



**Volunteering Australia**

**Submission in response to *Strong and Resilient Communities (SARC): A paper on the redesign of the Strengthening Communities grants program***

March 2017

Department of Social Services

**Volunteering Australia Contacts**

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### About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering. We work to advance volunteering in the Australian community.

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

We work collectively with the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies listed in Attachment A (**Peaks**) to deliver national, state/territory and local volunteering programs and initiatives in accordance with the Government's priorities.

### Introduction

As part of the 2016-17 Federal Budget it was announced that the Government would be undertaking a redesign of the Strengthening Communities grants program to enable a "greater focus on building strong, resilient and cohesive communities"<sup>i</sup>. In February 2017 the Department of Social Services released its discussion paper outlining the proposed changes that would come under the new Strong and Resilient Communities grants and inviting feedback from the sector.

One of the primary impacts of the grants redesign is that there will no longer be a distinguished pool of funding available for volunteer management. Volunteering Support Services (VSSs) and other volunteer management programs will now be forced to compete alongside other worthwhile and diverse programs from across the Social Services sector for broader grant categories that address "community resilience" and "inclusive communities". This removes a level of certainty for VSSs and forces them to tailor their programs in a way that fails to acknowledge the diversity and breadth of the impact of volunteering in Victorian and Australian communities.

Volunteering Australia holds a range of concerns with the proposed changes and what they will mean for the important work being done in Australian communities by VSSs. Volunteering in Australian communities does not happen on its own and it is not free: it requires consistent, professional management in order to remain responsive to the needs of local communities and sustainable in the face of a decrease in formal volunteer participation overall.

It is our firm position that funding for volunteer management must be maintained at least at current levels (budgeted at \$5.7 million per year under Strengthening Communities) with growth budgeted in line with CPI and against the SCHADS Award. Ideally, we would like to see responsibility for funding of volunteer management returned to the Department of Prime Minister in Cabinet, in recognition of the fact that volunteering responds to whole-of-Government priorities: from the social services to the emergency services, from the arts to learning, from primary health to aged care to sport.

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### **Volunteering Australia's Response to the Proposed SARC Redesign**

Volunteering Australia is understandably concerned about the proposal to remove the specific stream of funding for Volunteer Management that was available under the existing Strengthening Communities grants program. This stream of funding is currently budgeted nationally at \$5.7 million per year, funding a total of 70 volunteer management programs – primarily volunteering support services - in communities across Australia.

In the majority of States and Territories there is no Government program that provides funding for volunteering support services, meaning that for the majority of organisations, the Volunteer Management stream of the Strengthening Communities grants is their sole source of Government funding. A number of the organisations in receipt of this funding exist only because of the Grant, and would certainly close were this funding to conclude. The removal of this stream is therefore viewed by these organisations as a defunding of the sector which reflects a lack of national investment in, or prioritisation of, volunteering in our local communities.

Volunteering Australia is leading a national campaign in partnership with the State and Territory peaks and volunteering support services to draw attention to the work and worth of volunteering support services and the need for reliable funding. As a starting point, this campaign acknowledges that effective, safe, productive and efficient volunteering does not “just happen” and it is not free. It requires expertise, leadership and local knowledge, as well as effective workforce management. This is achieved through the work of secure and resourced community-based volunteering support services.

Based on our recent interactions with political representatives as well as representatives of the Department (including their responses to questions posed by Senator Louise Pratt in Senate Estimates, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2017), it is clear to Volunteering Australia that we must prioritise defining the work of volunteering support services and demonstrating how this represents a separate and equally important tier of management to the work of the State and Territory peaks. While every volunteering support service is different, in general they promote, resource and support volunteering in local communities across Australia. They provide infrastructure in communities to lead, enable and build capacity and capability to recruit and retain volunteers in a wide variety of organisations and services, from the human services and civil society groups, to the emergency services, environmental, animal welfare and sporting and active recreation groups.

In many cases, volunteering support services provide an important linkage in delivering Federal Government programs and priorities. For example, participants in Centrelink's Mutual Obligation program frequently rely on volunteering support services to facilitate their placements – a role that VSSs receive no additional funding for. As the NDIS rolls out across Australia's States and Territories, VSSs will also be called upon to assist in placing volunteers with barriers into roles that will help them to form community connections and build job-ready skills.

This represents one of the most challenging issues that volunteering support services face with current funding arrangements falling under the Department of Social Services: the work of volunteering in local communities in fact crosses all Government departments, and the kind of grants for which we are eligible under the Department of Social Services are inherently limited in their ability to support the work that we do.

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### Response to Specific Questions Raised by DSS in their SARC Redesign Discussion Paper

**1. What are some of the characteristics of a socially cohesive and fully participating community that you believe the Department should address in the grant guidelines and/or consider when assessing applications?**

Volunteering is a critical component of any socially cohesive and fully participating community. We know that volunteering acts as a connector and enriches health and happiness in a way that benefits both the community and the volunteer themselves. The recent Giving Australia report identified that volunteers are more likely to donate to charity than non-volunteers, indicating a greater overarching concern for community resilience and wellbeing<sup>ii</sup>. Volunteering Australia and PwC's *State of Volunteering in Australia 2016* report found that 93% of volunteers saw positive changes as a result of their volunteering efforts and 41% of people participate in volunteering in order to give something back to the community<sup>iii</sup>. Volunteering delivers Government programs and priorities across a range of policy areas and it can also act as an excellent pathway into greater community engagement and employment opportunity.

Yet at the same time, the 2014 General Social Survey found that the number of volunteers in Australia had dropped for the first time in close to twenty years<sup>iv</sup> while the *State of Volunteering in Australia 2016* report identified that 86% of volunteer-involving organisations need more volunteers and that there are critical gaps between the volunteering roles that are available in certain sectors and level of interest in those roles<sup>v</sup>. Many volunteers are looking for informal roles but struggling to connect with those roles in a sector that has traditionally valued and advertised formal volunteering participation. All of these trends point to the need for volunteer management and support services that link volunteers with opportunities in a way that is responsive and innovative.

In the context of all of this information, Volunteering Australia is surprised that the Government would make the decision to do away with the only avenue of federal funding exclusively dedicated to volunteer management. Volunteer management is the "glue" that holds volunteer-involving programs together in local communities.

In assessing applications we most strongly urge the Department and Government to maintain funding for volunteer management at least at current levels (i.e. over \$5.7 million per annum) with annual indexation against CPI and the SCHADS Award in recognition of staffing costs.

**2. How could organisations collaborate to deliver projects in your community? What do you see as some of the potential barriers to organisations collaborating?**

Volunteering support services are already collaborating with local volunteer-involving organisations and community-based services in order to deliver outcomes and placements in communities. For many volunteering support services, this entails the building of close relationships with local government and connected services (for example, public libraries),

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education institutions, volunteer-involving charitable and service organisations, sporting organisations – the list goes on. Collaboration with place-based organisations empowers volunteering support services to put down roots and work hand-in-hand with the local community to deliver responsive services, even where limited resources mean that primary physical infrastructure may be based elsewhere. This kind of place-based collaboration is an important factor in delivering responsive services that are actually relevant to, and utilised by the local community at a grassroots level.

The only challenge to collaboration that we can see arising through this process is “forced collaboration”, which we have seen in other grants programs – where previously unconnected organisations are thrown together to deliver a service that is a departure from their original application for funding or from their standard remit. This also arises where larger “umbrella” style programs are the recipients of funding but then rely on other smaller services who are not direct funding recipients, in order to deliver outcomes. For this reason it is important that collaboration take place in an organic and deliberate way and that wherever possible, funding be directed toward the organisations that are delivering services at a community level.

### **3. What are some of the key issues of national significance relating to community resilience, social cohesion and inclusive communities that you believe require further research, or innovative solutions to help address?**

Volunteering Australia would like to see further research into the role that volunteering can play in acting as an effective pathway into paid employment. The volunteering support services that we represent all report anecdotally that they regularly see volunteers building the skills, capacities and linkages that can support them in their search for paid employment. This has been acknowledged in the Government’s own NDIS materials<sup>vi</sup> and has also been discussed in international research, but has rarely been explored as a research field in the Australian context. We believe that solid and of-the-moment research in this space would lead to a greater focus on volunteering as a pathway to employment and may also result in more funding being made available to support this important work. This is particularly relevant in light of the work that many volunteering support services are regularly called upon to do to support the Government’s Centrelink *Mutual Obligation* program without any additional funding allocation for time spent delivering a Government priority.

Additionally, as all existing volunteering support services are aware, innovative solutions are needed to address the fact that many would-be volunteers are now seeking informal volunteering opportunities and struggling to find them through traditional means. Over 33% of informal volunteers would like further assistance in locating informal volunteering opportunities, and 43% of respondents would support the introduction of a platform to advertise informal volunteering opportunities, according to the *State of Volunteering in Australia 2016* report<sup>vii</sup>. The State of South Australia has sought to address the changing face of volunteering by providing support for Volunteering SA&NT to launch the WeDo phone app in 2016<sup>viii</sup>. It would be good to see DSS providing support for innovative connections between informal volunteers and opportunities that will utilise their skills.

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- 4. The new SARC program will allow funding for three and a half years (with consideration given to offering extensions for up to a further two years for projects of high priority). Does this funding period provide a better guarantee of support to your organisation than the previous Strengthening Communities grants program?**

Volunteering Australia is confused by the proposal to offer grant funding for three and a half years under the proposed SARC program, as this stands in direct contravention to the recommendations made in the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry into the *Impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community service tendering processes by the Department of Social Services* as well as in the Government's own response to that report, both of which acknowledged that five years was the preferred length of time for grants in order to foster consistency and stability:

*The Government remains committed to the implementation of five year grant agreements, where appropriate. We recognise that five year agreements allow community organisations to better undertake long-term business planning and provide consistency of services. This ensures community organisations are able to dedicate more resources to service delivery, rather than administrative processes, in turn providing valuable support to vulnerable Australians.<sup>ix</sup>*

It is unclear to us why the Government went to all of the expense and procedural hassle of conducting a redesign of the DSS Grants program in 2014 (which featured volunteer management as a distinct and separate part of the Strengthening Communities grants pool of funding<sup>x</sup>) only to then announce a further redesign of Strengthening Communities in 2016, with that subsequent redesign then failing to respond to the findings of the Inquiry into the first redesign. The volunteering sector has been dragged through two subsequent periods of great funding uncertainty and distress over a three year period, each of these requiring significant investment of time and resources in responding to the relating inquiries, consultations and changes. We have identified repeatedly that the organisations we represent are small and resource-limited and that this means that every time they are forced to allocate resources to responding to a redesign or applying for a new and unfamiliar grants program, this in turn takes those resources away from other important work that is core to the organisations' day-to-day operations.

Volunteering Australia further remains unconvinced that grants are the best way to respond to funding needs in the volunteer management space. Grants by their nature are suited to projects or programs that are either time-limited or require initial funding to "get off the ground", following which they will be in a position to resource themselves in a sustainable way by generating their own revenue. Neither of these descriptions applies to volunteering, a recurrent and central part of Australian life with ongoing community need and no ability to generate independent revenue due to the fact that it is free by definition. For this reason we will continue to advocate for recurrent ongoing funding for volunteer management and

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volunteering support services, preferably through the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

**5. Would you like to see the Government identify specific areas/locations that require funding? If not, what information would organisations be able to provide to self-identify their community as an area of high need?**

Recommendation 2 of the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry report notes that:

*future tendering processes should be planned strategically, with a clear sense of the service gaps and areas of geographic need, and be based on an assessment of how the tendering process would enhance the capacity of the sector to meet these needs. The Committee acknowledges that in some circumstances, competitive tendering processes may not meet the needs of the community sector, and recommends the adoption of alternative processes to ensure there are no gaps in service provision in the future.<sup>xi</sup>*

The Government response to the Inquiry agreed with this Recommendation. Based on this it is difficult to see how the SARC program could *not* feature geographic need as a determining factor without directly contradicting the Inquiry's findings and the Government's response.

In Volunteering Australia's submission to the Federal Budget 2017-18 we provided the following case study of Victorian programs where the level of funding provided under the current Strengthening Communities program does not appear to reflect or address areas of traditional disadvantage:

Currently the intention of the Volunteer Management Grants is to provide "individual referral, placement and support services to people experiencing disadvantage". In some States and Territories it is felt that there are gaps in the way the Grants have been applied within the context of addressing disadvantage. For example, in Victoria, Volunteer West – which covers the Municipal areas of Hobsons Bay, Melton, Brimbank, Wyndham and Maribyrnong, total 2015 population 718,307 – received annual funding of \$164,898.58 in the 2015 Volunteer Management Grants round, or \$0.22 per head of population; whilst Boroondara Volunteer Research Centre – which covers primarily the Municipal City of Boroondara and immediate surrounds, total 2015 population 174,787 – received \$140,000, or \$0.80 per head of population. Volunteer West services the needs of a growth corridor – in particular the City of Wyndham has the highest level of population growth in all of Victoria, adding 10,202 persons to its population in 2014-15. The SEIFA Index measures relative level of socio-economic disadvantage based on attributes that reflect disadvantage such as low income, low educational attainment, high unemployment, and jobs in relatively unskilled occupations, with high scores indicating low disadvantage and low scores indicating a higher level of disadvantage. The City of Boroondara has a SEIFA Index score of 1097.6 based on the 2011 Census, the second-highest level of advantage in the State of Victoria behind only the Shire of Nillumbik. In comparison, the Cities of Brimbank, Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong,

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Melton and Wyndham have SEIFA Index scores of 904.6, 1001.7, 974.0, 1002.1 and 1013.4 respectively. Brimbank ranks third lowest in Victoria in terms of level of advantage.

Obviously a range of criterion and weightings go into any decision to award grants funding, and we are not arguing here that any one organisation should or should not receive funding; but we do believe that the Grants standards should be applied transparently and consistently, especially where their stated performance criterions respond to “percentage and number of individuals from Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds”, “percentage and number of individuals reporting improved skills and confidence” and “percentage and number of individuals participating in education or training activities”.<sup>xii</sup>

Geographic measures of advantage and representation are an important tool in measuring need and it is particularly in Australia’s regions where lack of resourcing has meant that they have missed out on sustainable and effective volunteer management programs. However, they must be applied consistently and fairly.

**6. As a potential applicant, and based on the information currently available to you, do you see any barriers your organisation might face in applying for funding under SARC? If so, please elaborate.**

The greatest barrier that the volunteering sector faces is that we are no longer assured of a specific pool of funding for the work that we do. This places us in a far less certain position overall and alters the content that we will be required to produce for our applications. Rather than competing amongst peers to demonstrate our success as volunteering service providers, we will now have to compete in a broad pool of social services for niche funding that only recognises our potential to respond to disadvantage. As Senator Pratt pointed out in Estimates, this may lead to volunteer-involving organisations being in a stronger position to apply for funding than the specialist volunteering support services who place and train their volunteers in a way that is less targeted at addressing a specific field of disadvantage.

Volunteering Australia is already concerned by the limited timeframe remaining to undertake the full application process: to advertise grant applications, close applications, assess applicants and notify successful and unsuccessful applicants prior to the end of 2017, with the new grants programs scheduled to commence on 1 January 2018. Based on previous experience, it seems likely that we will not learn the outcome of grants applications until as late as Quarter 4 2017.

For volunteering support services applying to continue or further develop existing programs, this poses major staffing challenges. The short-term nature of the current grants (with six-month extensions being offered on a gradual basis over the past eighteen month period) has already had serious implications on staffing in terms of being able to offer accurate and secure contracts. This has placed the volunteer management sector in an uncompetitive position in terms of being able to attract the best staff and fails to appropriately value the excellent work done by our (overwhelmingly female) workforce.

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In addition, whilst the consultation process around the SARC redesign to date has been inclusive of organisations already receiving DSS funding under the existing Strengthening Communities program, it has not been clear that there have been many opportunities for new or potential applicants to learn about the redesign and prepare prior to the application period. This potentially places those organisations in receipt of existing funding at an unfair disadvantage. Given that it will have been over two years since the last opportunity to apply for new funding, it is important that new and emerging organisations that respond to need in areas with low service, have an equal opportunity to participate.

One of the most consistent pieces of feedback to arise out of the Senate Inquiry into the *Impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community service tendering processes by the Department of Social Services* was the challenge posed by the short turn-around on grant applications of around four weeks. This is simply not enough time for small community-based organisations, many of whom do not have the resources to hire dedicated grants writers and therefore must re-allocate those resources from elsewhere. The Inquiry report recognised this by drawing “attention to the effect that the truncated timelines of the 2014 process had on poor engagement with the sector, which in turn has been expressed in a general sense of stakeholder disenfranchisement” and suggested that the Attorney General consider the introduction of minimum time periods for pre-application, application, the process of signing a contract, and maximum time periods for assessing applications and notifying applicants. Additionally it recommended:

*that the selection criteria for future tender rounds should consider a mechanism such as a weighting on the contribution small, community-based organisations provide to their community beyond the service they are directly funded to provide.<sup>xiii</sup>*

We would like to see applications open for no less than eight weeks, and it would be our preference that all timelines (outlining the application and assessment period including when a final determination on successful applicants will be published) should be made available as soon as possible.

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### Authorisation

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



**Ms Adrienne Picone**

Chief Executive Officer

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### Endorsements

This submission has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies listed in Attachment A.

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### Glossary

<b>Peaks</b>	The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies (listed in Attachment A).
<b>VA</b>	Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering in Australia. It works collectively with the peaks to deliver national, state and local volunteering programs and initiatives.
<b>VIOs</b>	Volunteer-involving organisations are organisations that utilise volunteers as part of their workforce.

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**VSSs** Volunteer support services (also known as volunteer resource centres or volunteer support organisations) provide place-based volunteer support services to volunteers and VIOs in their locality.

<sup>i</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2016) 'Budget 2016-17: Budget Measures, Budget Paper No. 2 2016-17' p145, available online at [http://budget.gov.au/2016-17/content/bp2/download/BP2\\_consolidated.pdf](http://budget.gov.au/2016-17/content/bp2/download/BP2_consolidated.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Australian Government Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership (2016) 'Giving Australia 2016 Factsheet: Individuals – Volunteering', available online at [http://www.communitybusinesspartnership.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/giving\\_australia\\_2016\\_fact\\_sheet\\_-\\_individual\\_volunteering.pdf](http://www.communitybusinesspartnership.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/giving_australia_2016_fact_sheet_-_individual_volunteering.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Volunteering Australia and PwC (April 2016) 'State of Volunteering in Australia', available online at <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/State-of-Volunteering-in-Australia-full-report.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Volunteering Australia (30 June 2015) 'Are time poor Australians abandoning volunteering?', available online at <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/2015/07/are-time-poor-australians-abandoning-volunteering/>

<sup>v</sup> Volunteering Australia and PwC (April 2016) 'State of Volunteering in Australia', available online at <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/State-of-Volunteering-in-Australia-full-report.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> NDIS (2016) 'Examples of services and support', available online at <https://www.ndis.gov.au/people-disability/examples-services-and-support>

<sup>vii</sup> Volunteering Australia and PwC (April 2016) 'State of Volunteering in Australia', available online at <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/State-of-Volunteering-in-Australia-full-report.pdf>

<sup>viii</sup> Volunteering SA&NT (2016) 'WeDo: Making Volunteering Easy', online at <http://wedo.volunteering.sa-nt.org.au/>

<sup>ix</sup> Australian Government (December 2015) 'Australian Government Response to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Report: Impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community services tendering processes by the Department of Social Services', available online at [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01\\_2016/sentate\\_inquiry\\_response.docx](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01_2016/sentate_inquiry_response.docx)

<sup>x</sup> Australian Government Department of Social Services (June 2014) 'DSS Grants – A New Way of Working', available online at [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06\\_2014/honeycomb.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06_2014/honeycomb.pdf)

<sup>xi</sup> Australian Government (December 2015) 'Australian Government Response to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Report: Impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community services tendering processes by the Department of Social Services', available online at [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01\\_2016/sentate\\_inquiry\\_response.docx](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01_2016/sentate_inquiry_response.docx)

<sup>xii</sup> Volunteering Australia (January 2017) '2017-18 Federal Pre-Budget Submission' pp8-9, available online at [https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/files\\_mf/1485229336201718FederalPreBudgetSubmissionFINAL.pdf](https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/files_mf/1485229336201718FederalPreBudgetSubmissionFINAL.pdf)

<sup>xiii</sup> Australian Government (December 2015) 'Australian Government Response to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Report: Impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community services tendering processes by the Department of Social Services', available online at [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01\\_2016/sentate\\_inquiry\\_response.docx](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01_2016/sentate_inquiry_response.docx)