

16 January 2017

Re: Changes to the DSS *Strengthening Communities* Grants program, and an Invitation

Let me begin by welcoming you to the 2017 year. I hope that you found the opportunity for a restorative break over the Festive Season.

You may be aware that in November 2016, Brett Williamson OAM stepped down as Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia after three years in that role. Brett has been a powerful advocate for the volunteering community and his focus has ensured that Volunteering Australia has been able to build strong relationships within the Department of Social Services as well as with our many partners throughout the sector.

I am delighted to continue the important work of Volunteering Australia as its new Chief Executive Officer, having previously spent close to eight years as CEO of the State Peak Body for volunteering, Volunteering Tasmania. I am looking forward to progressing Volunteering Australia's role as the national peak body, building strong, connected communities through leading, strengthening, promoting and celebrating volunteering across Australia.

Volunteering lies at the heart of the contribution made by Australians to the public good, with 5.8 million Australians per year contributing an estimated \$290 billion in economic and societal benefit, acting as a vital community-based support to Commonwealth Government programs including the NDIS, aged care, sporting excellence, and efforts to support Australians in their transition into the paid workforce. In recent months, we noted with thanks the Government's work to address the needs of volunteers in the emergency services through the Fair Work Amendment (Respect for Emergency Services Volunteers) Bill. However, with ABS 2014 data indicating that the number of Australians reporting volunteer involvement had declined for the first time in almost twenty years, we in the volunteering sector must continue to work closely with the Federal Government to ensure that volunteers are respected and empowered with the support of strong, well-funded place-based Volunteer Support Services.

From our regular meetings with representatives in the Department of Social Services, Volunteering Australia is aware that over the coming weeks the Department will undertake consultation with the sector in regard to a redesign of the *Strengthening Communities* Grants program, originally announced in the Federal Budget 2016-17. You will, of course be aware that *Strengthening Communities* is currently the only source of Federal Government funding for place-based volunteer support services. The funding provided through

Strengthening Communities is delivering real and tangible benefits at a local level, providing much-needed training, placement, management and support services to help engage committed, skilled volunteers who work every day to build strong and resilient communities. In your own home State of South Australia, for example, Volunteering SA&NT has developed the WeDO app, a smart phone app that helps people find volunteering opportunities, keep track of their volunteering hours and claim rewards, with support from a Strengthening Communities grant.

Volunteering Australia agrees in principle that there is important cause to revisit the way that Volunteer Support Services are funded by the Commonwealth Government. The current system does not correspond with the overall intent of the DSS *New Way of Working* grants program, which recommends three to five year grant terms to “provide greater certainty for service providers to improve service delivery and enable them to continue to deliver the critical work they do” (Department of Social Services: February 2016). There are critical gaps and shortfalls in terms of the areas where Volunteer Support Services have been funded, with areas of high demographic need in the suburbs and regions failing to attract funding in the 2015 Grants round. And overall, funding for volunteer management has decreased in real terms over recent years, failing to keep pace with CPI and growth in demand for volunteer placement services. Our submission to the consultation process will reflect these concerns; however of most pressing and critical need is that the Commonwealth Government through the Department of Social Services commit to continue funding Volunteer Support Services to do their vital work, in the absence of any other existing avenue of Federal Government funding. We believe that the Government has a responsibility to continue to fund volunteer management, in light of the vital role played by volunteer support services in delivering Federal Government policy priorities at a local level.

As part of Volunteering Australia’s campaign to seek your support for continued Federal funding for volunteer management and support services, I am delighted to invite you to ‘Share the Love’ for Volunteer Support Services at our **Valentine’s Day morning tea event**, which we will be co-hosting with our State and Territory Peak partners in **Senate Committee Room 1S3 at Australian Parliament House at 10.30am on Tuesday, 14 February 2017**. This event is an opportunity for Parliamentarians to interact directly with the CEOs of the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies together with representatives of Volunteer Support Services who work on the ground across Australia, delivering innovative volunteer placement and volunteer program support services in Australia’s cities and regions. We are sure you will find that this event will highlight the important work being done by recipients of the *Strengthening Communities* Grants, and how crucial Federal funding is to our sector moving forward.

I invite your office to correspond with Ms Rebecca Rowland, Administration Officer at Volunteering Australia at admin@volunteeringaustralia.org or (02) 6251 4060 to RSVP for our morning tea event or to discuss any of the other matters raised above.

Yours sincerely



Ms Adrienne Picone
Chief Executive Officer
Volunteering Australia