



**Position Statement: 2019-20 VOLUNTEER GRANTS**  
14 February 2020

## Position Paper: 2019-20 VOLUNTEER GRANTS

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### Summary

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies have serious concerns about the new process introduced to administer 2019-20 Volunteer Grants. We are calling on the Federal Government to commit to a transparent evaluation of the revised approach and to review the administration of the program in response to evaluation findings.

There are two main concerns with the new process: 1) the potential risks associated with Members of Parliament acting as gatekeepers to the funds; and 2) the 'first in, best dressed' assessment of applications that has been adopted by the government's Community Grants Hub.

As stated in our Pre-Budget submission, Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies remain concerned that this vital support for Australia's volunteers has been subject to ongoing funding cuts and calls on the government to return funding to 2010 levels or \$21 million per annum.

### Introduction

Volunteer Grants are aimed at supporting Australia's volunteers, with grants of between \$1,000 and \$5,000 provided to organisations and community groups to assist their volunteers to purchase equipment, for training or for fundraising. In December 2019, it was announced there would be a new process for the administration of Volunteer Grants which involves Federal Members of Parliament nominating organisations to apply for funding. Volunteering Australia was not consulted on these changes.

The assessment process is being undertaken through a 'two-phased closed non-competitive grant process'<sup>1</sup>. Phase 1 requires Members of Parliament nominating organisations to apply. Phase 2 involves the Community Grants Hub inviting organisations to apply and assessing these applications.

On 12 February, the Guardian ran an article highlighting concerns from community groups that the new process could be discriminatory. The article reported that the LGBTQI community are particularly worried and cited their concerns that local members might not support their work and therefore not nominate them for funding. Volunteering Australia was contacted prior to publication of the Guardian article and stated that we are monitoring how the new process is unfolding.

Volunteering Australia has also been contacted by the ABC, who reported a different concern with the new process. Once groups have made an application (following a nomination from their MP), the applications are assessed 'in the order in which they are received'<sup>2</sup>. The grant guidelines state that once the funding cap (\$66,000 per electorate) is reached, no further applications will be funded.

In light of these concerns, and others detailed below that have been recently brought to Volunteering Australia's attention, our position of monitoring the process as it unfolds is no longer sufficient. Given the serious concerns emerging, Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory

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<sup>1</sup> See Page 13, Grant Opportunity Guidelines <https://www.communitygrants.gov.au/grants/volunteer-grants-activity-2019-20>

<sup>2</sup> See page 14 of Grant Opportunity Guidelines <https://www.communitygrants.gov.au/grants/volunteer-grants-activity-2019-20>

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volunteering peak bodies consider that the Government needs to urgently commit to a transparent evaluation and review of the process.

This new process has been introduced in the context of ongoing funding cuts to the program. In the last decade, the volunteering sector has seen an ongoing reduction to the quantum of Volunteer Grants. While \$21 million was allocated to Volunteer Grants in 2010, this was reduced to \$16 million in 2011-13, \$20 million in 2015 (a combined 2014-15 round), and then \$10 million in 2016. In 2018-19, \$20 million for volunteer grants was available which represented a combined allocation from the 2017-18 (which was not administered). The feedback provided to grant applicants of the 2017-18 Volunteer Grant round stated that there was a high standard of applications and a very competitive selection process. This indicates a high demand from community organisations in need of these small and flexible grants.

In our Pre-Budget submission, Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies called for the funding allocation for the Volunteer Grants activity to be returned to 2010 levels or \$21 million per annum.

### Concerns with the new process

Volunteering Australia has concerns with both phases of the new approach.

Phase 1, which requires Members of Parliament to nominate groups to apply for funds, has several risks. These include:

- *The varied approaches being taken by Members of Parliament.* Preliminary research suggests that MPs are adopting a range of approaches to identifying nominees. This diversity is inherently problematic given the Volunteer Grants are a national scheme. Many are asking community groups to complete an Expression of Interest (EOI) via an on-line or printable form available on their website. Others are directly mailing community groups in their electorate. These varied approaches place different administrative burden on applicants. That many are using an EOI process adds an additional stage to the application process for applicants. Again, preliminary research suggests MPs are also promoting the grants to varying degrees. For example, some are actively promoting the grants including using their websites and social media. In other electorates, it is difficult to find any information on the grants. It has also been difficult for Volunteering Support Services to promote the grants because of the convoluted process and with MPs able to set their own deadlines for receipt of an EOI. There does not seem to have been any marketing by the department and we understand that many organisations have only heard about the grants via word of mouth. The deadline on the departmental website is misleading as it relates to when MPs need to make nominations, not when community groups needs to register an EOI which is earlier.
- *Poor timing and extra administration.* We are concerned that the opening of the grants just before Christmas and closing soon, following a tumultuous summer for many communities and community organisations, means that many worthy organisations will not have had the chance to apply. This is being compounded by the lack of marketing and the difficulty that some organisations are facing in making contact with their local MP. One example brought to our

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attention is of a community group going to several different offices, but they were closed for the Christmas break. When they were eventually successful in finding an office open, they were told that the grant process had closed (well in advance of the 21<sup>st</sup> February nomination date.) This example came from a regionally removed site, with a part-time office. Rural and remote volunteer involving organisations are likely to face extra barriers with the additional step of having to be nominated by their local MP.

- *Using Members of Parliament as gatekeepers to national funding.* This approach seems to be a largely untested model and may result in unintended consequences. The Stronger Communities Program<sup>3</sup> and the Communities Environment Program<sup>4</sup> both involved MPs nominating groups in a similar fashion to the Volunteer Grants: we have been unable to find any evaluations of this approach. The department has stated that MPs are well placed to identify local needs and priorities. However, as set out in the Guardian article, there are community concerns that certain groups (such as LGBTIQ groups) may face discrimination because their values or interests differ from that of their local MP. There are assessment guidelines that are designed to be used by MPs, and MPs are required to declare any conflicts of interest, but we do not know whether these safeguards will be effective. MPs are politicians and members of a specific political party. Concerns have also been raised that this presents additional risks to the grants being impartially administered. Further, much of the correspondence and forms (used to elicit Expressions of Interest) are branded with the MP's political party, and this may influence which groups apply. Severe power imbalances exist between small volunteer involving organisations and MPs which are likely to bias the process, and which may deter some groups from applying. A further concern relates to giving equal funding to each constituency; allocating grants by electorate does not cater for differences in city, suburban, regional and rural settings.

Phase 2 involves the Community Grants Hub inviting nominated organisations to apply, and then assessing those applications. Volunteering Australia is particularly concerned with the way in which these applications will be assessed:

- *Assessment is on a 'first-come, best dressed' basis.* As stated in the grant guidelines, there is no limit to the number of organisations that an MP can nominate. However, funding is limited to \$66,000 per electorate. The closed non-competitive grant process involves applications being considered in the order in which they are received, until the funding cap is reached. This approach is not merit-based and has the potential to produce serious inequities. Organisations have varying capacity to complete an application expediently and it is an approach likely to favour larger organisations. Further, the department is effectively saying that the grant applications all have equal merit. This diminishes the efforts of volunteering involving organisations as they apply for funding. There are more worthwhile funding needs that others and this should be given the respect it deserves. This aspect of the grant-making could have very serious unintended consequences in terms of 'good use of government funds.'

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.business.gov.au/Grants-and-Programs/Stronger-Communities-Programme>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.environment.gov.au/cep>

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### Policy position

Volunteering Australia will continue to monitor the application process and gather community concerns. However, given the serious risks and concerns that have already come to light, Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies are calling on the government to commit to undertaking an evaluation<sup>5</sup> of the new process, to publishing that evaluation, and to reviewing the grant administration if the evaluation outcomes reveal that the process is discriminatory, politically-biased or has resulted in additional administrative burdens for applicants.

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies continue to urge government to increase funding for the Volunteer Grant program given the continued high demand for these funds and the positive impact they make on volunteering effectiveness.

### 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. 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

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<sup>5</sup> The assessment guidelines state that the 2019-20 Grants program *may* be evaluated to see how well the outcomes and objectives have been achieved, not that it *will be* evaluated.