

Submission on the aged care data strategy

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Overview

Volunteers are an essential but distinct component of Australia's aged care workforce. However, data collection on volunteer involvement in the sector has become less comprehensive in recent years, making it difficult to assess trends and plan for the future of aged care volunteering.

Volunteering Australia makes the following points for consideration in the development of the proposed aged care data strategy:

- Volunteers are included in key Government initiatives which must interface with the aged care data strategy, such as the Aged Care Workforce Strategy. Ensuring that volunteers are consistently included in data collection efforts in the sector is vital to the success of these initiatives.
- Data on volunteers in the aged care sector has become less comprehensive over time.
- High-quality data on the involvement of volunteers in aged care is crucial to meeting the stated purpose of the aged care data strategy.
- In particular, high-quality data on the involvement of volunteers in aged care is central to one of the aims of the data strategy which is to support "services and providers to improve their provision of safe, high-quality and dignified care."

Introduction

Background and context

Volunteers are a vital part of the aged care workforce, as recognised in the Aged Care Workforce Strategy¹. The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety recommendation 44² stipulated how the Australian Government should promote volunteers and volunteering in aged care to support older people to live meaningful and dignified lives.

About the consultation

The Australian Department of Health and Aged Care (the department) and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare are partnering to develop an Aged Care data strategy (data strategy). This is in response to the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety recommendations 67 and 108 which concerned improving aged care data governance. The intention is that the data strategy will align with other relevant strategies, including: the 2022-25 Data strategy; the Aged care digital strategy; the Aged care workforce strategy; the Aged care workforce action plan; and the National ageing and aged care research strategy.

¹ <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/a-matter-of-care-australias-aged-care-workforce-strategy>

² The full list of the Royal Commission's recommendations available here <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au>

About the submission

This submission responds to the current Information Guide³ on the data strategy. The department has stated that another guide will be released as the data strategy is refined and prior to its planned release in 2024.

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

Current data on volunteers in aged care

Currently, it is difficult to find comprehensive data on the involvement of volunteers in aged care. The most widely-used official source on volunteering in Australia is the General Social Survey administered by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. However, while the General Social Survey does include proportions and estimates of volunteer numbers by type of organisations, aged care is not included as a dedicated category.⁴

The most important data source is the Aged Care Workforce Census, which was conducted in 2016 and in 2020. The 2020 Aged Care Workforce Census measured the number of volunteers across the three service types (Residential Aged Care, Home Care Packages programs, Commonwealth Home Support Program) as well as the impact of COVID-19 on the workforce and the volunteers.

In comparison, the 2016 Aged Care Workforce Census collected data on workforce in Residential Care, as well as Home Care & Home Support programs (as a singular category). This means it is difficult to compare some of the data from the two censuses. The 2016 Census also provided additional information, not captured in the 2020 Census. The 2016 Census measured the extent of volunteering with respect to the ownership type of the facility (government, non-profit, for-profit), the distribution of volunteers by location (using the categories 'Major cities of Australia,' 'Inner Regional Australia,' 'Outer Regional Australia,' 'Remote Australia,' 'Very Remote Australia'), the roles undertaken by the volunteers across residential and home care and support services, and the average number of hours across each service type.

Ensuring that aged care data is comparable and captures adequate detail could greatly improve the usability and leverage of future data collection efforts in the sector. For this reason, ensuring the comparability and comprehensiveness of workforce data, which should include volunteers, should be considered as a key outcome of the aged care data strategy.

³ <https://agedcareengagement.health.gov.au/engage/improve-data/>

⁴ Data on aged care volunteering was recently collected as part of the *Volunteering in Australia* research project. The category 'Aged Care' was included in surveys of volunteer involving organisations and the general Australian population to capture data on aged care organisations that involve volunteers and on people who volunteer in the aged care sector. While this provides some broad insights on how volunteering in aged care compares to other sectors, it does not provide comprehensive workforce information such as detail on volunteer roles or the geographic distribution of volunteers across aged care facilities.

Volunteering data and the purpose of the aged care data strategy

Volunteering data is essential to fulfilling the aims of a comprehensive data strategy which supports “services and providers to improve their provision of safe, high-quality and dignified care.” Research has demonstrated that volunteers contribute significantly to the aged care sector, supporting the delivery of “person-centred care” and helping to build social capital in aged care settings.⁵

Further, volunteer involvement in the aged care workforce is central to other government strategies which the aged care data strategy aims to support. For example, the contributions of volunteers and the significance of volunteering as a pathway to employment in the aged care sector are both acknowledged in *A matter of care: Australia’s Aged Care Workforce Strategy*.⁶ Ensuring that high-quality data on volunteering activity in the aged care sector is consistently and regularly collected is necessary to support the implementation of this strategy.

Recommendations

In support of the purpose of the aged care data strategy, particularly its aim to support “services and providers to improve their provision of safe, high-quality and dignified care,” Volunteering Australia makes the following recommendations:

1. Prioritise regular, comparable, and comprehensive workforce data as a key outcome of the aged care data strategy.
2. Consistently include volunteers in the collection of data on the aged care workforce.
 - Where possible, information about the types of roles, hours contributed, and demographic information on aged care volunteers should be collected.
3. Engage key actors in the volunteering ecosystem, including the state and territory volunteering peak bodies, aged care providers that engage volunteers, in future consultation on data collection in the aged care sector.

⁵ <https://www.volunteeringwa.org.au/assets/downloads/the-jacaranda-project-final-report-jan-10-2020.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/a-matter-of-care-australia-s-aged-care-workforce-strategy.pdf>

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

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