



Submission: Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in the ACT

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Contacts:

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

Naomi Thomson
Policy and Advocacy Coordinator
e: naomi@volunteeringact.org.au
p: 02 6251 4060

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 over 200 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 and recognises any other peoples or families with connection to this Country. VolunteeringACT is committed to reconciliation and will continue to walk alongside First Nations Peoples and embrace the traditions, stories and wisdoms of the oldest continuing cultures in the world.

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, and people with disability, including psychosocial conditions.

Introduction

VolunteeringACT welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion's Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT.

Volunteering is a recognised indicator of social cohesion and a significant and powerful contributor to social connectedness in the ACT community.

Supporting, promoting, and investing in volunteering and volunteer programs is one of the most direct and cost-effective ways ACT government can improve social connectedness in the ACT community. Volunteer-involving organisations are often at the forefront of providing support to individuals experiencing social isolation and loneliness via neighbourhood and community groups, schemes that offer befriending and companionship, and/or by offering opportunities for those feeling isolated to be part of something they care about and become a volunteer themselves. These programs need greater recognition for the health and wellbeing impacts they deliver and sustainable resourcing to continue providing this vital assistance.

Further, expanding and promoting the existing online Community Directory will help to ensure Canberrans can access all the information they need on services and programs available to them that address social isolation and loneliness.

We have provided a list of key recommendations for the Committee's consideration below, with further details provided on the following pages.

Recommendations

- 1. Recognise and promote the significant positive impact of volunteering and volunteer-involving organisations on social connectedness in the ACT.**
- 2. Secure an ongoing funding commitment from all relevant directorates across the ACT Government to support implementation of the ACT Volunteering Strategy (currently under development).**
- 3. Provide additional funding for enhancements to the Community Directory.**
- 4. Actively promote the Community Directory across ACT Government, and work in partnership with the sector to market it more broadly.**

Volunteering and social connection – the evidence

Volunteering is a nationally recognised indicator of social cohesion.¹ Volunteering is proven to help individuals develop stronger social networks and interpersonal relationships, improve self-esteem, relieve stress and alleviate symptoms of depression.^{2,3} This important link is reflected in the ACT Wellbeing Framework, within the *Social Connection* domain, with volunteering used as a key indicator of Canberrans being connected with family, friends, and community.⁴ The link has also been acknowledged within the new National Wellbeing Framework, with volunteering included as a measure of the Social Connection Indicator.⁵

Through volunteering in their community, individuals become more ‘outwardly focused’, which can lead to a reduction in social isolation, foster a greater sense of social connection and promote good mental health.⁶ Research indicates that social interaction is one of the key mechanisms linking volunteering to improved mental health and wellbeing.⁷

There are numerous programs delivered by volunteer involving organisations in the ACT that facilitate social connections and reduce loneliness, as well as providing the community with valuable information and guidance on opportunities to engage with their community.

This Inquiry provides an opportunity to recognise, celebrate, support, and strengthen the significant positive impact volunteering can have on the social connectedness of ACT community members.

Recommendation 1: Recognise and promote the significant positive impacts of volunteering and volunteer involving organisations on social connectedness in the ACT.

Social connectedness through volunteering

Volunteering creates opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to interact socially and engage in meaningful activity that provides support and/or benefit to other people. Research indicates that social interaction that involves providing support to others is a particularly beneficial form of social connection and creates a positive emotional state, replacing stress-causing emotions, including loneliness.⁸ The real stories provided in this section illustrate the significant

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021), [Determinants of wellbeing: Social connection](#)

² Healthdirect (2021) [Benefits of volunteering](#)

³ McDermott, J (2023) [Volunteering and Mental Health](#), Volunteering Australia, p3

⁴ ACT Government (2023) [ACT Wellbeing Framework - Explore overall wellbeing](#)

⁵ Australian Government (2023) [Measuring what Matters statement](#), p56

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021), [Determinants of wellbeing: Social connection](#)

⁷ McDermott, J (2023) [Volunteering and Mental Health](#), Volunteering Australia, p5

⁸ McDermott, J (2023) [Volunteering and Mental Health](#), Volunteering Australia, p5

positive impact that the act of volunteering can have on an individual person's sense of social connectedness. Please note that some names have been changed to maintain privacy.

Ariah's Story

“Volunteering was (and still is) the highlight of my week, it gave me something to look forward to, a reason to leave the house and a way to connect.” - Ariah

The 2023 State of the Nation Report on social connection found that young people reported the highest levels of loneliness in Australia with 22% of 18 to 24-year-olds reporting that they often/always feel lonely.⁹ Ariah's story demonstrates the impact that volunteering can have on young people who may be experiencing loneliness or social isolation due to disability or chronic illness:

“Six years ago, I was unable to work, and living in a wheelchair due to two debilitating disabilities. This meant that I was extremely isolated from the workforce, from any kind of social life and from the community. I was 20 at the time, so most of my friends were living active lives which, due to my pain and energy levels, I couldn't participate in. Often, while they were spending 2am on a Saturday at a club, I was spending mine in the emergency room. But volunteering, for me, was not only a pathway to employment but back to social connection and the community.

While I was still unable to return to work, I started by volunteering a few hours a week, first online and then physically with Vinnies through their migrant and refugee school programs. Volunteering was (and still is) the highlight of my week, it gave me something to look forward to, a reason to leave the house and a way to connect. I could use volunteering to test my limits, gain back some confidence and meet new people.

As I slowly recovered on my health journey, I was able to increase my volunteering hours and start volunteering for another organisation, which eventually led to paid work. Now I work fulltime, I volunteer and am even studying, which seemed impossible to me only a few years ago.”

⁹ Lim M et al (2023) *State of the Nation Report: Social Connection in Australia*, https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ELT_LNA_Report_Digital.pdf

Lee's story

“The connection that I had through the volunteers I spent time with, and the employees I started work with, allowed me to develop more confidence” - Lee

Not dissimilar to Ariaah, Lee (not real name) suffered significant isolation and illness in their youth, but found a way back into society through volunteering:

“Between 2017 and 2019 my health deteriorated, and I spent some time in hospital and isolating at home. When COVID-19 kicked into gear, the isolation became worse. Due to health complications, I lost my job, and the few family members that lived nearby moved interstate, so the anxiety and isolation developed into agoraphobia. During this time, I was given the opportunity to study community services, and despite the re-occurring health complications, I was able to study on a flexible schedule. Leading into 2020, I began volunteering in the community at the suggestion of my course coordinator, to complete my work experience and try to start leaving the house again. With time, I gained more confidence with being outside, and in the following year I was offered employment. The connection that I had through the volunteers I spent time with, and the employees I started work with, allowed me to develop more confidence. I now involve myself with different volunteer opportunities that come my way, and have a better variety of relationships, personal, professional, or otherwise.”

Sarah's Story

“My volunteer role provides a way for me to get out into society and interact with others, without feeling like I am putting myself or other people at risk”
- Sarah

Sarah (not real name) is living with an auto-immune disease and has been volunteering in various roles since she was a teenager. The onset of COVID-19 meant that Sarah was left unable to safely interact with community members, leaving her – along with many Canberrans with an autoimmune disorder – socially isolated. At the advice of her occupational therapist, Sarah joined the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment (IVP) Program (see p10 for details on this program) to explore volunteering opportunities that might be possible for her. Sarah was placed in a role that involved driving elderly community members (many of whom are also immunocompromised) to appointments and community centres. This was a perfect fit for Sarah as it provided an opportunity for her to get out into the community and connect with other people face to face, without facing a high risk of COVID-19 infection. At the same time, her role facilitates social connection for the aged care participants she transports. In her words, *“My volunteer role provides a way for me to get out into society and interact with others, without feeling like I am putting myself or other people at risk”.*

Irene and Carol's story

“If it weren't for volunteering, I would be sitting at home, doing nothing and getting depressed”

- Irene

Volunteering can also be a particularly valuable form of social connectedness for older Australians. Around one in five older Australians and a third of older people living in residential care are socially isolated.¹⁰ As recognised in the National Strategy for Volunteering, the community engagement opportunities that volunteering activities provide for older people directly contribute to healthy ageing in Australia.¹¹

Irene and Carole (both over 75) have volunteered for over a decade at *Best Club*, a social group program for seniors created by Capital Region Community Services (CRCS) to provide support and connections for elderly people in Canberra. Irene and Carole serve morning tea to Best Club participants each week and provide practical support with activities such as crafts, games, and light exercise activities. A sense of helping the community is not all that Carole and Irene have gained through their work at Best Club. They have developed a close friendship and experienced an improvement in their mental health and wellbeing. In Irene's words, *“If it weren't for volunteering, I would be sitting at home, doing nothing and getting depressed”*. Both Carole and Irene started volunteering at Best Club after their husbands passed away. They were looking for something to do after this tremendous loss and found that volunteering provided a new way of connecting with others and reinventing themselves. *“Get out and volunteer because it is good for your health, you will make new friends, you will learn new things and you will serve your community”* say Irene and Carole.

Greg's story

VolunteeringACT runs a community information hub in central Canberra that provides the public with information on services and supports, clubs and groups, events, and activities in the Canberra region. It is regularly staffed by volunteers and provides an opportunity for both volunteers and Hub visitors to interact socially, as well as learn about opportunities for social connection that are available throughout the Canberra region. Some Hub volunteers start their journey as visitors to the Hub. Recently, Greg (not real name) visited the Hub to seek help finding a volunteer opportunity that would involve working in a team with other volunteers. He expressed that he was experiencing loneliness from being 'stuck at home', and that he didn't

¹⁰ Aged Care Research and Industry Innovation Australia (2024) [Social Isolation](#)

¹¹ Volunteering Australia (2023) [National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033](#), p22

get to see people very often. After talking more about the kind of volunteer role he was interested in, Greg was offered a volunteer role at the information hub and has since become a much-valued member of the Hub volunteer team.

Informal volunteering

“[Volunteering] reinforces the idea that they are doing something worth it, rather than feeling lost. It is a gateway to belong to the community”

- VACT survey respondent

Informal volunteering (i.e. unpaid help that occurs outside of a formal organisation, excluding help provided to members of one’s own household or family), is also an important source of social connection in the ACT community. Research has shown that informal volunteering provides social capital and a sense of belonging for many multicultural Australians, particularly during early settlement.¹² For newly arrived migrants in the ACT, religious and cultural associations are often the first sites of contact and connection. Volunteering within such groups allows individuals to build connections, maintain their rituals and traditions, navigate their settlement journey, find appropriate accommodation and professional connections, and learn about resources they may need such as Access and Centrelink Services.¹³ During VolunteeringACT consultations carried out with multicultural communities, one participant expressed the benefits of volunteering as follows: *“They [culturally and linguistically diverse volunteers] belong to this space. Their contributions are valued. [Volunteering] reinforces the idea that they are doing something worth it, rather than feeling lost. It is a gateway to belong to the community.”*

Volunteer programs facilitate social connections

Volunteer-operated programs are often at the forefront of the ACT’s core support services to individuals and communities, providing interaction via different one to one and/or group programs such as education programs, befriending activities, or volunteer mentoring, with extremely effective results. Volunteers can sometimes provide support and help facilitate solutions for people in a way that cannot always be achieved within conventional service system models, particularly when a service has fairly strict operational parameters, or a narrow remit. The programs detailed below offer a small insight into the numerous, diverse volunteer programs in the ACT that enhance and build social connectedness.

¹² Al Adaway, H (2023) [The Story Project - Australian Multiculturalism Through the Prism of \(Informal\) Volunteering](#)

¹³ Volunteering Australia (2023) [Submission to the Multicultural Framework Review](#), p8

The Compeer Program

A volunteer program that specifically targets social isolation and loneliness in the ACT is St Vincent de Paul's [Compeer Program](#). Compeer links adults living with a mental health challenge with friendship from a volunteer in the community. The aim of the program is "to increase participants' social connection and community participation as well as improve participants' wellbeing and quality of life through social connections."¹⁴ In the ACT, the Program supported 30 connections and friendships in the last year. Many of the participants involved in this Program report feeling overwhelmed by large group activities or large gatherings so the one-on-one friendship provided via Compeer is much more comfortable and supportive for them. This Program would not be possible without the volunteers and often leads to long-lasting friendships that have a significant impact on the wellbeing of both the participants and the volunteers themselves.

Menslink Mentoring

Similarly, the [Youth Mentoring Program](#) operated in the ACT by Menslink, pairs volunteer male mentors of all ages and backgrounds with young males aged 10-16 needing a constructive influence in their lives, to benefit from the support and friendship a mentor provides. Following engagement in the program, feedback from parents has shown that 80% report positive/very positive impacts on their sons' confidence and self-esteem, 71% report positive/very positive impacts on their sons' willingness to seek support and 86% report positive/very positive impacts on their sons' relationship with peers and family.¹⁵ The Menslink person-centred program design ensures that young men have the support and social connection they need in a timely manner, before things in their life escalate and potentially result in negative health and wellbeing impacts further down the track. Community-based interventions like this are a vital component in addressing social isolation and contributing to suicide prevention amongst men in the ACT, and volunteers are at the heart of this service delivery model.

Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program

"I had zero confidence in myself to be a part of the community and I was really isolated. Now I can be in an environment where I can be a part of the team and be supported. It's really common for people with mental health struggles to feel like you can't contribute, like you're useless. This program helped me with that."
- IVP participant

VolunteeringACT currently leads the [Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment \(IVP\) Program](#) operating across Tasmania, NSW, and the ACT in partnership with the Centre for

¹⁴St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn (2024) [Compeer Friendship Program](#)

¹⁵ Menslink (2022) [What We Do Works - Impact Survey Results 2022 - Menslink](#)

Volunteering (NSW) and Volunteering Tasmania. This program facilitates inclusive volunteering opportunities for people with disability and mental ill health and has a proven track record of delivering positive and sustainable volunteering outcomes for them. The IVP Program involves working closely with participants to understand their individual goals, find a suitable volunteer placement, overcome barriers, and support them in a volunteering journey that is both rewarding and enjoyable. 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 can lead to volunteer placements that allow participants to connect with and contribute to their community in an appropriate, safe, and supported way. A recent internal evaluation report found that 67% of IVP Participants felt the program increased their sense of belonging and connection.¹⁶

Investment in volunteering

Volunteer programs are generally cost-effective to run, can support and enhance other service delivery mechanisms, and provide significant social, cultural, and economic returns on investment. Recent data collected as part of the ACT's 2023 State of Volunteering Survey (due to be published shortly) has shown that **for every \$1 invested in volunteering, \$5.40 is returned.**¹⁷

While volunteers offer their time for free, there are costs associated with running volunteer programs and they require adequate funding to ensure their viability. Volunteers require ongoing line management to ensure their volunteering experience is ethical, safe, inclusive, and in line with the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.¹² It is vital that programs are run in this way, as this ensures they are sustainable and deliver high quality outcomes.

Despite the powerful contribution the volunteering sector makes to the ACT community, it has not received adequate levels of investment over the past few years to ensure funding envelopes fully cover the costs of running volunteering programs, including volunteer management. A report commissioned by ACTCOSS in 2021 found that only 25% of 88 surveyed community sector organisations were adequately funded to manage volunteers.¹⁸

As evidenced through the stories and examples provided throughout this submission, **investing in volunteering is a direct and highly cost-effective way to contribute to greater social connectedness in the ACT.**

¹⁶ VolunteeringACT (2024) IVP Evaluation Report: Internal

¹⁷ ACT State of Volunteering Research 2023 – report due for publication March/April 2024

¹⁸ ACTCOSS (2022) [Counting the costs – Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector](#), p1

An ACT Volunteering Strategy is currently being co-designed by the volunteering ecosystem in partnership with ACT Government. This Strategy will provide a clear roadmap for the Canberra region to respond to shifting sector priorities and needs, achieve National Volunteering Strategy¹⁹ objectives in line with ACT priorities, and foster an inclusive, ethical, and sustainable ACT volunteering ecosystem.

Volunteering is an activity that cuts across numerous Government portfolios including (but not limited to) disability, social services, health, mental health, education, environment, emergency services and employment. Historically, responsibility for volunteering strategic policy and ongoing resourcing has been led by the Community Services Directorate. However, it is vital that responsibility for resourcing and implementing the ACT Volunteering Strategy is established as a whole of government initiative to be effective and ensure that the needs of volunteers are considered in all forums relevant to them. Making volunteering a cross-portfolio issue is a critical step for both safeguarding and elevating volunteering in the ACT.

This Inquiry provides a timely opportunity to recognise and promote the significant benefits volunteering provides to the ACT community and to call for ongoing adequate investment in an ACT Volunteering Strategy, apportioned across all relevant ACT Government budget streams.

Recommendation 2: Secure an ongoing funding commitment from all relevant directorates across the ACT Government to support the implementation of the ACT Volunteering Strategy (currently in development).

Connecting people to community

“I recently moved to Canberra and was looking for local play groups where I could meet other new parents. By searching for ‘Play Groups and Childcare’ in the Community Directory and entering my location, I was able to find play groups and connect with new parents in my local area.”

- Community Directory user

VolunteeringACT currently manages the [ACT Community Directory](#) and Community Information Hub, both funded through the ACT Government Community Services Directorate. These services link community members with services to support their needs, groups to connect with other people and activities to participate in their local community. The Community Directory provides information on over 3,000 services including interest groups, sporting clubs and cultural communities.

¹⁹ Volunteering Australia (2023) [National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033](#)

The Community Directory is a vital existing resource that is already helping connect ACT community members and service providers with a range of programs and services that tackle loneliness and social isolation. However, there are several enhancements available that would enable us to fully leverage the existing resources within it, but these come at an additional cost.

Possible enhancements could include building in a question pathway mechanism that leads users through a series of questions (available in multiple languages) to help them connect with the appropriate service or support. This process should involve co-design with relevant stakeholders to ensure enhancements are appropriate and fit for purpose.

VolunteeringACT recommends that additional funding is provided for enhancements to the Community Directory. This investment would further improve the directory's accessibility and ability to connect people with what they need/want, enabling greater social connectedness for them.

Recommendation 3: Provide additional funding for enhancements to the Community Directory.

While the Community Directory is a valuable, accessible, and rich information source, there is still a lack of government and public awareness of this online tool. The ACT Government should commit to more proactively promoting the Community Directory internally to increase awareness of the Directory's purpose, functions, and content. The services listed in the front end of the Directory provide easy opportunity for linkages and referring onto other services. The records contained within the back end of the Directory system serve as an accurate *source of truth* on current ACT service provision and could be better utilised by ACT government officers in future service planning and help avoid duplication.

It would also be useful for ACT Government to work in partnership with the sector more to help market it more broadly and help improve awareness amongst the ACT general population of the Community Directory and how it can help them.

Recommendation 4: Actively promote the Community Directory across ACT Government, and work in partnership with the sector to market it more broadly.

Authorisation

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

Jean Giese
Chief Executive Officer
