

Submission on the Future of Supported Employment Discussion Paper

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Overview

Volunteering offers opportunities for social, economic, and cultural participation, facilitates pathways into the paid workforce, and plays a key role in disability advocacy in Australia. Volunteering is a demonstrated pathway to employment, but barriers to volunteering for people with disability remain in many volunteer involving organisations. Further, services that connect people to volunteer roles can be crucial to facilitating meaningful and sustainable volunteer placements. The role of volunteers in disability advocacy is recognised in the National Disability Advocacy Framework 2023-2025,¹ and many organisations funded under the National Disability Advocacy Program engage volunteers to support their advocacy services.

The proposed initiatives to support the future of supported employment should explicitly recognise and support volunteering as a pathway to employment and as a crucial resource for disability advocacy. Volunteering Australia makes the following recommendations on the design of the new supported employment initiatives:

1. Recognise the role of volunteering in the future of supported employment.
2. Support volunteer involving organisations to better engage volunteers with disability through the Structural Adjustment Fund. This funding should be available for programs that connect people with disability to tailored and meaningful volunteering opportunities, and for volunteer involving organisations to improve access and inclusion practices.
3. Expand data collection and evaluation methods to emphasise the quality and sustainability of volunteering and employment placements.
4. Include explicit resourcing for volunteering under the Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program, in line with the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033).

Introduction

About the Future of Supported Employment funding package

As part of the 2023-24 Budget the Australian Government announced a package of measures relating to supported employment that seek to:

- create ongoing employment opportunities for people with disability with high support needs
- assist the supported employment sector to evolve, and
- provide people with disability with high support needs, their families and carers with access to greater advocacy and information in order to build confidence and understanding about rights and options at work.

This investment includes six initiatives focused on supported employment:

- Structural Adjustment Fund

¹ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2023/national-disability-advocacy-framework-2023-2025-pdf.pdf, 3

- Supporting organisations to transition to the new Supported Employment Services Award
- Consulting on a disability business procurement policy
- Evaluation of supported employment initiatives and trials
- Disability employment expos
- Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program

About this submission

This submission highlights the role of volunteering in the disability employment support system, and recommends that volunteering be recognised and funded under two of the proposed initiatives, namely the Structural Adjustment Fund and the Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program.

The submission complements previous submissions made by Volunteering Australia, in partnership with the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies, on volunteering and people with disability, the NDIS, and disability services, including:

- [Submission to the NDIS General Issues Inquiry](#)
- [Submission on the National Disability Advocacy 2022-2025](#)
- [First Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability - Response to the Issues paper on Promoting Inclusion](#)
- [Second Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability](#)
- [Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme on the NDIS National Workforce Plan: 2021-2025](#)
- [Submission to the consultation on the National Disability Employment Strategy](#)
- [Submission to the development of the National Disability Strategy](#)
- [Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme on the Market Readiness of the NDIS](#)
- [Response on the National Disability Insurance Scheme \(NDIS\) Costs](#)
- [Response to the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme Amendment \(Quality and Safeguards Commission and Other Measures\) Bill 2017](#)
- [Submission to the ILC Commissioning Framework Consultation](#)

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

Volunteering in the disability sector

Volunteers and the organisations that engage them contribute extensively to the disability services landscape. The latest national data on volunteering in Australia, collected as part of the Volunteering in Australia 2022 research, found that 4.7 per cent of volunteers were engaged by organisations in

the disability sector.² This equates to around 319,000 volunteers across Australia,³ who 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.⁴ Many of these functions complement and support the work of paid staff.

Volunteering as a pathway to employment

The capacity of volunteering to facilitate pathways into paid employment is well established. Undertaking voluntary work can equip 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.⁵ Further, 92 per cent of employers identified that relevant volunteering experience gave a candidate an advantage in job interviews.⁶ Volunteering also creates opportunities to make new connections and to maintain existing skills while searching for paid work. A quantitative study from the US found that people who volunteered were 27 per cent more likely to find employment than those who did not volunteer.⁷

The potential of volunteering to lead to paid work makes it an important option for people seeking employment, including people with disability. In qualitative research, people with disability have indicated that their volunteering helped them to build personal skills, access networking opportunities, and find paid roles.⁸

Despite its benefits, people with disability often face significant barriers to engaging in meaningful volunteering. Prior research has indicated that people with physical disability are less likely than those without disability to engage in formal volunteering and are less likely to be connected to opportunities that encourage them to apply for voluntary roles.⁹ While recent data indicates that people with disability volunteer at a similar rate to people without disability,¹⁰ interview research

² <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 42

³ Based on the count of the Australian population reported in the 2021 Census; <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/population-census/2021>

⁴ <https://www.interchange.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Value-Added-Volunteer-Supported-Services-and-the-Challenge-of-the-NDIS.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.seek.com.au/career-advice/article/3-reasons-volunteering-can-put-you-ahead-of-the-pack>

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ https://americorps.gov/sites/default/files/evidenceexchange/FR_2013_VolunteeringasaPathwaytoEmployment_1.pdf

⁸ Galit Yanay-Ventura, ““Nothing About Us Without Us” in Volunteerism Too: Volunteering Among People with Disabilities,” *Voluntas* 30, no. 1 (2018): 147,163, doi:10.1007/s11266-018-0026-7

⁹ Carrie L. Shandra, “Disability and social participation: The case of formal and informal volunteering,” *Social Science Research* 68 (November 2017): 195-213, doi: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2017.02.006

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics (June 2021) ‘Table 3.3: Persons aged 15 years and over, Social Experiences—By Sex and Health Characteristics, proportion of persons’ [data set], *General Social Survey 2020*,

has found that low expectations from society and from organisations often prevent people with disability from engaging in meaningful volunteering roles.¹¹ Volunteers with disability may also be underestimated by organisations and assigned jobs well below their capability.¹² This was emphasised as a key determinant of volunteer dissatisfaction by the lived experience Project Advisory Group for the Victoria ALIVE project, a program by Volunteering Victoria which aimed to improve disability inclusion in the volunteering community sector.¹³ As a consequence of this, volunteers with disability may find their roles unfulfilling, and may miss out on the personal and social benefits of community engagement.

Supporting pathways to employment

Research has also found that the link between participation in volunteering and the likelihood of finding paid work depends on external factors, like the volunteer role, the nature of support provided,¹⁴ and the presence of defined mechanisms to facilitate employment outcomes.¹⁵ Taken together, this evidence suggests that for volunteering to function as a viable path to employment for people with disability, support must be provided to both people with disability and volunteer involving organisations to improve access and inclusion.

Services which connect people to volunteer roles can be crucial to facilitating meaningful and sustainable volunteer placements. Programs which support meaningful placements in volunteer involving organisations, such as the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program offered by VolunteeringACT, Volunteering Tasmania and the Centre for Volunteering, can be an invaluable resource. Research conducted as part of the Victoria ALIVE program similarly identified supported volunteer placement services as a key recommended initiative for facilitating disability-inclusive volunteering.¹⁶ These programs should be supported through the Structural Adjustment Fund. Data collection to support the proposed evaluation of supported employment initiatives and trials should also include data on the quality and value of volunteering experiences.

Removing barriers to volunteering

It is also important that volunteer involving organisations take steps to reduce barriers to volunteering for people with disability. This requires the appropriate resourcing, including education and training on inclusive practices. Providing education and training is a key aspect of the Inclusive

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

¹¹ Becky L. Choma and Joanna Ochocka, "Supported Volunteering: A Community Approach for People With Complex Needs," *Journal on Developmental Disabilities* 12, no. 1 (2006): 14, doi:10.1.1.492.1063; Aneta Marková, "Volunteering of people with disability," *Kontakt* 22, no. 3 (2020): 205, doi:10.32725/kont.2020.013

¹² Choma and Ochocka, 14

¹³ <https://www.victoriaalive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Vic-ALIVE-Project-Final-Report.pdf>, 17

¹⁴ Kamerade, Daiga, and Angela Ellis Paine, "Volunteering and employability: implications for policy and practice," *Voluntary Sector Review* 5, no. 2 (2014): 265, doi:10.1332/204080514X14013593888736

¹⁵ <https://www.victoriaalive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Vic-ALIVE-Project-Final-Report.pdf>, 28

¹⁶ <https://www.victoriaalive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Vic-ALIVE-Project-Final-Report.pdf>, 34

Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program. The following case study from the Program recorded in October 2021 highlights the benefits of this training.

“Upon first interaction with the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program, the host organisation's volunteer manager was open to being involved, but was sceptical about the amount of support a participant might require. The volunteer coordinator's attitudes were not inherently exclusive, but they were applying unconscious bias and judgments in their interactions with the participant.

After the participant's completion of a trial period, alongside regular check-ins and discussions with the program coordinator, the volunteer manager expressed that the participant was capable of more than they had originally thought. They assigned more challenging and engaging tasks to the participant which were more aligned with the participant's SMART goals. The participant's support worker also noted a shift in attitude from the volunteer manager, which had a flow-on effect to the participant's confidence and sense of agency. The volunteer manager expressed gratitude for the enormous value the participant has brought to the organisation. The key learning for the volunteer manager was not to assume someone's ability without asking the question. It was a “light-bulb” moment for them, where they could see a real-life example of their discussions with the program coordinator in practice. They will apply this learning throughout their organisation over time.

The volunteer manager began as someone who would have considered themselves to be very inclusive: accepting, welcoming, and curious about people from all backgrounds and abilities. Through the sharing of resources and consultation with the program coordinator about inclusive practices, the volunteer manager began to recognise that they were applying unconscious bias and assumptions onto the volunteers they were dealing with. The volunteer manager is now conscious about asking volunteers how much support, if any, they will need in order to complete their duties. While this shift in attitude may appear to be small, it is such a significant first step in the right direction. It affects every single volunteer's experience within that organisation, as well as opening the door for the volunteer manager to consider their inclusive practices more broadly.”¹⁷

Volunteering opportunities should be included in the scope of this package of measures relating to supported employment. In particular, programs that facilitate pathways to employment through volunteering and those that support volunteer involving organisations to better engage volunteers with disability should be eligible for funding through the Structural Adjustment Fund. This funding should be available for programs that support meaningful volunteering opportunities that facilitate pathways into paid employment, and for volunteer involving organisations to address internal barriers to participation.

¹⁷ Case study provided by VolunteeringACT; <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

Volunteers and disability advocacy

Volunteers contribute extensively to disability advocacy. A study by the University of Melbourne identified ‘advocacy’ as one of seven key models of volunteer-supported programs in the disability sector.¹⁸ This work was found to support the key aims of the NDIS Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Program relating to the protection of the rights and welfare of people with disability, including increased community understanding of rights and barriers for people with disability, positive change in individual attitudes and community culture, and increased understanding of rights, obligations, and barriers surrounding disability within mainstream services.¹⁹

Volunteering through advocacy organisations is also an important means for people with disability to be directly involved in decision-making and policy development. The organisation ‘Voice at the Table’ aims to increase the number of people with cognitive disabilities sitting on boards, committees, and advisory groups within community organisations, local government, and service providers.²⁰ Board and committee roles are usually undertaken by volunteers.

The role of volunteers in disability advocacy is recognised in the National Disability Advocacy Framework 2023-2025,²¹ and many organisations funded under the National Disability Advocacy Program engage volunteers to support their advocacy services. It is therefore crucial that the new Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program has a funding model which appropriately supports volunteering and relevant initiatives for the volunteering ecosystem, including the implementation of the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033).

The National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033)

The new National Strategy for Volunteering (2023–2033) is a ten-year blueprint for a reimagined future for volunteering in Australia. It is the first National Strategy for Volunteering in a decade, providing a strategic framework for enabling safe, supported, and sustainable volunteering. The National Strategy for Volunteering was developed through a 12-month co-design process with members of the volunteering ecosystem.²²

Ensuring alignment with the National Strategy for Volunteering can maximize the potential of volunteering in the disability sector and help facilitate a strategic approach to investment and policymaking on volunteering. This section highlights the key strategic objectives of the National

¹⁸ <https://www.interchange.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Value-Added-Volunteer-Supported-Services-and-the-Challenge-of-the-NDIS.pdf>, 8

¹⁹ <https://www.interchange.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Value-Added-Volunteer-Supported-Services-and-the-Challenge-of-the-NDIS.pdf>, 110

²⁰ <https://voiceatthetable.com.au/about-us/vatt-community-organisations/>

²¹ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2023/national-disability-advocacy-framework-2023-2025-pdf.pdf, 3

²² <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/the-strategy/>

Strategy for Volunteering and outlines how our recommendations on the future of supported employment can support these goals. In particular:

1. *Recognise the role of volunteering in the future of supported employment* aligns with:
 - **Strategic Objective 3.1**, to ensure that governments are consistently considering the needs of volunteers and supporting volunteering through comprehensive policy and investment.
2. *Support volunteer involving organisations to better engage volunteers with disability through the Structural Adjustment Fund. This funding should be available for programs which connect people with disability to tailored and meaningful volunteering opportunities, and for volunteer involving organisations to improve access and inclusion practices* aligns with:
 - **Strategic Objective 1.2**, to make volunteering more inclusive and accessible.
3. *Expand data collection and evaluation methods to emphasise the quality and sustainability of volunteering and employment placements* aligns with:
 - **Strategic Objective 2.3**, to ensure volunteering is recognised and supported as an activity with inherent value and for its role in facilitating individual and community outcomes.
 - **Strategic Objective 3.3**, to ensure volunteering is supported across Australia by common infrastructure and continuous strategic investment.
4. *Include explicit resourcing for volunteering under the Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program* aligns with:
 - **Strategic Objective 3.1**, to ensure that governments are consistently considering the needs of volunteers and supporting volunteering through comprehensive policy and investment.
 - **Strategic Objective 3.3**, to ensure volunteering is supported across Australia by common infrastructure and continuous strategic investment.

Recommendations

Volunteering Australia makes the following recommendations on the Future of Supported Employment:

1. Recognise the role of volunteering in the future of supported employment.
2. Support volunteer involving organisations to better engage volunteers with disability through the Structural Adjustment Fund. This funding should be available for programs which connect people with disability to tailored and meaningful volunteering opportunities, and for volunteer involving organisations to improve access and inclusion practices.
3. Expand data collection and evaluation methods to emphasise the quality and sustainability of volunteering and employment placements.
4. Include explicit resourcing for volunteering under the Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program, in line with the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033).

Authorisation

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



Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This submission 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 to promote a strong, connected, and resilient Australian community through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

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