



Submission to the ACT Disability Strategy Consultation

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VolunteeringACT Contacts:

Jean Giese
Chief Executive Officer
e: ceo@volunteeringact.org.au
p: 02 6251 4060

Cath Cook
Sector Development Manager
e: cath@volunteeringact.org.au
p: 02 6251 4060

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
02 6251 4060
Level 2, 202 City Walk, Civic 2601
PO Box 128, Civic Square, ACT 2601
ABN 30 433 789 697

volunteeringact.org.au

Overview

- A strengths-based approach, where the time is taken to properly get to know individuals and understand their motivations and passions alongside tapping into their personal expertise around their disability, leads to vast improvements in service design, delivery, accessibility, and better life outcomes.
- Volunteering provides an important option for people with disability, as either a 'stepping stone' or more direct skills/career pathway to paid employment, for personal growth, and to help build confidence to enter or re-enter the workforce. The value of what volunteering opportunities for people with disability can provide needs to be better recognised and volunteering considered as a legitimate part of the overall Education, Skills, and Employment system.
- The life and professional experiences of people with disability need to be more respected, particularly in relation to employment. There is a need for better education of employers around the benefits and added value of employing people with disability, including overturning negative perceptions from employers about the level of support they would need to provide, and levels of risk involved.
- The Disability Royal Commission hearings highlighted that neglect and exploitation can occur when those responsible for providing support to people with disability do not have the level of training and skills required. It is important to increase the standard of education/training requirements and safeguarding procedures for disability support workers across the board, in all operating environments to ensure the safety and dignity of people with disability who use their services.
- There is a need to respect that people with disability are all diverse human beings, where inclusion and equity may look different for each person. The new Strategy presents an opportunity for a wider range of people with disability beyond the current advisory structures to be actively engaged in its implementation and ongoing impact assessment.
- The impacts of COVID are still being felt widely, but it is especially important to understand the link between some disabilities and compromised immunity, but also the additional impact public health measures and use of PPE can have on people with disability and their ability to manage their daily activities etc. The new Strategy needs to incorporate better planning and protection for people with disability around COVID mitigation, or within other public health emergency responses etc.
- Inclusivity as standard needs to be properly built into all information sources, service design, costings and funding arrangements, going forward, to ensure that services can provide information in a wide range of formats, keep pace with best practice around inclusive digital communications/access pathways as technology evolves, main face-to-face options where they are essential, and strive for a service delivery culture where accessibility is apparent from the first interaction.
- There needs to be greater understanding of the links between people with disability and poverty and the way in which services operating at the crisis end of situations such as homelessness, emergency relief, food banks etc. design their responses, so these do not further stigmatise and marginalise people with disability or place a barrier to their achieving greater financial security.

Recommendations

VolunteeringACT makes the following recommendations for the development and implementation of the new ACT Disability Strategy:

1. Greater recognition of volunteering as a legitimate pathway into employment and acquiring new skills for people with disability, with volunteering activities and options fully resourced and integrated into the ACT's overall Disability Employment, Skills, and Education approach.
2. Greater investment at the planning and development stage and allocation within Budgets to ensure all ACT services have inclusive design at the centre, as a minimal standard. This includes design and dissemination of information and access routes, a range of methods/options for service delivery and engagement, and an appropriate balance between utilising technology/digital solutions and human-facing interactions.
3. Increase the education/training requirements and safeguarding procedures for disability support workers to ensure the safety and dignity of people with disability who use their services.
4. Ensure the Strategy's implementation approach provides genuine co-design and co-production opportunities such as designing, delivering, and evaluating both mainstream services and specialist disability services, educating others about the wide range of disabilities and what works best to support people, and building the capability of all agencies around disability and access across portfolios and sectors.
5. The ACT to maintain a robust approach to managing the impacts of COVID on people with disability and improve future planning, communication, and health protection measures regarding all future public health and other emergency responses.

Introduction

In this submission, VolunteeringACT provides commentary on our experiences of providing community information services, delivering inclusive programs aimed at people with disability, promoting best practice around inclusive volunteering, and representation of the experiences of our extensive Member base, including many organisations working at the front line of disability, mental health, and community services. Our consultation process involved facilitating our own 'Kitchen Table Conversations' with people with disability using our services, centred around the following themes:

- Employment, education, and financial security
- Inclusive design and utilising the expertise of people with disability
- Perceptions/attitudes of key decision makers and community members
- Social connection
- Health and wellbeing

This information has been collated into five core recommendations outlined above.

Recommendation 1: Greater recognition of volunteering as a legitimate pathway into employment and acquiring new skills for people with disability, with volunteering activities and options fully resourced and integrated into the ACT's overall Disability Employment, Skills, and Education approach.

People with disability are regularly perceived as having 'non-ability' in terms of employment. This has resulted in a historical practice of primarily funnelling people with disability into low/unskilled and low pay

employment – even within the specialist disability employment sector. However, even if a person with disability obtains a job, they may find they are not always able to keep it. One of our participants reported that despite finding a role herself, successfully applying for it, and making a positive start at her workplace, the moment her employer discovered that regular absent seizures were part of her ongoing health issues, her employment was terminated on the grounds of ‘duty of care’. This action was taken despite these instances having no detrimental effect on overall performance and ability to carry out her role duties, and without proper discussion and an opportunity to fully explain her condition and how she managed it.

Volunteering is regarded by many people with disability as an important step towards gaining employment, enabling them to try out roles safely and supportively. Volunteering is a key determinant of social inclusion, participation, and connection, and a proven pathway to both education and employment. Participation in volunteering provides vital workplace experience and enables volunteers to build confidence, become job ready, and increases their chances of obtaining meaningful, long-term employment or re-entering the workplace again after a long absence. Research demonstrates that participation in volunteering can improve an individual’s chances of gaining employment by 27 per cent.¹ Despite the known outcomes of volunteering and its relationship to employment, there has historically been little investment in this area in Australia and the ACT Disability Strategy presents an ideal opportunity to invest in and embed volunteering as a legitimate pathway to employment at a jurisdictional level.

VolunteeringACT leads the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program operating across Tasmania, NSW, and the ACT in partnership with the Centre for Volunteering (NSW) and Volunteering Tasmania. This program has a working relationship with Department of Employment Service Providers to facilitate inclusive volunteering opportunities for people with disability and a proven track record of delivering positive and sustainable volunteering outcomes for them. One of the clear benefits of this program and what it offers is the truly human-centred approach and the one-to-one time spent on understanding an individual’s circumstances. This holistic lens allows for easier identification of intersecting issues, and how to address all relevant factors that may be causing barriers. This may require more intensive work initially to uncover the right supports and build solutions around an individual participant, but the longer-term outcomes are more sustainable, where a participant has a greater chance of sticking with the program, is not set up to fail, and goes on to thrive. For example, of 12 currently placed participants in the ACT program; three have been in their role for over 12 months, three have been in their role for over eight months, and six have been in their role for over six months.²

VolunteeringACT takes a strengths-based approach when assessing what type of volunteer placement they would like, what the person’s values are, and what they wish to achieve from it. This has enabled us to direct people who may have been considered by other agencies as ‘too difficult to place’ into successful experiences. For example, one of our previous program participants was non-verbal, and always accompanied by a support worker. When we had our initial conversation, it became clear that the participant loved to socialise and interact with people. He had a great memory for faces and recognised a several people from his high school who were walking past. We placed the participant with a local organisation, who were very open to adapting the volunteering role they had to suit his skills. The role involved packing donations and then distributing them out to charitable organisations. The participant

¹ Spera, C., Ghertner, R., Nerino, A., & DiTommaso, A. (2013). *Volunteering as a pathway to employment: Does volunteering increase odds of finding a job for the out of work?* Office of Research & Evaluation, Corporation for National and Community Service.

² <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

used support from his support worker to communicate with the clients, and really enjoyed being able to connect to community in this way. This placement wouldn't have happened without the focus on strengths, and the inclusive practice of the volunteer coordinator, who understood that the person's particular skill set would suit this role perfectly and wouldn't require any 'reasonable adjustments' at their end. They took the time to show the participant the tasks he would be required to do and ask questions about his abilities in relation to the role, rather than making assumptions about what he could or couldn't do. The volunteer coordinator has fed back to us several times that he has added so much value to the organisation, and clients love to interact with him.³

As another example, one of our current Inclusive Volunteering Program participants does not have the use of one of their hands. During our initial meeting, she told us she is really interested in fashion and would love to get experience in the retail space. When discussing her barriers, she focused on more "invisible" barriers she faces including a language barrier, anxiety, and low confidence in general. We discussed the tasks that might be involved in a retail role (lifting and moving things, hanging clothes up, folding, using a cash register etc.) and discovered that the participant already completes most of these tasks independently at home. Again, asking questions and having robust conversation allowed us to have a good understanding of the participant's skills and interests, and avoid making assumptions about what she physically could or couldn't do.⁴

VolunteeringACT received feedback that current funding approaches to disability employment is often provided merely to 'get people through the door' of a job or volunteering placement, but no resourcing is provided for the ongoing 'on the job' support that is also needed to keep people with disability in those jobs or placements. People with disability also frequently express that they do not want incentives for employment, they would rather that money went towards resourcing adequate, ongoing support. It is the ongoing support that is crucial for ensuring people are not set up to fail and their volunteering/work experience remains a positive and sustainable one the new Disability Strategy presents an opportunity to embed that into an ACT approach.

Volunteering also provides an important bridge between young people transitioning between education and employment, which is particularly important for younger people with disability, as there are clear gaps in the system for ensuring they are supported through those important transition points. Long term unemployment is a major concern for people with disability, as additional barriers they face can make it harder to find suitable opportunities, and for younger people this can be even more complicated due to their lack of experience. Being disconnected from the workforce can have a considerable knock-on effect, and potentially limit their future life chances and trajectory to participate in society and maintain their independence. The new Disability Strategy provides an opportunity to include volunteering as a recognised 'bridging' activity for young people to aid their transition from education to the workplace and enable them to try out different work settings/roles and acquire new skills in preparation for paid employment further down the track.

Recommendation 2. Greater investment at the planning and development stage and recognition within Budgets to ensure all ACT services have inclusive design at the centre, as a minimal standard. This includes design and dissemination of information and access routes, a range of methods/options for service

³ <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

⁴ <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

delivery and engagement, and an appropriate balance between utilising technology/digital solutions and human-facing interactions.

There is frustration amongst people with disability that inclusive design principles are not automatically embedded within ACT services and infrastructure planning and development. For the ACT Disability Strategy to deliver on its aspirations around inclusion and accessibility, more thought, investment, and time needs to be given to understanding the diverse access and communication/information needs of people with disability.

Many of the basic inclusion principles are simple to apply from the beginning and review on an ongoing basis within most services. For example, Easy Read documentation is an effective way to make sure information is accessible. Forms should always be available in all formats such as paper, digital, in different file types and sizes, or perhaps even smart forms that are enabled with voice recognition software so people can speak their responses instead of writing them etc.

Digital information and processes need to have very clear language/communication instructions, including any specialist communication methods used by people with disability so people can follow those instructions as independently as possible, without having to always rely on support workers, interpreters, or family members to help them navigate basic website functionality or other online platforms. Technology and apps can simplify processes but need to have a high level of intuitiveness to work successfully for people with disability. Digital information solutions and communications can be a great enabler for people with disability, but also require a certain amount of digital literacy to engage with in the first place. Improving diversity in the user testing process before these solutions are fully operational would help make the end products easier to use and more accessible.

It is also important to recognise that one person's solution could present a barrier for someone else's disability, so it is important to ensure that accessibility options are omni-channel, including always retaining a face-to-face human interaction alongside other solutions. Technology and digital solutions should be applied as a way of enhancing/expanding responses rather than just replacing them.

The cost of providing accessible formats should be factored into the overall Budget process and accounted for when planning and designing public services. This cost burden should not have to be met by individual organisations or people with disability themselves.

Recommendation 3. Increase the education/training requirements and safeguarding procedures for disability support workers to ensure the safety and dignity of people with disability who use their services.

The Disability Royal Commission hearings highlighted that neglect and exploitation can occur when those responsible for providing support to people with disability do not have the level of training and skills required. It is important to increase the standard of education/training requirements and safeguarding procedures for disability support workers across the board, in all operating environments to ensure the safety and dignity of people with disability who use their services.

Several organisations within our networks and people within the NDIS system have voiced a particular need for staff that are employed within NDIS support coordinator roles and at places like Centrelink to have access to better training and support so they have a thorough understanding of the wide range of disabilities people have, that they understand people with disability often have ongoing support needs,

but also that their needs can fluctuate or change over time. It is important that people involved in delivering disability services and providing disability related advice have refresher training at regular intervals and that people undertaking disability assessments are considering the most up to date information relating to an individual's capabilities and support needs when doing so.

Similarly, for any ACT services providing specialist disability support/advice, they too need to have more than just a basic understanding of disabilities and the ACT Disability Strategy should contain clear actions to improve the standard of training around disability and how it can be expanded to more people.

However, it was also recommended to us that all ACT Government services staff should have some mandatory training on disabilities, how they can present in different ways in the community and what the implications may be for 'mainstream' service design and delivery. For example, creative approaches were suggested including inviting people with disability into those workplaces for direct exposure or setting up a "day in the life" experiences so workers can gain a better understanding of what it can be like to have to operate a wheelchair, or try and read a sign or information leaflet with reduced vision, or navigate a busy environment while managing sensory overload etc.

One way to achieve this is to provide more co-production opportunities for people with disability to lead the design and delivery of training, and capability-building activities.

Recommendation 4. Ensure the Strategy's implementation approach provides genuine co-design and co-production opportunities such as designing, delivering, and evaluating both mainstream and specialist disability services, educating others about the wide range of disabilities and what works best to support people, and building the capability of all agencies around disability across portfolios and sectors.

People with disability are the experts of their own bodies, experiences, capabilities, and support needs and are often gauge more effectively what is or isn't possible for them. This perspective needs to be at the centre of service design, planning and decision-making processes and clear mechanisms for engagement to gather these views should be reflected in the implementation approach for the Disability Strategy.

For example, VolunteeringACT operates Participatory Advisory Group model (PAG) to facilitate regular and ongoing consultation and feedback with people using our services on their design and delivery. This includes the opportunity to have input into the design of our assessment questions, surveys, information guides, documents, and policies/procedures.

Our participants expressed that a 'top-down' approach does not feel respectful of their life experience and does not work for them. They want to feel their perspective is valued and important from the beginning, not just as an after-thought. Commitments to co-design and co-production were welcomed, but it was also suggested that these processes have not been well executed by ACT Government in the past and have not been meaningful or felt genuine. There was strong consensus amongst the group around negative attitudes and perceptions of not only key decision makers, but also community members and even community organisations delivering services to them.

For example, one participant recounted her experience of feeling trapped on a low income and becoming increasingly reliant on crisis services and in particular – food banks. The place she used operated a card system to access the food bank, which felt quite an overwhelming and complex process. Her feedback was that this kind of process can affect executive function and time management as keeping track of a physical

card can be hard for some people. She also raised concerns about the lack of privacy over her personal information, and difficulties navigating the floor layout, searching shelves to find items or how much they cost, with some areas not being physically accessible. The participant described the perception and attitudes of the Charity workers as if she should be grateful to be receiving assistance and the experience as humiliating and lacking in dignity.

Participants expressed the desire to see genuine opportunities for co-design and co-production within the ACT Disability Strategy development and implementation, particularly in relation to educating others around disability and improving training and capability building.

There is strong evidence from similar programs operating internationally that a co-production approach where people with lived experience are at the heart of not only designing but delivering training and education programs produces strong outcomes. For example, Services for Empowerment and Advocacy (SEA) in the UK operates an ongoing 'Experts by Experience' model within its bespoke training offer. SEA devised a recruitment and training model where people with a range of complex health and support needs including intellectual disability and acute mental health conditions designed a screening/recruitment process in partnership with Nottingham Trent University to recruit candidates onto their Social Work Degree course. People with lived experience of receiving support from social workers lead that part of the recruitment process, have control over decision making regarding what that recruitment process looks like, the questions that are asked, who should be shortlisted for interview, and the final decision making regarding who receives a place on the course. They also designed a core training module based on their experiences that puts those social work students in challenging real life work scenarios early on in their course and it is entirely delivered by the Experts by Experience group. This is a unique learning experience that gives the students extra insights they couldn't otherwise gain as easily, or that early on in their studies.⁵

Recommendation 5. The ACT to maintain a robust approach to managing the impacts of COVID on people with disability and improve future planning and health protection measures regarding all future public health and other similar emergency responses.

Although many restrictions have been lifted in the ACT, there are still high numbers of COVID cases, and the new Disability Strategy must factor in the continued impact of COVID and what this may mean for people with disability. However, it is important to understand and recognise that there are very differing views on what should be in place.

For example, the removal of restrictions can mean additional risks for some people with disability, and this can make them feel more anxious or isolated. There are links between several disabilities and compromised immunity that can mean people with disability are disproportionately impacted upon in terms of their ability to participate fully in society and visit/travel to where they may need to visit.

However, it is also equally important to recognise that when restrictions and use of PPE are mandated, there can be additional barriers for people with disability and other negative effects. For example, some people with disability may have exemptions around vaccines and mask wearing but may feel stigmatised around non-compliance by others who do not understand their situation. Similarly, people may experience

⁵ www.seaparticipation.org.uk

physical/sensory barriers or a trauma response if they are directed to wear certain types of PPE that may restrict their ability to see, hear, breathe etc. Some may find their usual communication method such as lip-reading or picking up on visual queues are significantly diminished.

Within the new Disability Strategy, it is important to consult widely on continued responses/mitigations relating to COVID, especially as new strains emerge, or if new viruses and other similar public health emergencies occur.

For organisations working with people with disability, guidance around COVID safety, vaccine mandates and use/distribution of PPE need to be clear and timely and extend to the volunteer workforce. Over the past 18 months, there have been instances when it has not been clear enough where the responsibilities of individuals versus organisations and staff/volunteers begin and end regarding COVID safe planning, responses and policies required.

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.

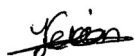
VolunteeringACT connects people to volunteering opportunities; supports volunteer involving organisations with training, advice, and volunteer recruitment; makes sure information on services and supports is easily accessible to everyone through our Community Information services; supports people experiencing 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 our experience of delivering Inclusive Volunteering Programs for people with disability and ongoing consultations with these stakeholders.

VolunteeringACT is part of the National Network of Volunteering Peak Bodies in Australia.

Authorisation

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



Ms Jean Giese
Chief Executive Officer
