



Submission to the consultation on The National Preventive Health Strategy

September 2020

The National Preventative Health Strategy

Overview

- The National Preventative Health Strategy should recognise the important role that volunteering and the volunteer workforce play in sustaining and enhancing the health and wellbeing of individuals and the wider community. The Strategy should include actions to ensure the contribution of volunteering into the future is sustainable, effective, and inclusive.
- Research evidence consistently demonstrates that volunteering has significant preventative mental and physical health benefits for those who volunteer¹. Volunteers also make substantial contributions to sustaining the health and wellbeing of others - the individuals and communities they serve. Volunteers play vital roles in disability, health, palliative, aged care and community services, as well as sports clubs, the arts, environmental protection and in response to emergencies. Prior to COVID-19, nearly six million Australians volunteered each year².
- Volunteering is facing many challenges, and this jeopardises the health and wellbeing outcomes of volunteering into the future. The challenges include the recent profound impact of COVID19 (with two thirds of volunteers ceasing volunteering³) and ongoing problems resulting from weak resourcing of volunteer management, poor recognition of volunteering, and an overall lack of strategic development and investment.
- All parts of the volunteering ecosystem (which includes volunteers, volunteer involving organisations, volunteer support services, volunteer peak bodies and governments) have important roles to play in sustaining volunteering. The Strategy should reflect this and articulate that the Federal Government has a distinct and vital role to play in providing strategic leadership and investing in resources and infrastructure to enable volunteering to thrive.

Introduction

About the National Preventive Health Strategy

In June 2019, the Minister for Health, the Hon Greg Hunt MP, announced that the Australian Government would develop a 10-year National Preventive Health Strategy (the Strategy). The aim of the Strategy is to provide the overarching, long-term approach to prevention in Australia. It is planned that the Strategy will be developed by March 2021.

¹ For example, see literature review and recent research by Kim et al (2020). Volunteering and subsequent health and well-being in older adults: an outcome-wide longitudinal approach. American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

² See <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/latest-release#volunteering>

³ See <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/research-briefing-the-experience-of-volunteers-during-covid-19/>

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About this submission

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the development of the National Preventative Health Strategy. This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies.

As requested, our submission is grouped under the five consultation questions:

1. Vision and aims: Are the vision and aims appropriate for the next 10 years? Why or why not?
2. Goals: Are these the right goals to achieve the vision and aims of the Strategy? Why or why not? Is anything missing?
3. Mobilising a prevention system: Are these the right actions to mobilise a prevention system?
4. Boosting action in focus areas: Where should efforts be prioritised for the focus areas?
5. Continuing strong foundations: how do we enhance current preventative action?

Currently, the strategy makes no reference to volunteering. Overall, we urge that volunteering, its scale and diversity, and the power it has to sustain health and wellbeing, is recognised and included in the National Preventative Health Strategy.

[Shaded text is drawn from the consultation document.]

Consultation questions and responses

1. Vision and aims: Are the vision and aims appropriate for the next 10 years? Why or why not?

The Strategy will be designed to improve the health of all Australians at all stages of life, through early intervention, better information, targeting risk factors and addressing the broader causes of health and wellbeing. The Strategy will aim to ensure:

- *Australians have the best start in life*
- *Australians live as long as possible in good health*
- *Australians with more needs have greater gains*
- *Investment in prevention is increased*

Response:

The high-level vision and aims should recognise that volunteering is an important factor in lifetime wellbeing. Volunteering occurs across the lifecycle⁴:

⁴ All data taken from the 2014 GSS – <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/latest-release> The 2019 GSS volunteering data will be available end September 2020.

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- Many people are introduced to volunteering through high school programs. In 2014, those aged 15-17 volunteer had the highest rate of volunteering in Australia, with 41 per cent of young people in this age group volunteering each year.
- People aged 35-44 are the next most likely to volunteer with 39 per cent volunteering, often in relation to children's schools and sports clubs.
- Those aged between 65-74 have the third highest volunteering rate with 35 per cent of people volunteering. This group is more likely to volunteer in health and community organisations than other cohorts.
- Volunteering is often maintained well into old age, long after paid work opportunities have ceased. One in four (24 per cent) of people 75 years and older volunteer.

The Strategy should recognise the diversity of volunteering in Australia. The term 'volunteering' covers a wide diversity of activities in Australian society. It includes 'formal volunteering' that takes place within organisations in a structured way and 'informal volunteering' that occurs in the community.

Evidence on the link between volunteering and improved health and wellbeing is particularly strong for older age groups. The results of a recent longitudinal study in the US⁵ demonstrated that adults over 50 who volunteer for at least 100 hours a year (about two hours per week) have a substantially reduced risk of mortality and developing physical limitations, higher levels of subsequent physical activity, and an improved sense of well-being later on compared to individuals who do not volunteer. Based on this and previous studies, the authors suggest that government policies should encourage more volunteerism. As they highlight⁶, volunteering policies and programs can "simultaneously enhance society and foster a trajectory of healthy ageing in the rapidly growing population of older adults."

In relation to mental health, a recent ANU study⁷ explored levels of life satisfaction, psychological distress and loneliness between volunteers and non-volunteers during the early stages of COVID-19. The impact of COVID-19 on life satisfaction and psychological distress varied by volunteering behaviour over the period, with those who managed to continue volunteering during COVID-19 faring much better. Those people who were able to continue volunteering experienced a significantly and substantially smaller decline in life satisfaction and psychological distress than those who stopped volunteering and those who had never volunteered in the first place. Levels of loneliness were also lower for those who were able to continue volunteering.

⁵ Kim et al (2020). Volunteering and subsequent health and well-being in older adults: an outcome-wide longitudinal approach. American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

⁶ Ibid. page 184.

⁷ <https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/experience-volunteers-during-early-stages-covid-19-pandemic>

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This evidence base has led to volunteering being promoted as contributing to good health. For example, the Australian Government's Health Direct⁸ service promotes the benefits of volunteering and the Head to Health⁹ website includes volunteering as one of the 'purposeful activities' that can support good mental health. In the UK, volunteering is one of the activities that doctors can recommend as part of 'social prescribing' initiatives¹⁰ which connect people with non-medical help in communities.

2. Goals: Are these the right goals to achieve the vision and aims of the Strategy? Why or why not? Is anything missing?

The Strategy will focus effort on the following six goals by 2030, prioritising effort for those with greater needs including in rural and remote locations.

The goals of the strategy should reflect the importance of volunteering to individual and community wellbeing. Under each of the proposed goals, we have highlighted where and how volunteering should be included.

Goal 1 - Different sectors, including across governments at all levels, will work together to address complex prevention challenges

The volunteering sector is an important partner in this, working with governments and other partners across society.

Goal 2 - Prevention will be embedded in the health system

As part of embedding prevention in the health system, social prescribing¹¹ should be considered in the Australia context. Volunteering and enhanced community participation is one of the 'treatments' that doctors can prescribe.

Goal 3 - Environments will support health and healthy living

We should be considering environments where people 'live, work, learn and play' (page 14 of the Strategy) **and volunteer**.

Goal 4 - Communities across Australia will be engaged in prevention

Place-based volunteering programs should be recognised as important contributors to communities engaging in prevention.

Goal 5 - Individuals will be enabled to make the best possible decisions about their health

⁸ <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/benefits-of-volunteering>

⁹ <https://headtohealth.gov.au/meaningful-life/purposeful-activity/volunteering>

¹⁰ For explanation, see Drinkwater, C., Wildman, J. and Moffatt, S., 2019. Social prescribing. *Bmj*, 364, p.l1285.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

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Volunteering is 'time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain'¹². As such, volunteering is an activity where individuals exercise agency¹³ and contribute willingly to maintaining their own health and wellbeing

Goal 6 - Prevention efforts will be adapted to emerging issues and new science

Volunteering is adapting in the context of recent crises and ongoing trends, for example there has been growth in virtual volunteering¹⁴ and corporate volunteering¹⁵ over the last decade, and more recently an upsurge of informal volunteering¹⁶ in communities and neighbourhoods during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of prevention efforts, it will be important to leverage these changes.

3. Mobilising a prevention system: Are these the right actions to mobilise a prevention system?

The Strategy will focus on seven enablers to create a more effective and integrated prevention system. Workforce underpins all seven enablers in mobilising a prevention system. It was highlighted during consultations that building the capacity and capability of the workforce, both current and emerging, will be integral to achieving success. The seven enablers are:

- Information and literacy skills
- Health system action
- Partnerships
- Leadership and governance
- Preparedness
- Research and evaluation
- Monitoring and Surveillance

Response:

As highlighted in the consultation document, workforce issues underpin all seven enablers and that building the capacity and capability of the workforce is critical. The volunteering workforce is part of the nation's overall workforce. In several important government-funded services, for example health care, aged care, disability care and community services, volunteers work alongside paid employees as part of the workforce.

¹² <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/definition-of-volunteering/#/>

¹³ 'Agency' in the sociological sense: that is, they have the ability to act and be agents of their own development.

¹⁴ Virtual volunteering is done remotely through online and digital platforms.

¹⁵ Corporate volunteering is where paid staff engage in volunteering during work.

¹⁶ Informal volunteering is undertaken outside the context of a formal organisation, for example directly assisting people in your community or neighbourhood.

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The aged care sector provides a useful example. In aged care¹⁷, volunteers are integral to the aged care workforce in both residential and home settings. The 2016 National Aged Care Workforce Census and Survey¹⁸ estimated that volunteers are engaged extensively across aged care, with 83 per cent of residential facilities and 51 per cent of home care and home support outlets engaging the services of volunteers. Some services, such as Meals on Wheels¹⁹, are delivered primarily by volunteers. Volunteers are not 'discretionary' in aged care – they provide care and support that is central to the overall wellbeing of older people.

Volunteering is time freely given, but enabling volunteering is not free. Like paid workers, volunteers need induction, training, and ongoing management. Funding needs to be available to support volunteering programs, to comply with sector standards and legislative requirements, and to cover costs of volunteering (e.g. insurance and expenses).

4. Boosting action in focus areas: Where should efforts be prioritised for the focus areas?

Six focus areas have been identified to boost prevention action in the first years of the Strategy and to impact health outcomes across all stages of life:

- Reducing tobacco use
- Improving consumption of a healthy diet
- Increasing physical activity
- Increasing cancer screening
- Improving immunisation coverage
- Reducing alcohol and other drug-related harm

These are important focus areas. We would like to suggest a further focus area - *increasing community participation and volunteering*. Being socially connected and having meaning and purpose in life is fundamental to health and wellbeing. Volunteering can deliver these benefits. Given the power of volunteering and community participation to improve health, a distinct focus area is merited.

5. Continuing strong foundations: How do we enhance current preventative action?

Volunteering is one of the foundations of preventative health, bringing benefits to the individual volunteer and the wider community they serve. However, volunteering is facing many challenges, and this jeopardises the health and wellbeing outcomes of volunteering into the future. The challenges include the recent profound impact of COVID19 (with two thirds of volunteers ceasing

¹⁷ For further information, see our submission to the Aged Care Royal Commission https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-Australia-submission-to-the-Aged-Care-Royal-Commission_Jul-2020.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/work-res>

¹⁹ <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/submission/AWF.660.00126.0001.pdf>

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volunteering) and ongoing problems resulting from weak resourcing of volunteer management, poor recognition of volunteering, and an overall lack of strategic development and investment.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) apply in Australia and overseas, and one of the SDGs concerns health and wellbeing²⁰. Increasingly volunteerism is being understood on the global stage as central to achieving the SDGs. It is being promoted as a powerful way of engaging people in civic activities and realising the individual and community benefits this brings. The Australian Government's review of the SDGs²¹ articulated the importance of volunteering in the Australian context, for example highlighting successful volunteering programs in Indigenous communities. This recognition of the value of volunteering needs to be extended to the National Preventative Health Strategy.

The National Preventative Health Strategy should recognise the important role that volunteering plays in sustaining the health and wellbeing of individuals and the wider community, and include actions to ensure the contribution of volunteering into the future is sustainable, effective and inclusive.

Conclusion

Volunteering has a vital role to play in securing the nation's health and wellbeing. But it must not be taken for granted. Volunteering needs support, recognition, and investment if it is to meet its preventative health potential in the future. The Strategy should reflect that the federal Government has a distinct and vital role to play in providing strategic leadership and investing in resources and infrastructure to enable volunteering to thrive.

²⁰ <https://sdgs.org.au/goal/good-health-and-well-being/>

²¹ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/aid/topics/development-issues/2030-agenda/Pages/sustainable-development-goals>

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Authorisation

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



Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer

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.

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