



Submission on the Future of Supported Employment Discussion Paper 2023

September 2023

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About VolunteeringACT

Volunteering and Contact ACT Ltd (trading as VolunteeringACT) is the peak body for volunteering and provides community information services in the Canberra region. We also deliver 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 values collaboration, diversity, equity, innovation, integrity, and participation. 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. Through our activities, we improve inclusivity, enable sustainable volunteering, and create a more resilient Canberra community.

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

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 (VIOs) that contribute to the health and happiness of our community.

This submission has been made as part of our commitment to ensuring the perspectives and expertise of volunteers, VIOs and volunteer leaders informs development of public policy and contributes to achievement of positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes. The content has been informed by the experiences of organisations in our membership and networks, and our experiences of engaging with and delivering services to people living with mental ill health, people with multiple/complex needs including those with a dual diagnosis of substance misuse and mental health, and people with disability, including psychosocial conditions.

Introduction

VolunteeringACT welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Draft Future of Supported Employment Discussion Paper 2023. We also support and endorse the national submission being made by Volunteering Australia to this consultation.

VolunteeringACT previously provided a submission to the DSS consultation on a new Disability Employment Support Model in 2022. We believe many of our recommendations from that submission (available on the [VolunteeringACT website](#)) are applicable to all people with disability, including those with high support needs, and therefore apply here. While the Discussion Paper briefly references the 2022 consultations as well as other feedback received over recent years, it is not made clear how the six Supported Employment initiatives were selected, following on from that initial feedback.

As this work moves forward, it is important to ensure that Supported Employment reform is integrated and aligned with the multiple other disability reform processes currently underway and that people with high support needs and their families are closely engaged throughout the process.

We have provided our list of key recommendations below, with further details on the following pages.

Recommendations

- 1. That volunteering is recognised and promoted as a legitimate pathway to employment for people with disability, including those with high support needs.**
- 2. That Supported Employment reform provides genuine opportunities for meaningful co-design and co-production with a wide range of people with disability in the design, delivery, and evaluation of initiatives - and that adequate resourcing is provided to achieve this.**
- 3. That volunteering programs are eligible to access funding provided through the Structural Adjustment Fund, particularly those that provide continuing and ongoing support for people with disability to access volunteering as a pathway to employment and/or provide support for volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) to build their capacity for inclusion and accessibility.**
- 4. That data collection and evaluation methods are expanded to emphasise the quality and sustainability of volunteering and employment placements, longitudinal outcomes and 'distance-travelled' by people with disability over time, as more meaningful measures of success.**

- 5. That Disability Employment Expos include the volunteering sector and incorporate promotion of volunteering as a pathway to employment.**
- 6. That Disability Employment Expos are co-designed with a diverse group of people with disability and their families to ensure they are relevant, inclusive and fully accessible.**
- 7. That the Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program includes explicit resourcing for volunteers and volunteer management, and is co-designed with people with disability and their families.**

Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment

Volunteering is well-established as a strong and legitimate pathway to employment. Participation in volunteering provides vital workplace experience and enables volunteers to become job ready, increasing their chances of obtaining meaningful, long-term employment. Research demonstrates that participation in volunteering can improve an individual's chances of gaining employment by 27 per cent.¹ For people with disability, their disability can be perceived as 'non-ability' when it comes to being in control of their own lives, decisions, and employment prospects. Volunteering is an important option for people who are commonly excluded from workplaces to gain transferable skills that will aid them to achieve employment outcomes. Research demonstrates that volunteering can help people with disability build personal skills, access networking opportunities, and find paid roles.²

In the ACT we have heard that 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. Volunteering provides a '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.

Further, for many people with disability, the option to engage in volunteering activities that can be undertaken remotely can remove significant barriers to participation and increase accessibility to a wide range of programs. The prolonged impact of COVID-19 has contributed to more services and activities moving to or catering for an online format. Within the volunteering sector, many organisations have managed to retain their volunteers by using remote technology to keep them engaged through the pandemic, and a longer-term impact is that more organisations are introducing full or hybrid working/volunteering from home arrangements. For some people with disability who may also have other health conditions, or be immunocompromised, remote volunteering options can facilitate participation without exposing them to the same level of risk of contracting illnesses circulating in the population within workplaces and other shared environments.

¹ Spera C, Ghertner R, Nerino A and 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 Yanay-Ventura, G (2018) "Nothing About Us Without Us" in Volunteering Too: Volunteering Among People with Disabilities, *Voluntas*, 30(1): 147,163, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-0026-7>

Supported Employment reform presents an opportunity for greater investment in and promotion of volunteering and for placing choice and control for people with disability with high support needs at the heart of exploring different pathways to employment that might suit them. People with disability are the experts of their own experience and are often able to gauge more effectively what is or isn't possible for them. This perspective needs to be at the centre of decision making around where volunteering activities may fit within an employment pathway approach. Services that work directly with individual people with disability to ascertain their needs, interests and career goals and then connect them to suitable volunteering opportunities can play a vital role in facilitating meaningful and sustainable volunteer placements that provide a pathway to paid employment.

At the same time, for volunteering to be an effective pathway to employment, support must be provided to VIOs to reduce barriers to volunteering for people with disability. Research demonstrates that the link between volunteering and securing paid employment is highly dependent on external factors including the nature of support provided and the presence of defined mechanisms to facilitate employment outcomes.^{3,4}

Many of the inclusion and accessibility barriers to the workplace for people with disability can be perceived rather than actual. During consultations with organisations in our networks, the issue of risk and risk management was raised several times, indicating that greater education is needed for employers around what supporting a person with disability in a volunteering or paid role requires in practice. Providing VIOs with education on inclusive practice and accessibility is an essential element of facilitating meaningful volunteering placements that act as an effective pathway to employment.

VolunteeringACT currently leads the **Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment (IVP) 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 has a proven track record of delivering positive and sustainable volunteering outcomes for them. The IVP Program is provided free of charge and involves working closely with participants to understand their individual employment goals, find a suitable placement, overcome barriers, and support them in a volunteering journey that is both rewarding and enjoyable. The IVP Program also provides training and works with organisations

³ Kamerade, Daiga, and Angela Ellis Paine, "Volunteering and employability: implications for policy and practice," *Voluntary Sector Review* 5, no. 2 (2014): 265, doi:10.1332/204080514X14013593888736

⁴ Victoria ALIVE (2019) *Benefits, Barriers and Brining About Change: Disability Inclusive Volunteering*, <https://www.victoriaalive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Vic-ALIVE-Project-Final-Report.pdf>, p28

to help them become more inclusive as they involve people with all abilities and from all backgrounds in their workplace.

One of the clear benefits of the IVP program is that it offers a truly human-centred approach and invests significant one-to-one time 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. This type of approach is particularly important when placing someone with high support needs into a volunteer role as it will help to ensure that the placement is both appropriate and enjoyable but also safe and well-supported. A recent example is provided below:

Megan (name has been changed) is completing college through an adjusted program and approached the IVP team in the hope of gaining some experience in a workplace prior to leaving a structured school environment. As a person living with Aspergers and Hypotonia, Megan has received a lot of support throughout her schooling and her parents were concerned that she had not developed the skills required to enter the workforce. Megan herself expressed some anxiety around entering a new environment on her own and was unsure of the skills required to succeed in a workplace.

The IVP Program secured a volunteering placement for Megan and her support worker at a Food Pantry. It is a small workplace, occupied by one other experienced volunteer and any visitors that are present. Feedback from the participant, her mother and support worker indicate that after two months in the position she now feels much more confident in taking on new or unfamiliar tasks. When there are quiet moments, she looks for tasks that need to be done without being prompted, and actively asks for help from the other volunteer. She has enjoyed interacting with members of the public who visit the pantry and has begun to initiate these interactions herself. Social skills are a particular challenge for Megan due to her Asperger's syndrome, so her efforts in this area indicate that she has developed further confidence to challenge herself, especially in a new environment. These improvements in the participant's confidence have had a positive impact on the other volunteers in the pantry, as she has been able to actively contribute to the workplace independently.

The supports provided by the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program allowed Megan to feel a sense of agency in her volunteering journey. Her initial meeting with a program coordinator gave her the opportunity to identify her goals and express her fears and concerns. A meet-and-greet process with the volunteering organisation eased her anxieties about entering a new environment by giving her the opportunity to see the workplace, meet her supervisor and understand the shift responsibilities in a safe and non-judgemental environment. The organisation's buddy policy allowed the participant to feel safe, supported and part of a team. The combination of these interactions created an environment in which the participant could develop her confidence and begin to challenge herself.

The IVP Program clearly demonstrates real outcomes for real people. Participants frequently report back to VolunteeringACT that their involvement in the program has made a significant difference to their social connectivity and their employment prospects. At the same time the IVP Program supports organisations to become more inclusive and reduce and remove barriers to involving volunteers with disability, paving the way for other organisations to follow their lead.

Recommendation:

- 1. That volunteering is recognised and promoted as a legitimate pathway to employment for people with disability, including those with high support needs.**

Meaningful Engagement with People with Disability

There are many strengths that people with disability can bring to the overall development and implementation of the proposed Supported Employment initiatives, particularly when it comes to educating others around the wide range of disabilities people can present with and the best ways to support them to engage with volunteering/employment opportunities in a workplace environment.

The implementation of the proposed Supported Employment initiatives should provide genuine co-design and co-production opportunities for people with disability from a variety of backgrounds across design, delivery, and evaluation. The current Discussion Paper does not currently reference how or if people with disability and their families/carers will be engaged.

People with disability are the experts of their own bodies, experiences, capabilities, and support needs and can often gauge more effectively what is or isn't possible for them. This perspective

needs to be at the centre of Supported Employment reform design, planning and decision-making processes and clear mechanisms for engagement to gather these views should be in place. Research demonstrates that genuine and effective co-design or co-production requires authentic and equitable collaboration and should be underpinned by respect and sharing of decision-making power.^{5,6} Further, meaningful and genuine co-design requires allocation of appropriate time and resources to enable it to occur.⁷

There is strong evidence nationally and internationally that a co-production approach where people with lived experience are at the heart of not only designing but delivering and assessing impact of programs can transform systems and produce strong outcomes. For example, 'Y-Change' is a social and systemic change platform for young people with lived experience of socioeconomic disadvantage set up by Berry Street, a Victorian non-government organisation.⁸ Y-Change provides opportunities for young people who have experienced disadvantage to contribute as leaders, change agents and advisors on matters affecting young people experiencing disadvantage. This platform not only has a profound impact on feelings of agency and wellbeing amongst participants, but also provides professionals who are developing products, services or policy solutions with advice and guidance on designing creative, effective and participatory-focused pathways and solutions.⁹

Recommendation:

- 2. That Supported Employment reform provides genuine opportunities for meaningful co-design and co-production with a wide range of people with disability in the design, delivery, and evaluation of initiatives - and that adequate resourcing is provided to achieve this.**

Responses to Proposed Initiatives

Structural Adjustment Fund

VolunteeringACT supports the provision of funding to enable and strengthen pathways to employment for people with high support needs. In particular, we welcome the proposed focus of the Structural Adjustment Fund on capability building, developing partnerships to provide

⁵ Butler T et al (2022) A Comprehensive Review of Optimal Approaches to Co-Design in Health with First Nations Australians, *Int J Environ Res Public Health*,19(23):16166, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9735487/>

⁶ Agency for Clinical Innovation (2019) *A Guide to Build Co-design Capability*, https://aci.health.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0013/502240/Guide-Build-Codesign-Capability.pdf

⁷ National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum (2021) *Co-design and Co-production*, <https://nmhccf.org.au/our-work/advocacy-briefs/co-design-and-co-production>

⁸ Berry Street (2023) *Youth Engagement (Y-Change)*, <https://www.berrystreet.org.au/what-we-do/young-people/youth-engagement-y-change>

⁹ *ibid*

clearer pathways and support for innovative programs that support people with disability to gain employment. Volunteer programs have great potential to contribute across these areas and should be eligible to access funding through the Structural Adjustment Fund. The IVP Program outlined above is an excellent example of how a volunteering program can deliver tangible, sustainable outcomes and provide effective support to empower people with disability - including those with high support needs - to improve their job prospects, while also building the capability of organisations in inclusive practice.

Recommendation:

- 3. That volunteering programs are eligible to access funding provided through the Structural Adjustment Fund, particularly those that provide continuing and ongoing support for people with disability to access volunteering as a pathway to employment and/or provide support for VIOs to build their capacity for inclusion and accessibility.**

Transition to the Revised Supported Employment Services Award

VolunteeringACT supports the aim of this initiative to provide effective support and information to ensure the sector can effectively transition to the new Supported Employment Services Award. We would emphasise the need to ensure that all information and training provided under this initiative is clear, accessible, and responsive to the diversity of the disability sector. It should also be ensured that no organisation is left worse off due to the transition process.

Disability Business Procurement Initiative

The development of a procurement policy focused on disability employment should involve close consultation with the sector to ensure it is fit for purpose and effective in increasing employment for all people with disability across all organisations (not just Australian Disability Enterprises). The proposed policy should also ensure that VIOs that provide support to people with disability are not excluded from the procurement approach.

Evaluation of Supported Employment Initiatives and Trials

When seeking to evaluate supported employment initiatives and trials there is a need to move away from purely numerical measures of success, focussed on numbers of people placed in volunteering or employment opportunities. Historically, this has led to limiting of choice for some scheme participants, with them being placed or 'funnelled' in large numbers into roles on the basis of what is easy for the provider to connect them to, or because they have a certain quota or target they need to reach, rather than being opportunities that are genuinely chosen by and tailored to the participant. More measures that reflect the overall journey of and distance-

travelled by a person with disability through an employment pathway would assist in collecting more outcomes-based data and provide greater opportunity for people with disability to self-assess their progression over time. Meaningful engagement of people with high support needs and their families in the evaluation process will be critical to effectively collecting rich data that accurately reflects lived experience perspectives. For example, tools such as the Outcomes Star¹⁰ could work well within this setting, especially if co-designed with people living with disability, to determine the outcome domains that resonate with them, and that they wish to capture their progress on.

A greater emphasis on the quality of the volunteering/employment opportunities people with disability are connected to and how well-matched these are to an individual's needs and employment aspirations would also be more useful. This should include measures related to skills gained and job-readiness.

Specific data related to the added value people with disability bring to the workforce and the impact they have on improving understanding of disability and accessibility in the workplace would be beneficial to collect and could also be used to build confidence of employers in providing more volunteering or paid opportunities to them.

A greater emphasis on longitudinal data to measure success over time would be a more effective method of capturing sustainability of outcomes of Supported Employment initiatives aimed at people with disability. It would also be useful to expand measures to capture the experiences of family members and other persons of significance involved in the lives of people with disability, to show the wider impacts of high quality and sustainable volunteering and employment opportunities.

Recommendation:

- 4. That data collection and evaluation methods are expanded to emphasise the quality and sustainability of volunteering and employment placements, longitudinal outcomes and 'distance-travelled' by people with disability over time, as more meaningful measures of success.**

Disability Employment Expos

The proposed Disability Employment Expos should include involvement of the volunteering sector and promote volunteering as a legitimate pathway to employment for people with

¹⁰ Unique Outcomes (2020) *Outcomes Star in Australia and New Zealand*, <https://outcomesstar.com.au/>

disability, particularly through programs such as the IVP to Employment Program discussed above.

It is important that this initiative involves genuine co-design with people with high support needs, their families, and the disability sector to ensure that these events are effective and highly accessible to people with a range of support needs. This should incorporate physical accessibility at venues as well as making information available in a variety of formats (including Easy Read materials, Auslan interpretation etc). Providing opportunities for online engagement is essential, to widen choice and enable people to self-select their chosen engagement method and this should be made available as standard. Exposure to COVID-19 is still a significant factor for vulnerable people and this can impact their ability to attend face to face events. Further, face to face events may limit the ability for people with certain support needs and people in rural and remote locations to participate.

Each Expo should be specifically designed for each location to ensure it is relevant to its location, responds to the local context and caters for the specific needs of local attendees.

The Expos should be inclusive events that welcome attendees from all backgrounds and abilities. Involving a diverse group of people living with disability, including those from First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse and LGBTQI+ communities, in the Expo co-design and implementation process will help to ensure this.

Recommendations:

- 5. That Disability Employment Expos include the volunteering sector and incorporate promotion of volunteering as a pathway to employment.**

- 6. That Disability Employment Expos are co-designed with a diverse group of people with disability and their families to ensure they are relevant, inclusive and fully accessible.**

Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program

Volunteers play an important role in contributing to disability information and advocacy, a role that is recognised within the National Disability Advocacy Framework 2023-2025.¹¹ Many of the organisations funded under the National Disability Advocacy Program (and therefore eligible to apply for grants under this proposed new Program) engage volunteers to support their advocacy work. It is important, therefore, that the new Disability Employment Advocacy and

¹¹ Department of Social Services (2023) *The National Disability Advocacy Framework*, https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2023/national-disability-advocacy-framework-2023-2025-pdf.pdf, p3.

Information Program has a funding model that appropriately supports the inclusion of volunteers within its delivery – including resourcing for their training and ongoing management.

The new Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program should also be co-designed with people with disability and their families to ensure it is fit for purpose and meets the needs of its target audience.

Recommendation:

- 7. That the Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program includes explicit resourcing for volunteers and volunteer management, and is co-designed with people with disability and their families.**

Authorisation

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

Jean Giese
Chief Executive Officer
