



VolunteerWest

SUBMISSION

Review of Volunteer Management Activity

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Introduction

Volunteer West's mission is to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Melbourne's west through volunteering that empowers and engages. Operating in a growth region, the breadth of our geographic reach is significant, covering 6 local government areas with an estimated population of 880,000 people and a diverse demographic mix that gives the region its unique strengths and challenges.

Volunteer West welcomes the Review as an opportunity to take stock and improve service delivery at the VRC level, at the sector level and the government levels (Commonwealth, State and local governments).

As we understand it from the Review forums, a core question to be answered by the Review process is, where along the spectrum of capacity building should funding be directed so that there is a clear purpose for VMA funding? From our reading of the *Report on the Review of the Volunteer Management Activity*¹, the early steer is seemingly towards IT-based enablers, and rationalisation of VSS service-providers to a leaner spoke-and-hub/outreach model.

The policy frame: Volunteering as movement-building

However, in our consultations to date across our networks (that includes community-based organisations, peer VRCs in Victoria and Australia, differing peak bodies), this Review is a long-awaited 'critical juncture'² for governments – and the sector – to make transformational change to volunteering, especially now with COVID implications. To move toward transformational change, we advocate for a shift from a contracted-services-delivery policy frame to a 'movement-building approach'³ that sees volunteering as an instrumental component in addressing complex social issues and building community resilience, especially in a post-pandemic world. To this end, we propose two elements for consideration in the Review during the co-design phase.

¹ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/12_2019/accessible-version-report-review-volunteer-management-activity.pdf

² Cerna, 2013. 'The Nature of Policy Change and Implementation: A Review of Different Theoretical Approaches'. OECD.
<http://search.oecd.org/education/ceri/The%20Nature%20of%20Policy%20Change%20and%20Implementation.pdf>

³ Cabaj & Weaver, 2016. 'Collective Impact 3.0: An evolving framework for community change'. Canada: Tamarack Institute.



Revisiting Place-based Leadership in Volunteering: Coalition building activity

A movement-building approach to volunteering sees intrinsic value in investing *intentionally* in the *activity of building & maintaining coalitions of organisations*, especially in peri-urban, regional and rural regions. These coalitions, formal, informal & organic, provide the critical – often intangible – social capital for community resilience in times of disaster (eg bushfires) and pandemics as can be seen currently.⁴

This coalition-building effort goes above and beyond the traditional model of membership-based networks (eg peak bodies) and information-sharing networks. These coalitions need to be place-based and cross-sectoral (public sector especially local councils, NGOs/community-based organisations, private sector organisations). The coalitions would be focused on strengthening access to meaningful volunteering participation as the common goal. This is occurring organically and informally currently, and we suggest more so during COVID-times. We therefore advocate that the next step of the Review co-design process be informed by action-research into emergent coalition-based responses during this time⁵. This research should be conducted by an independent body⁶ through academic-practitioner collaborations between universities and VRCs to ensure findings informed by practice-based applied knowledge.

VRCs are already taking on this responsibility of coalition-building for strengthening volunteering. VRCs have place-based advantages: local networks, grass-roots understanding of the social and community context (demographics, needs, strengths, particularly local champions to galvanise community), and a mandate focused on volunteering in their region. This movement-building approach means that a discrete outcome is a robust and adaptive coalition in and of itself, in addition to existing traditional outcomes of matched volunteers and better volunteer management practices. The current VMA outcomes framework is

⁴ Coalitions ‘often contain elements of one or more of the following:

- *Influencing or developing public policy, usually around a specific issue.*
- *Changing people's behavior* (reducing smoking or drug use, for instance).
- *Building a healthy community.* This term generally refers both to the community 's physical health (which may include not only medical and preventive or wellness services, but the environment, community planning, housing, hunger, substance abuse, and other factors) and its social and psychological health (encompassing diversity, education, culture and the arts, violence prevention, youth development, employment, economic development, mental health and other human services, etc.).

See <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/promotion-strategies/start-a-coalition/main>

⁵ For example, research by the Bushfire and Natural Hazard Cooperative Research Centre, <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/research/communityresilience>

⁶ For example, through the creation of a Volunteering Cooperative Research Centre supported by government agency members, peak volunteering bodies and networks and VRCs.

predicated on input-output metrics such as the number of people referred or VIO trained/supported, and misses important second-order collective impacts that require well-designed evaluations using tools such as social network analysis, or metrics to capture the contribution of volunteering to social capital.

This shifts the frame of the volunteering sector as a services-marketplace akin to the employment services sector (implicit in the Review Report and thus narrows the discourse and solution-finding to a false dichotomy of choice between investing in VRCs or investing in VIOs⁷) to seeing volunteering activity as a critical community development activity.⁸ This distinction in policy framing is critical when we consider the value of volunteering in redressing disadvantage experienced by vulnerable and disadvantaged communities.⁹ In particular, the value of informal volunteering needs to be better captured and supported as discussed later.

Volunteering confidence

The policy challenge at hand is to foster an ecosystem that is conducive – and sustains – all styles of volunteering experiences. And one *collective impact* in this ecosystem (comprising of diverse actors and mandates) is to improve ‘volunteering-confidence’.

‘Volunteering-confidence’ is a concept we advance as a way to assess the impact of collective efforts to help community members feel confident to find and undertake volunteer placements, and to have the awareness and ability to assert their rights. For example, surveys can measure the collective impact of education & awareness campaigns that equip formal and informal volunteers with ‘confidence’ to make volunteering safe¹⁰ and meaningful for themselves. On the flip side, ‘volunteer confidence’ means VIOs’ confidence

⁷ See page 6 for one such example.

⁸ VRCs do more than provide VSS services. VRCs fundraise, lobby and advocate, support and build networks with organisations across all sectors, write submissions, represent community voices at consultations, provide governance advice, mediate disputes, all of which require tremendous time and effort within a larger remit of community development work. In Volunteer West’s case, these activities are carried out by a workforce comprising of staff, volunteers (including volunteer Board members) supported by DSS funding nominally for one full-time position. The Review Report does not adequately acknowledge these operational challenges faced by VRCs in its identification of the shortcomings of the system to efficiently deliver VSS services.

⁹ There is ample evidence from community and international development research, and well recognised by local government strategies. Examples: *Volunteering Strategy for Wyndham City* 2019/24 at <https://theloop.wyndham.vic.gov.au/volunteer-strategy>; and *The Role of Volunteering in Sustainable Development*, 2015, https://www.vsointernational.org/sites/default/files/the_role_of_volunteering_in_sustainable_development_2015_vso_ids.pdf

¹⁰ Formal volunteering places confer legal and regulatory protections for volunteers.



in recruiting and managing a volunteer workforce (including knowledge of and implementation of the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement).

A 'volunteer-confidence' index, formed from a suite of indicators, can track the behavioural changes or the strength of the volunteering movement as the cumulative outcome of activities undertaken in the ecosystem (information provision, recognition, training, coalition-building etc); and can include traditional input-output performance indicators. This approach drew inspiration from the consumer policy and health sectors where behavioural change¹¹ is one of many intended effects of government intervention. We note however that achieving behavioural change can be difficult¹² and requires sustained effort. We thus advocate for inquiry and research to explore and learn from consumer policy and health sectors.¹³

Digital divide

Investment in digital tools and shared-service platforms provide the first order resources to lift the capacity and confidence of volunteers and VIOs to access information, training, identify opportunities and match themselves. However, as we are now learning during these COVID times is that while digital can go some way, it cannot be a complete replacement of the necessary in-person, face-to-face support.

Indeed physical distancing during COVID-times has produced new and adaptive social practices such as digital-based ways of being socially connected; but in other respects, social isolation and marginalisation have been exacerbated and heightened in certain corners of community that we are still learning about (such as the digital-literacy and digital-access divides, loneliness and mental illness).

Therefore to answer the question of where along the capacity building spectrum should government funding be directed, we advocate that one clear purpose for VMA funding is to invest in this face-to-face, in-person work by place-based VRCs, especially now that there is a greater imperative to address social exclusion and social collapse in parts of the community.

This necessary human-dynamic work is best supported - and not replaceable - by *enabling* digital tools that reduce the compliance and operational burden and free VRCs to focus on their core work. For example, in Volunteer West's experience, we have had to spend

¹¹ <https://www.apsc.gov.au/changing-behaviour-public-policy-perspective>

¹² See note 11.

¹³ See for example Warr D, Dickinson H, Olney S, Hargrave J, Karanikolas A, Kasidis V, Katsikis G, Ozge J, Peters D, Wheeler J, Wilcox M, 2017, *Choice, control and the NDIS: Service users' perspectives on having choice and control in the new National Disability Insurance Scheme*, Melbourne Social Equity Institute, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, <https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/projects/choice-control-and-the-ndis>



considerable time, resources and funds to develop DEX reporting plug-ins and workarounds to fulfil our reporting obligations. VMA funding can be invested in the development of *enabling* digital platforms and tools that are tested by VRCs and are *customisable* by VRCs.

Here, we digress to challenge the assumption of duplication across VRCs. A high-level view can mistake as duplication the innovation, responsiveness and customisation that occur organically at local levels. Where there is duplication, they can be redressed by better coordination through coalitions (discussed above), communities-of-practice, or through the development of shared service solutions or platforms.

We do not support the rationalisation approach (implicit in the Review Report) along the lines of what transpired in the employment services sector¹⁴. In this regard, a cautionary lesson needs to be taken from the employment services sector, where a narrow focus on matching outcomes and rationalisation resulted in service delivery focused on easier-to-place clients, with the unintended policy outcome of entrenching social exclusion of harder-to-place clients such as the long-term unemployed; and thus the system fails in its objective for a large segment of Australian society.¹⁵ Relatedly, as Australia comes out of the post-COVID world with high unemployment rates, we seek to highlight an area of growing unmet needs that requires a specific focus for the short to medium term as discussed later.

Integrating Informal Volunteering into the Volunteering ‘Movement Building’ approach

Volunteer West recognises that the effort on professionalising the sector is necessary and important work to enhance formal volunteering experiences. To that end, we support the Review’s impetus for further improvements to formal volunteering as a starting point.

However, Volunteer West advocates that a holistic approach to emerging volunteering styles is needed now more than ever, and in turn support the emerging social connections needed to tackle the negative impacts of COVID on the community. As post-disaster recovery empirical research has shown, volunteering is instrumental to community rebuilding, and there is a need to develop ‘models that are more flexible, adaptive and inclusive of newer and diverse volunteering styles’.¹⁶

¹⁴ Olney, 2016. *False economy: New Public Management and the welfare-to-work market in Australia*. University of Melbourne.

¹⁵ See Olney, note 14.

¹⁶ See Bushfire and Natural Hazard Cooperative Research Centre, <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/research/communityresilience>



The Review Report excludes informal volunteering¹⁷; and given CALD community members tend to engage in informal volunteering,¹⁸ Volunteer West finds the exclusion perplexing and regrettable.

Informal and non-formal¹⁹ volunteering is a growing segment of the volunteering sector and needs to be explicitly part of the VMA envelop of policy and programmatic work for government and VRCs. Therefore, the Review thus needs to draw on or commission research into informal volunteering to establish an evidence-base to guide policy responses and program design in the sector.²⁰ These COVID times provide a critical window of opportunity to gather emergent volunteering practices.

Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment

Volunteering has been widely recognised and promoted as a pathway to employment. This is increasingly a driver of demand for volunteering opportunities. It is worthwhile emphasising here that volunteers want to give back to the community, and volunteers are not necessarily job seekers who come in get matched and then end up in a job. Thus the mandate for the ‘volunteering sector’ remains meaningful access to inclusive volunteering so all people can contribute to their community.²¹

Nonetheless, this is one area that Volunteer West believes we need to cross the traditional demarcation between VRCs and employment service providers, and stretch our imagination to design and deliver support mechanisms for this growing cohort of volunteers. We observe that VRCs and employment service providers rely on cross-subsidisation and leveraging of additional funding from other sources to run programs that address service gaps²². Therefore, it would be very challenging to do so within the current funding envelope.

To that end, in the recent 2019-20 Pre-Budget Submission statement by Volunteering Australia, the sector advocated for the Commonwealth government to allocate ‘\$5 million toward Volunteering Support Services and digital solutions as part of pre-employment

¹⁷ See page 8.

¹⁸ In Victoria, amongst volunteers from CALD communities, 72% are involved in informal volunteering (Volunteering Australia 2006), from Circa, 2016, *Giving and volunteering in culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous communities – Literature Review*, www.communitybusinesspartnership.gov.au

¹⁹ <https://www.communitydoor.org.au/volunteer-management/non-formal-volunteering>

²⁰ See for example the ‘Spontaneous Volunteer Strategy - Coordination Of Volunteer Effort in the Immediate Post Disaster Stage’ (funded through the Australian Government’s National Emergency Management Projects (NEMP)).

²¹ See VVSN submission.

²² We note also that in contrast to operational funding for VRCs, employment service providers are funded for placements.



programs'.²³ This would go some way - but not enough - to address the needs of volunteers seeking a pathway to employment, especially as there will be high rates of unemployment post-COVID-times. We acknowledge that there is a wealth of digital and online resources (Australian and international) available. We would posit that the challenge for the individual is the filtering of this information and the 'just-in-time' use when the need arises, and this may need to be mediated by a support person. This support person could be a friend, or by the time people come to a VRC, a staff member or volunteer at a VRC.

In our experience, volunteer-to-job cohorts who come to Volunteer West look to develop confidence, transferrable skills, and to develop networks. We see that this 'volunteer-to-job confidence' component of work (in our roles as a VRC and as a VIO) needs greater investment to develop dedicated services, resources²⁴ and linkages. We are seeing the emergence of organisations such as 'Work and Learning Centres' that are collaborations between the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Jobs Victoria (Vic Gov) and local community agencies providing pre-employment services such as career guidance and job service training, foundation skill courses to improve work-readiness, amongst others²⁵. Volunteer West does not seek to duplicate these services, but rather facilitate the reach and access to these services for our community members. Our goal is to provide a supported journey for our volunteers with greater volunteer-to-job confidence as a result of our intervention and support²⁶. There are clearly unmet needs for volunteer-to-job cohorts and they can get lost in the system(s). There are clear opportunities for government to facilitate and invest in cross-sector collaboration to fulfil this area of need.

²³ https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/files_mf/1548911493FINAL_VolunteeringAustralia201920PreBudgetSubmission.pdf

²⁴ See for example <http://www.hvc.org.au/programs/volunteer-pathway-to-employment/>

²⁵ We note Jobs Victoria's mandate is to address gaps in employment programs: <https://jobs.vic.gov.au/about-jobs-victoria/who-we-are,-what-we-do>.

²⁶ On the need for such 'clear progression pathways', see Queensland Government, 2012 *Volunteering Report*, page 32, <https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/resources/dcdss/community/volunteering/2012-report-on-volunteering.pdf>



About Volunteer West

Volunteer West's mission is to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Melbourne's west through volunteering that empowers and engages. The breadth of our geographic reach is significant, covering 6 local government areas with an estimated population of 880,000 people, with the region's unique community strengths and challenges as a growth area.

Volunteer West's focus is inclusive volunteering experiences that sustain personal wellbeing and build community resilience. We do this by:

- Supporting community members to find volunteer opportunities. Our strength is providing personalised guidance and support through a volunteer-for-volunteers model;
- Providing training and support to coordinators and managers of volunteers, and to organisations that run volunteering programs;
- Advocate for the growth of socially inclusive volunteering - in all its forms - across Melbourne's west;
- Advance volunteering leadership through research and evaluations.

Given our size and the challenge of servicing a fifth of Melbourne's metro population, we work through collaborations and coalitions to deliver services that reach diverse communities and meet service needs across the region.