Nation: Positive Impact, Strong Communities](#), valuing volunteering means more than just holding volunteers in high regard or speaking about the importance of their contribution. It also means more than reducing volunteering to an economic valuation. Genuinely valuing volunteering requires action to support it, including recognition of its contribution to cohesive communities and to essential services that would otherwise not be delivered.

We look forward to working with the returned Government to sustain and build our volunteer nation.

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<sup>59</sup> <https://www.dss.gov.au/volunteering/site/index.html>

<sup>60</sup> [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/estimate/28748/toc\\_pdf/Community%20Affairs%20Legislation%20Committee%202025%2002%2027%20Official.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22committees/estimate/28748/0000%22,77](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/estimate/28748/toc_pdf/Community%20Affairs%20Legislation%20Committee%202025%2002%2027%20Official.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22committees/estimate/28748/0000%22,77).

## Authorisation

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

A blue ink signature, likely of Mr Mark Pearce, written in a cursive style.

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. Volunteering Australia's mission is to support a thriving volunteering ecosystem in Australia by promoting and advocating for volunteering and providing leadership at a national level.

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.

Our vision is for a future where volunteering is the heart of Australian communities. This vision was co-designed with thousands of people from across Australia during the development of the National Strategy for Volunteering.

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