

Submission to the Independent Panel Review on COVID-19

July 2022

Written by: Jack McDermott (Policy Officer, Volunteering Australia)



Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and ongoing impact on volunteering in Australia. In Australia, COVID-19 accelerated the long-term decline in the number and proportion of people participating in volunteering through organisations.¹ The pandemic, and the social and public health restrictions it necessitated, have also changed the way many Australians volunteer. Appropriate policy, based on a robust base of evidence on the economic and social impacts of COVID-19, and which supports new patterns of volunteer engagement, will be crucial to the recovery of volunteering and the essential services that depend on it.

Throughout the Australian Government's response to COVID-19, volunteering both supported the delivery of key services and helped to mitigate the pandemic's impact on mental health and social isolation. However, the volunteering ecosystem has also required additional support from government and often the available support has been insufficient to ensure that volunteering could continue safely and efficiently. Ongoing resourcing will be required to safeguard the contributions of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, and to support the long-term role of volunteering preparedness and recovery. To support this, we make the following recommendations to the Independent Panel review of Australia's response to COVID-19:²

- Include volunteering clearly and consistently in official guidance and messaging.
- Engage actively with the volunteering ecosystem to plan for volunteer involvement in response to crises.
- Provide appropriate and ongoing support to volunteer involving organisations to meet heightened demand for services and to engage volunteers safely.
- Resource efforts to reinvigorate volunteering in Australia.

The recommendations explored in this submission reflect the experience of organisations prior to July 2022. Cases of COVID-19 are projected to increase significantly throughout over the coming months due to the BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants of the COVID-19 Omicron strain.³ The impact on public health and the strain on the health system during this wave may be the most significant of any outbreak in Australia so far. Supporting public health and safety must remain the priority as the risk of COVID-19 infection increases.

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

Policy lessons from the pandemic

Based on the experience of the volunteering ecosystem, including the state and territory volunteering peak bodies, volunteer involving organisations, volunteering support services, and volunteers themselves, we argue that volunteering has been frequently overlooked in the government response to COVID-19. Volunteering, both as a meaningful activity for many Australians

¹ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/covid-19-research/#/>

² <https://www.e61.in/covid-review>

³ <https://www.health.gov.au/news/covid-19-update-from-the-chief-medical-officer-professor-paul-kelly>

and as an integral part of the social welfare and public health response to the pandemic, has not been considered strategically in government policy. Further, volunteer involving organisations, particularly charities and not-for-profits, have not received adequate support to engage volunteers safely and effectively while satisfying surging demand for services.

The lack of strategic consideration caused many complications for the volunteering ecosystem, the most significant of which are outlined in the sections below.

Volunteers in official guidance and communications

The inclusion of volunteers in official guidance was often left unclarified. This reduced the effectiveness and efficiency of government communications and placed the onus on volunteer involving organisations to seek clarification.

Lack of clarity regarding the inclusion of volunteers in official guidance caused frequent delays for volunteer involving organisations adapting their operations to comply with government regulations and to ensure COVID-safe practices. These include:

- **The mandating of COVID-19 vaccinations for workers in aged care and disability support.** Whether volunteers engaged in these sectors required vaccinations under Commonwealth government mandates was not initially clarified. Further, there were often inconsistencies as to whether volunteers were specified. For example, when the National Cabinet announced in June 2021 that vaccinations for residential aged care workers would be made mandatory, it was initially unclear whether volunteers were included. This was clarified on 3 August, when volunteers engaged by residential aged care facilities were included in the workforce scope defined by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC).⁴ However, when the AHPPC recommended that COVID-19 vaccinations be mandated for residential disability support workers, volunteers were not specified in the definition provided.⁵
- **The definition of “essential work.”** Whether volunteers were included in the definition of essential workers has varied among the states and territories throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In New South Wales, workers in roles which are designated essential are counted as essential workers, whether they are paid or unpaid.⁶ Guidance from the Queensland Government, by contrast, has been clear that volunteers are not included as “critically essential workers.”⁷ During earlier outbreaks of COVID-19, the state and territory peak volunteering bodies received many queries from volunteers who were uncertain about their inclusion as essential workers. Lack of clarity in this respect frustrated volunteer

⁴ <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/08/covid-19-vaccination-mandatory-vaccination-of-residential-aged-care-workers-covid-19-vaccination---mandatory-vaccination-of-residential-aged-care-workers.docx>

⁵ <https://www.health.gov.au/news/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc-statement-on-mandating-vaccination-for-disability-support-workers>

⁶ <https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/about-us/glossary/glossary-acordion/worker>

⁷ <https://www.qld.gov.au/health/conditions/health-alerts/coronavirus-covid-19/industry-and-businesses/critically-essential-worker-requirements>

involvement in the pandemic response and caused confusion regarding the inclusion of volunteers in the vaccine rollout.

This inconsistency made it very difficult for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations to anticipate how changes to public health directives would affect their operations, and to plan accordingly.

Involving volunteers in the response to COVID-19

Early in the pandemic, there was little engagement of volunteers in the Australian Government's response. This is despite the typically far-reaching role of volunteers in emergency response and recovery in Australia.

Despite the lack of strategic planning at the federal level, volunteers showed the potential to contribute extensively to the COVID-19 response across Australia. Volunteer support of the response has been provided primarily through organisations that deliver essential social services. The demand for services delivered by volunteers, which include emergency and food relief, crisis support, domestic/family/gender-based violence hotlines, aged care, disability care, and mental health support, has been high throughout the pandemic.

In some states, volunteers also contributed directly to the provision of COVID-19 relief efforts. In Queensland, for example, spontaneous volunteers were recruited through the Care Army platform to provide social connection and essential services such as the delivery of groceries and medicines, particularly for older and vulnerable people.⁸ As of 2021, 29,643 volunteers registered with the Care Army. 1,052 of these volunteers were even deployed to Community Vaccination Hubs.⁹

Better facilitation at the federal level could have increased access to these services throughout Australia during the pandemic, particularly during times of heightened need.

Ongoing support for Australia's charities and not-for-profits

Volunteer involving organisations, particularly charities and not-for-profit organisations, are essential to facilitating volunteering in Australia. These organisations have been severely impacted by COVID-19.

During the early months of the pandemic, many volunteer involving organisations were extended emergency support, including access to JobKeeper payments for paid staff, contractual flexibility for grand-funded organisations, and access to Supplementary Volunteer Grants in late 2020.¹⁰ These measures assisted many volunteer involving organisations to remain viable and maintain their operations in a safe capacity, and were welcomed by the volunteering ecosystem.

However, as was the case for many other organisations and businesses, the JobKeeper payment was withdrawn before there was time for the sector to recover. In a survey of not-for-profit

⁸ <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/covid-19/for-volunteers/join-the-care-army-to-help-isolated-older-people>

⁹ https://volunteeringqld.org.au/docs/2021/Volunteering_Qld_AnnualReport_2021.pdf, 8

¹⁰ Though welcomed by the ecosystem, these grants were hugely oversubscribed, falling well short of meeting demand. <https://www.communitygrants.gov.au/news/2020-supplementary-volunteer-grants>

organisations by the Australian Council of Social Service, 36 per cent of leaders said that their organisation's financial position had worsened through the crisis.¹¹ More than half of leaders (54 per cent) reported their organisation applied for JobKeeper, and of those who received it, 40 per cent said they expected to need to reduce staffing levels when the support ceased.¹² Providing ongoing support to the charity and not-for-profit sector could have alleviated this strain and significantly improved their capacity to engage volunteers and to deliver services.

Ensuring COVID-safe volunteering

Volunteer involving organisations have not been provided with the resourcing needed to ensure that volunteering is COVID-safe. Already facing significant financial challenges, many organisations had to create COVID-safe plans, and provide hand sanitiser, personal protective equipment (PPE), rapid antigen tests (RATs), and other materials to their volunteers in order to facilitate safe volunteering and to comply with government requirements. The lack of financial support for these measures meant that resources had to be directed away from service provision during a time of increased demand.

Leadership and engagement

When asked about their engagement with government during the pandemic, many volunteer-based organisations reported feeling overlooked in the COVID-19 response.¹³ As a consequence, we understand many organisations have disengaged from the government response during the recent Delta and Omicron variant outbreaks.

Improved leadership, particularly from the federal government, was needed to retain the engagement and confidence of the volunteering ecosystem.

Supporting volunteering during the recovery from COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant damage to the Australian economy. However, the extent of its long-term consequences for health and social wellbeing are not yet clear.

Volunteering improves life satisfaction and contributes to key sectors which support economic and social recovery.¹⁴ Many sectors, such as mental health, disability support, food and emergency relief, arts and heritage, and sports, depend heavily on volunteer involvement. Supporting their recovery, therefore, will not be possible without support for volunteers and for the wider volunteering ecosystem.

¹¹ https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Australias-community-sector-and-Covid-19_FINAL.pdf, 10-11

¹² *ibid*

¹³ https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Australias-community-sector-and-Covid-19_FINAL.pdf, 62

¹⁴ <https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/volunteering-during-first-year-covid-19-pandemic-april-2021>

Recommendations

1. Include volunteering clearly and consistently in official guidance and messaging.
 - In particular, the Australian Government should play a more active role to ensure consistent and comprehensive language.
 - The volunteering ecosystem should be consulted on how best to include volunteers in relevant policy decisions.
2. Engage actively with the volunteering ecosystem to plan for volunteer involvement in the crisis response.
3. Provide appropriate and ongoing support to volunteer involving organisations (particularly charities and not-for-profit organisations) to meet heightened demand for services and to engage volunteers safely.
4. Resource efforts to reinvigorate volunteering in Australia.
 - Clarify a **Volunteering COVID-19 Recovery Plan**, which would enable volunteers to re-engage safely, support the adaptation of volunteering programs, and facilitate the recruitment of new volunteers to ensure services and programs can recover.

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 strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote, and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

Volunteering Australia Contacts

Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer
ceo@volunteeringaustralia.org
0428 186 736

Sue Regan
Policy Director and Deputy CEO
policy@volunteeringaustralia.org
0480 258 723

State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies

Volunteering ACT

www.volunteeringact.org.au

02 6251 4060

info@volunteeringact.org.au

Volunteering SA&NT

www.volunteeringsa-nt.org.au

08 8221 7177

reception@volunteeringsa-nt.org.au

The Centre for Volunteering (NSW)

www.volunteering.com.au

02 9261 3600

info@volunteering.com.au

Volunteering Victoria

www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au

03 8327 8500

info@volunteeringvictoria.org.au

Volunteering Queensland

www.volunteeringqld.org.au

07 3002 7600

reception@volunteeringqld.org.au

Volunteering WA

www.volunteeringwa.org.au

08 9482 4333

info@volunteeringwa.org.au

Volunteering Tasmania

www.volunteeringtas.org.au

03 6231 5550

admin@volunteeringtas.org.au