



2021-2022 ACT Pre-Budget Submission

June 2021

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VolunteeringACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra region. VolunteeringACT pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their vital ongoing contribution to our lands.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges volunteers of all genders and sexualities, with all abilities and from all cultures. Their skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering services and programs, and in making Canberra a better place to live. We also acknowledge the contribution of the volunteer involving organisations that contribute to the health and happiness of our community.

VolunteeringACT

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Recommendations

VolunteeringACT makes the following recommendations for inclusion in the 2021-2022 ACT Budget:

1. The funding of consultation-based research into the volunteering experience in the ACT, exploring how to support the increased demand for spontaneous and informal volunteering during Canberra's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. The formulation of a new *Volunteering Strategy for the ACT*.

Overview

Recent research on the state of volunteering resoundingly demonstrates the sector has not recovered from the unprecedented disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this research does not tell us how the pandemic has changed the needs and interests of both volunteers and the organisations that engage them. The numbers on volunteering are clear, but the changes responsible for these trends are not. Based on the current data, combined with leading research on the volunteering sector, VolunteeringACT identifies two aspects of the volunteering landscape that need to be urgently examined: 1) growing demand for and participation in informal volunteering, and 2) the challenges facing volunteer involving organisations in attracting and engaging the volunteers they need to provide services in the ACT.

What we know

Recent research on the state of volunteering in Australia highlights a number of trends. Most significantly:

The number of Australians who volunteer reduced significantly during the pandemic.

Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods compared data collected in 2019, 2020 and 2021 to assess the impact of the pandemic on volunteering. The data shows that the number of people volunteering in the ACT decreased dramatically during the pandemic, from 30 percent in late 2019 to 24.8 as of April 2021.¹ Of those who ceased volunteering during the height of the pandemic, just over half have since returned to volunteering, even though lockdown and social distancing restrictions have been eased or removed entirely. Whilst this data demonstrates an alarming downward trend in participation, it does not identify which roles and sectors were most affected, or which services are running under capacity as a result.

Fewer formal volunteering opportunities are available. Organisations are advertising fewer volunteering roles. The number of roles advertised from February 2020 – February 2021 declined by 30 percent compared to the previous 12 months. This aligns with the findings of our April 2020 Member Survey that found 72 percent of volunteer involving organisations in the Canberra region had to stand down their volunteer workforce. A national survey conducted by Volunteering Australia in December 2020 found that volunteering programs have not fully recovered, with 72 percent of organisations reporting their volunteering programs were either only partially operational or not at all operational.² Concurrently, 43 percent of volunteer involving organisations reported an increase in demand for services, and 56 percent reported that they need more volunteers.³

More people are seeking informal roles. According to the recent State of Volunteering in Queensland report, the number of volunteers in Queensland actually increased in 2020 compared to 2019.⁴ In an Australian first, this report captured both formal and informal volunteering, and found that

30.3 percent of volunteers donated their time exclusively in informal contexts, compared to 14.1 percent who volunteered exclusively through volunteer involving organisations.⁵ Further, almost a third of organisations reported an increase in the desire of people to volunteer occasionally, as opposed to regular hours.⁶ This seemingly contradictory data demonstrates the imperative to better understand informal volunteering and to re-assess volunteer motivations to map forward trends.

What we need to know

It is clear that declining volunteering rates are creating a gap between demand for volunteer services and supply of volunteers. However, this data does not tell us which aspects of the volunteering experience are changing, or the kinds of measures that could attract more people to volunteering roles. Our analysis of the available research, combined with the feedback gathered from VolunteeringACT Members, reveals two key gaps in the data.

1. Understanding the motivations of informal volunteers and how to support them. Firstly, while the growing demand for informal, non-ongoing roles is evident, the reasons for this increase in demand are not. In particular, it is puzzling that even Australians who volunteered formally and consistently before the pandemic, and who recognise its profound benefits, have not returned to volunteering. Without further research it is not possible to identify why volunteering in the ACT is currently at its lowest rate in recent history. It could be the case that conflicting priorities, such as caring responsibilities or changed working conditions have affected the ability of many to volunteer. However, given that the ACT was not subject to the same COVID-19 conditions, such as mandatory lockdowns, as our interjurisdictional counterparts we suggest this does not tell the full story. A comprehensive policy response to the drastic decline in formal volunteering in the ACT will need to be guided by a stronger understanding of the determinants of role satisfaction, and of the increased demand for informal volunteering opportunities.

Research is also needed on the service areas in which spontaneous or informal volunteering work effectively, and how to facilitate volunteer engagement in these sectors. The scant existing research indicates that different motivations are associated with participation in and satisfaction with spontaneous volunteering.⁷ At the same time, information and support functions that are usually provided through organisations are still crucial to volunteer satisfaction, but demand innovation to be useful and accessible.⁸ Ensuring that informal volunteering opportunities are safe, well-coordinated, and beneficial to the health and wellbeing of volunteers will be essential to supporting volunteers in the ACT. A stronger understanding of why demand for these roles is growing and how to support them will be indispensable to protecting and advocating for Canberra's volunteers into the future.

2. The demand for volunteers among volunteer involving organisations. Volunteer involving organisations have traditionally engaged a large number of volunteers in the Canberra region, and many provide essential services central to the region's COVID-19 recovery. As identified earlier, formal volunteering decreased by 5.2 percent in the ACT between April 2020 and April 2021; however, the cause of this decline is unclear. Organisations may not have the resources to accommodate necessary training and onboarding procedures due to new restrictions and hygiene requirements; they may not yet be able to resume programs which typically require volunteers; or they may be responding to a downturn in demand for formal roles in general. Research from Volunteering Tasmania indicates that the growing

disparity between demand for volunteer services and supply of volunteers will create a service gap of \$1.2 billion for the Tasmanian economy.⁹ This highlights the urgency of this issue, and the need for a well-researched strategy to mitigate a potentially similar risk in the ACT.

Recommendations

VolunteeringACT recommends that an extensive study into the changing patterns of volunteering and an increasing demand for informal volunteering be conducted in the Canberra region. This study should apply qualitative methods, based on interviews and consultations with volunteers, volunteer involving organisations, service users, and local government.

VolunteeringACT recommends this research be used as the foundation for a new *Volunteering Strategy for the ACT*, with the aim to create a comprehensive action plan to safeguard volunteering. The recent adoption of and reporting against the ACT Wellbeing Framework demonstrates a clear need to strategically consider volunteering, which aligns with all twelve domains. The current *ACT Volunteering Statement* was last revised in 2015. Research conducted in the years since the publication of the *Volunteering Statement* and the acceleration of a downward trend in formal volunteering demonstrates the critical need to reimagine the future of volunteering in the Canberra region.

The investment required to advance these recommendations is \$150,000.

Conclusion

The trends highlighted in this submission suggest dramatic changes to the ways prospective volunteers seek opportunities and engage in voluntary work. The data suggests that these trends are unlikely to revert even as Australia progresses the COVID-19 vaccine rollout and restrictions continue to be lifted. Consequently, addressing the research gap on informal volunteering and devising a new Volunteering Strategy is an urgent priority for the recovery of the voluntary sector, and for the wellbeing of the Canberra community.

About VolunteeringACT

VolunteeringACT is the peak body for volunteering and community information in the Canberra region, as well as being a service provider of programs for people experiencing disadvantage and isolation, people with disability, and people needing support for mental wellness.

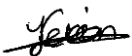
VolunteeringACT has a vision of an inclusive Canberra, and a mission to foster inclusion by enabling participation and connection.

VolunteeringACT connects people to volunteering opportunities; supports volunteer involving organisations with training, advice, and volunteer recruitment; makes sure information on services and supports is easily accessible to everyone through our Community Information services; supports people experiencing disadvantage; and provides programs to help people reconnect with their community and access supported volunteering roles.

VolunteeringACT is a people driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of 189 members, advocates for and supports volunteers, and engages with the broader Canberra community. This submission is informed by ongoing consultations with these stakeholders.

Authorisation

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



Ms Jean Giese
Chief Executive Officer

¹ Nicholas Biddle and Matthew Gray, "Volunteering during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2021)," <https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/volunteering-during-first-year-covid-19-pandemic-april-2021>

² "Re-engaging Volunteers and COVID-19," Volunteering Australia (February 2021), <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021.02.08-Re-engaging-Volunteers-and-COVID-19-Report.pdf>

³ *ibid*

⁴ "State of Volunteering in Queensland 2021," Volunteering Queensland (May 2021), <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/docs/2021/State-of-Volunteering-in-Queensland-2021-Full-Report.pdf>

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ "State of Volunteering in Queensland 2021," Volunteering Queensland (May 2021), <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/docs/2021/State-of-Volunteering-in-Queensland-2021-Full-Report.pdf>

⁷ Stefan Trautwein, Florian Liberatore, Jörg Lindenmeier, and Georg von Schnurbein, "Satisfaction With Informal Volunteering During the COVID-19 Crisis: An Empirical Study Considering a Swiss Online Volunteering Platform," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 49, no. 6 (December 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764020964595>

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ "Budget Priorities Statement 2021-22," Volunteering Tasmania (2021), https://www.volunteeringtas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Volunerring-Tasmania_Budget_Priorities_Statement_2021_2022.pdf