

Submission on a new voluntary parent support service

September 2023

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Overview

Volunteering provides a flexible option for parents with young children to undertake prevocational training, build skills, connect with the community, and strengthen social supports. Volunteering is also a demonstrated pathway to employment, particularly when participants are engaged in suitable roles. Connecting people with meaningful and fulfilling opportunities to volunteer should be supported in government policy, including in a new voluntary parent support service.

Volunteering Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input on a new voluntary parent support service. In our submission to the Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services on ParentsNext, we recommended that volunteering should be included in a future, voluntary parent support service. This submission highlights the value of volunteering for the wellbeing of participants, its value as a pathway into paid employment, the social and economic value of volunteering to Australian communities, and the role of referral services and other common infrastructure that supports volunteering in supporting the principles of the new service.

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies make the following recommendations on including and resourcing volunteering through the new program:

1. Include volunteering in the scope of the new service, encouraging and resourcing opportunities for participants to volunteer.
2. Prioritise funding for volunteering programs that focus on connecting participants to sustainable employment outcomes and provide them with the appropriate supports to develop work-related skills.
3. Provide funding through the program for relevant supportive infrastructure to enable volunteering, in alignment with Strategic Objective 3.3 of the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033).
 - The development of the funding model should involve an analysis of existing government funding and extensive consultation with the volunteering ecosystem including volunteer involving organisations, peak bodies, and volunteering support services.

Introduction

About the new voluntary parent support service

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations is designing a new voluntary service that supports parents who care for young children. The new service will be for parents who receive a parenting payment, to help them to plan for their future education and employment goals.¹

Pre-employment services help people prepare to join the workforce. The Consultation Guide highlights a broad range of pre-employment services which may be considered in the new program:

¹ <https://www.dewr.gov.au/consultation-new-voluntary-parent-support-service>

“A pre-employment service may provide vocational support. For example, helping people with career advice or to build their skills through education and training to get a qualification. It may also help people with other support they need before they can focus on their vocational goals. For example, this might include help to: access child care, build confidence, combat social isolation, manage finances, find more secure housing, manage family relationships, access health professionals, improve health and wellbeing. The result is the person is better placed to join the paid workforce. For full-time parents, this means when they’re ready, at a time that suits their family responsibilities.”²

About this submission

This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies. It follows an earlier submission to the Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services on ParentsNext, which highlighted that the requirement for participants to engage in programs to receive a payment does not meet the definition of volunteering as “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain” and may impact intentions to volunteer in the future. Volunteering Australia welcomes the development of and consultation on a voluntary program.

This submission highlights the value of volunteering for the wellbeing of participants, its value as a pathway into paid employment, the social and economic value of volunteering to Australian communities, and the role of referral services and other common infrastructure that supports volunteering in supporting the principles of the new service. It responds primarily to the following questions from the Consultation Guide:³

- *How would referrals to local services enhance the new service? Would priority access be required and if so what types and why?*
- *What should be the funding model for providers? For example, fee for service, up-front payments, graduated payments, or outcome payments or a combination of these?*
- *What types of interventions should be funded for participants? For example, goods and services participants need to achieve goals or undertake activities.*

Volunteering and pathways to employment

Volunteering provides a flexible option for jobseekers to undertake prevocational training, build skills, connect with the community, and ensure social supports. Research undertaken by employment company SEEK found that 95 per cent of employers identify that volunteering is just as credible as paid work.⁴ Further, 92 per cent of employers identified that relevant volunteering experience gave a candidate an advantage in job interviews.⁵ 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

² <https://www.dewr.gov.au/node/15499>, 3

³ <https://www.dewr.gov.au/consultation-new-voluntary-parent-support-service/resources/consultation-guide-providers>

⁴ <https://www.seek.com.au/career-advice/article/3-reasons-volunteering-can-put-you-ahead-of-the-pack>

⁵ *ibid*

find employment than those who did not volunteer.⁶ Connecting people with meaningful and fulfilling opportunities to volunteer should be supported in the new voluntary parent support service.

However, research also indicates that whether participants can successfully leverage their volunteering experience to find paid work depends on other factors, including frequency of engagement, demographics, reasons for and duration of unemployment, motivation for volunteering, volunteer role, and the nature and quality of support provided to volunteers.⁷ An analysis of the British Household Panel Survey found that among those out of employment due to family or caring responsibilities, volunteering on a weekly basis had a negative effect on their likelihood of entering employment, while taking part on a monthly basis had a positive effect.⁸ Evaluations of existing volunteering programs and broader evidence on the benefits of volunteering indicates that consideration of individual circumstances, including the background, motivations, employment goals, and support needs of prospective volunteers, is crucial to facilitating appropriate and effective volunteer placements to support pathways into paid and sustainable employment opportunities.

Programs like the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment program delivered by the Centre for Volunteer, VolunteeringACT, and Volunteering Tasmania, can be invaluable in facilitating pathways to employment through volunteering.⁹ This program aims to reduce barriers to volunteering and employment for people with disability or on a mental health recovery journey by matching participants with meaningful volunteering roles that help build the skills, experience, and confidence needed to work towards employment goals. The program also provides ongoing support to participants, access to volunteer mentors, and tailored support, resources, and training for organisations to equip them with the skills and knowledge to reduce and remove barriers to involving volunteers with disability or mental health conditions. Resourcing and promoting such programs should be a focus on the new parent support service.

Volunteering and wellbeing

Supporting involvement in volunteering can help build confidence, combat social isolation, and improve health and wellbeing of participants. Participation in volunteering is associated with better life satisfaction, happiness, self-esteem, and perceived psychological well-being.¹⁰ Volunteering in

⁶ Spera, Christopher, Robin Ghertner, Anthony Nerino, and Adrienne DiTommaso, "Out of work? Volunteers Have Higher Odds of Getting Back to Work," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 44 no. 5 (2015): 886–907. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764015605928>

⁷ Kamerāde, Daiga, and Angela Ellis Paine, "Volunteering and employability: implications for policy and practice," *Voluntary Sector Review* 5, no. 2 (2014): 264–265, accessed Sep 8, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204080514X14013593888736>

⁸ Ellis Paine, Angela, Stephen McKay, and Domenico Moro, "Does volunteering improve employability? Insights from the British Household Panel Survey and beyond," *Voluntary Sector Review* 4, no. 3 (2013): 333–53

⁹ <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/services/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

¹⁰ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Evidence-Insights-Volunteering-and-mental-health-Final.pdf>

the community creates opportunities for social interaction, and evidence suggests that giving support to others is a particularly beneficial form of social connection.¹¹ Meeting and offering support to other people creates a positive emotional state and replaces stress-causing emotions, such as anger or loneliness.¹² Some studies indicate that social interaction is the primary reason that volunteering improves mental health.¹³ Satisfaction with the volunteering experience is associated with higher perceived wellbeing and social connectedness.¹⁴ A recent study of volunteering in Australia found that those who continued to volunteer during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced greater life satisfaction than those who stopped volunteering.¹⁵

In conclusion, volunteering serves as a multifaceted avenue for people to build confidence, combat social isolation, and enhance their health and wellbeing. By providing opportunities to make meaningful contributions, fostering social connections, and promoting both mental and physical wellness, volunteering stands as a powerful tool for personal growth and community enrichment. This makes participants better placed to join the paid workforce if this is their goal. Support for volunteering opportunities should therefore be provided through the new voluntary parent support service. Further, given the benefits of volunteering to employment and wellbeing outcomes, efforts should be made to maximise opportunities to be involved in volunteering programs. This should include consideration of extending eligibility to parents who care for young children who do not receive a parenting payment.

Strategic investment to support volunteering

While volunteering has many benefits, barriers to participation can be significant, particularly for parents receiving a parenting payment. Access to childcare, transport, fuel, meal allowances, and funding of compliance checks are all significant costs for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, particularly amid ongoing increases in cost of living. Further, many organisations lack the necessary insurance, work, health and safety, and child and youth safe training resources which would allow them to involve children and young people. This can prevent organisations from supporting and identifying volunteering roles that parents can undertake while caring for their children.

¹¹ Neal Krause, A. Regula Herzog, and Elizabeth Baker, "Providing Support to Others and Well-Being in Later Life," *Journal of Gerontology* 47, no. 5 (1992): 300-311, doi:10.1093/geronj/47.5.P300; Post 2011, 819

¹² Post 2011, 824

¹³ Ann-Marie Creaven, Amy Healy, and Siobhán Howard, "Social Connectedness and Depression: Is There Added Value in Volunteering?" *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 35, no. 10 (November 2018): 1411, doi:10.1177/0265407517716786; Pamela D. Pilkington, Tim D. Windsor, and Dimity A. Crisp, "Volunteering and Subjective Well-Being in Midlife and Older Adults: The Role of Supportive Social Networks," *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 67, no. 2 (2012): 254, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbr154>

¹⁴ Arthur A. Stukas, Russell Hoyer, Matthew Nicholson, Kevin M. Brown, and Laura Aisbett, "Motivations to Volunteer and Their Associations With Volunteers' Well-Being," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2016): 127, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089976401456112>

¹⁵ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 67

To address these barriers, sufficient resourcing should be made available for volunteer involving organisations and prospective participants to address these barriers and support participants to volunteer.

Volunteering across sectors requires fit-for-purpose infrastructure, including policy, research and data, systems, tools, and resources. Currently, the volunteering ecosystem is hindered by low investment in capacity and capability-building initiatives, which may limit the effectiveness of volunteering through Australia's employment services system in the future.¹⁶

Volunteering support services play a crucial role in facilitating safe, effective, and sustainable volunteering by connecting prospective volunteers to formal roles and supporting organisations to recruit, retain, and manage their volunteers. Volunteering support services take various forms throughout Australia. They are responsible for the promotion, resourcing, and support of volunteering in local communities. In the context of employment support services, this is primarily achieved by providing information and referral services to job seekers. These services can be provided by dedicated volunteering support services, volunteering peak bodies, or other organisations.

These services are important to make volunteering opportunities more accessible to prospective volunteers and are shown to improve recruitment and retention outcomes. A 2017 report found a select group of volunteering support services were shown to have enabled nearly 12.3 million volunteer hours across Australia. This volunteering was valued at \$477.5 million and demonstrates the value-add of support services as an intermediary.¹⁷

The funding model for the new voluntary parent support service should ensure that organisations that provide information and referral services for volunteers are eligible to receive funding for their role in the program. Funding arrangements must also include dedicated funding for the necessary staffing and volunteer management function to ensure programs are sustainable. One of the easiest and most sustainable ways to ensure this resourcing is by including a specific volunteering component within funding arrangements. This specific budget line can be allocated to supporting volunteer management, and the full recruitment, on-boarding, and ongoing training requirements of volunteers. The cost of funding volunteer program delivery and management as an integrated part of an overall service design is modest in comparison to other funding aspects and provides a good return on that investment. For example, a recent study on the economic value of volunteering in the New South Wales State of Volunteering report found that for every dollar invested in volunteering, approximately \$3.30 is returned.¹⁸

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,

¹⁶ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/National-Strategy-for-Volunteering-2023-2033.pdf>, 60

¹⁷ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Value-of-Volunteering-Support-Services.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.volunteering.nsw.gov.au/?a=815420>, 3

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.¹⁹

Strategic Objective 3.3, Commit to Strategic Investment, identifies the need for common infrastructure and strategic investment to support volunteering. Volunteer involvement is multifaceted and requires considerable resources. Providing and promoting volunteering opportunities requires investment in:

- tools and resources
- accessible and relevant research and data
- referral services
- education and training
- marketing and awareness raising
- fast and accessible screening processes
- fit-for-purpose policy and regulation
- platforms for recruiting and managing volunteers
- accessible funding mechanisms
- insurance and work, health, and safety protocols
- processes for evaluation
- celebration and recognition

Currently, the volunteering ecosystem is hindered by low investment in capacity and capability-building initiatives. Funding for programs and services that deliver specific outcomes for communities is undeniably important. But where such programs and services include volunteers in their delivery, adequate resourcing is required to support internal and external infrastructure. This should include core staffing costs to ensure the volunteering sector has enough paid roles with the skill sets required to develop, test, evaluate, and refine the policies and programs that support volunteering. For volunteering in Australia to thrive, investment priorities need to be broadened to understand and account for the true costs of enabling volunteering and facilitating volunteer involvement.

Funding of \$4 million to boost up to 37 volunteering support services (also known as Volunteering Resource Centres) was announced earlier this year by the Department of Social Services.²⁰ The funds are being released over two years (2022-23 and 2023-24) but will only equate to \$50,000 per organisation each year, and with cost of living increases impacting volunteer involving organisations across the country, these amounts make it extremely challenging to deliver sustainable and effective outcomes that can make a difference in the long term. Further, not all jurisdictions benefit from this funding. Future funding decisions should aim to deliver more strategic and sustainable investment in common infrastructure for the volunteering ecosystem in alignment with Strategic Objective 3.3 of

¹⁹ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/the-strategy/>

²⁰ <https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/10246>

Submission on a new voluntary parent support service

the National Strategy for Volunteering, to ensure that volunteering is supported across Australia by common infrastructure and continuous strategic investment.²¹

Recommendations

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies make the following recommendations on a new voluntary parent support service:

1. Include volunteering in the scope of the new service, encouraging and resourcing opportunities for participants to volunteer.
2. Prioritise funding for volunteering programs that focus on connecting participants to sustainable employment outcomes and provide them with the appropriate supports to develop work-related skills.
3. Provide funding through the program for relevant supportive infrastructure to enable volunteering, in alignment with Strategic Objective 3.3 of the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033).
 - The development of the funding model should involve an analysis of existing government funding and extensive consultation with the volunteering ecosystem including volunteer involving organisations, peak bodies, and volunteering support services.

²¹ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/National-Strategy-for-Volunteering-2023-2033.pdf>, 59-61

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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