



Submission: Inquiry into Unpaid Work

May 2024

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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 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 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, volunteer involving organisations 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 Economy and Gender and Economic Equality's Inquiry into unpaid work.

VACT are currently working with the ACT Government Community Services Directorate (CSD) to finalise a 10-year ACT Volunteering Strategy. This Strategy has been co-designed with the ACT volunteering ecosystem over the past two years and provides a clear roadmap for the Canberra region to respond to shifting sector priorities and needs, achieve National Volunteering Strategy¹ objectives in line with ACT priorities, and foster an inclusive, ethical, and sustainable ACT volunteering culture. The ACT Volunteering Strategy and its associated action plans (currently in development) will provide a coordinated mechanism to foster cost-efficient and evidence-based support for volunteering in our region, as well as enabling shared understanding of and support for volunteering in its many forms. This Inquiry provides a timely opportunity to recognise the enormous and vital contribution of volunteering to our local community and to promote the importance of ACT Government cross-directorate support for the forthcoming ACT Volunteering Strategy and its implementation.

We have provided a list of key recommendations for the Committee's consideration below, with further details provided on the following pages, including a request that each ACT Government Directorate supports the ACT Volunteering Strategy (currently in development) when it is presented to Cabinet in August 2024.

Recommendations

- 1. Clearly differentiate and define the different forms of unpaid work that occur in the ACT, including volunteering.**
- 2. Recognise and promote the significant and multi-faceted contributions of volunteering to the ACT community.**
- 3. Recognise and promote volunteering as a legitimate pathway to paid employment.**
- 4. Ensure volunteering is included as standard in ACT workforce development initiatives.**

¹ Volunteering Australia (2023) [National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033](#)

- 5. Ensure that volunteering is repositioned as a cross-government responsibility and that the full cost of volunteer programs is adequately and sustainably resourced.**
- 6. Support and invest in building and sustaining inclusivity and accessibility across the ACT volunteering ecosystem.**
- 7. Address the recommendations in this submission and provide coordinated support across ACT Government directorates for volunteering by endorsing the ACT Volunteering Strategy 2024-2034 (currently in development).**

Terminology and Definitions

A critical aspect of this Inquiry is recognising that “unpaid work” can take many forms and there is a need for clear definitions and correct terminology within this broad area. While student placements, internships, work experience, caring responsibilities and volunteering may all describe forms of unpaid work, **they are not interchangeable terms**. Each have their own motivations, obligations, requirements, distinct needs, and associated challenges. Therefore, it is essential to differentiate volunteering as an activity that is distinct from other forms of unpaid work.

Unlike most other forms of unpaid work, volunteers are primarily motivated by the desire to contribute to their community and are exercising a choice. Volunteering is defined nationally as *“time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.”*² This captures a diverse range of activities across almost every aspect of society and includes volunteering that occurs formally within an organisation or group, for example volunteering as a dog walker for the RSPCA or assisting at a local food pantry. It also incorporates volunteering that occurs informally outside of an organisation or structured group, such as driving a friend’s children to school, coordinating refreshments during half time at local sports practices, or facilitating a neighbourhood book exchange.³

Importantly, a volunteer’s time must **never** be exploited – they should not be used to replace paid workers under the guise of saving money, and should be limited to an appropriate number of hours per week.⁴ Volunteering does **not** include direct family responsibilities, student placements, mandated court orders (including community service), internships, formal work experience/vocational placements, mandatory government (i.e. Centrelink) programs or limited choice labour market government programs.⁵

Where clarity around terminology doesn’t occur and the boundaries between what is/isn’t and should/shouldn’t be classed as unpaid work are blurred, this can lead to participation in volunteering becoming something that is mandated and therefore exploitative. For example, VACT has heard reports from member organisations who are being approached to take on student ‘volunteers’ who are being directed to undertake volunteering as an essential requirement to pass their course, making this both unethical and exploitative. In this context

² Volunteering Australia (2015) [Definition of volunteering](#)

³ Volunteering Australia (2015) [Volunteering Australia Project: The Review of the Definition of Volunteering](#)

⁴ Volunteering Australia (2015) [Volunteering Australia Project: The Review of the Definition of Volunteering](#)

⁵ Volunteering Australia (2015) [Volunteering Australia Project: The Review of the Definition of Volunteering](#)

volunteering is being used as an essential course 'placement', with terms being used interchangeably, when they are actually two different types of unpaid work.

Further, some forms of unpaid work need to be supported appropriately and in a way that allows individuals to also participate in volunteering if they wish to. For example, recent changes announced regarding the carer payment that no longer restrict the hours a carer can choose to volunteer⁶ are welcomed and help provide clarity for people in this situation.

To ensure the wellbeing of their volunteers, all volunteer involving organisations should have appropriate policies and safeguards in place, in line with the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement⁷, so that their volunteer programs are safe, ethical, inclusive, and supportive.

Recommendation 1: Clearly differentiate and define the different forms of unpaid work that occur in the ACT, including volunteering.

The Contributions and Benefits of volunteering

Volunteers make a vital and enormous contribution to the ACT, supporting a wide range of services and activities across society and contributing to building healthier and more resilient individuals, communities, and natural environments. Recent research conducted in 2023, found that 75% of ACT residents aged over 15 volunteered, collectively contributing 63.7 million hours of their time.⁸

There are thousands of volunteer-involving organisations in the Canberra Region operating across diverse areas that include sport and recreation, health, education, environment, arts, tourism, major events, emergency services, and community services. In addition, the region benefits from vital services and programs delivered by the ACT Government and Australian Government, that rely heavily on the skilled contribution of volunteers, such as Emergency Services and Rural Fire Services, the annual National Multicultural Festival, the National Folk Festival, the ACT Library Service, and activities within ACT Government schools.

Economic Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteer programs are generally cost-effective to run, can support and enhance other service delivery mechanisms, and provide a great return on investment. In 2023, VolunteeringACT facilitated the first ever ACT State of Volunteering Report. This involved a public survey

⁶ Carers Australia (2024) [Media Release: Carers Australia welcomes Government's revised conditions to the carer payment](#)

⁷ Volunteering Australia (2024) [The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement](#)

⁸ State of Volunteering in the ACT Report 2024 –due for publication May 2024.

conducted with randomly selected ACT residents and a survey targeted at ACT volunteer managers. The findings of this report highlight the significant economic contribution of volunteering to the ACT. It was found that **for every \$1 invested in volunteering in the ACT, \$5.40 is returned.**

Volunteering in the ACT enabled a remarkable estimated **\$14.1 billion worth of benefits** in 2023, which incorporates \$3.3 billion in commercial benefits, \$4.1 billion in civic benefits and \$6.6 billion in individual benefits. Further, the cost of **replacing volunteer labour is estimated to be \$3.3 billion**, which equates to over two-thirds the cost of replacing the entire ACT public service.⁹

These recent findings suggest that, as is likely the case for other forms of unpaid work, the vast contribution of volunteering to the ACT economy has been significantly undervalued and under-recognised to date. This Inquiry provides an opportunity to change the perception of volunteering and to publicly recognise and promote the remarkable economic benefits that it brings to our region.

Volunteering and Wellbeing

In the current ACT policy and decision-making landscape volunteering is often not well-recognised for the clear population wellbeing benefits it brings, with an outdated perception that to volunteer is simply a form of unpaid labour. It is important to challenge this perception and establish a more current and shared understanding of the significant positive wellbeing outcomes volunteering provides so many Canberrans, and how this sets it aside from other forms of unpaid work being considered by this Inquiry.

For example, volunteering is a recognised indicator of social cohesion and a significant and powerful contributor to social connectedness in the community.¹⁰ There is a two-fold connection between volunteering and good overall health and wellbeing, providing a dual impact of improving the wellbeing of people undertaking volunteering, as well as volunteering activities contributing to enhancing the wellbeing of others.

Volunteering has been found to help individuals develop stronger social networks and interpersonal relationships, improve self-esteem, relieve stress, alleviate symptoms of depression, and help with mental health recovery and/or self-management.¹¹

⁹ State of Volunteering in the ACT Report 2024 –due for publication May 2024.

¹⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021), [Determinants of wellbeing: Social connection](#)

¹¹ Healthdirect (2021) [Benefits of volunteering](#); McDermott, J (2023) [Volunteering and Mental Health](#), Volunteering Australia, p3

As outlined in VolunteeringACT's response to the Legislative Assembly's Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in the ACT¹², 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.

Volunteering is currently recognised within the *Social Connection* and *Time* domains of the ACT Wellbeing Framework as a key indicator of Canberrans being connected with family, friends, and community, and having the time to live life well.¹³ This has also been acknowledged within the new National Wellbeing Framework, with volunteering included as a measure of the Social Connection Indicator.¹⁴

In fact, volunteering contributes across almost all the Wellbeing domains. For example, volunteering can contribute to physical health, particularly amongst older volunteers, and has been linked to general health and wellbeing and reduced mortality.¹⁵ Further, the contribution of ACT volunteers to our local environment is both critical and irreplaceable. As recognised in the ACT government's inquiry into environmental volunteerism in 2022, "*volunteers contribute work and expertise to land management and environmental efforts to an extent that would not otherwise be possible due to budgetary and other constraints.*"¹⁶ Recent data suggests that environmental volunteers provide over 300,000 hours of work each year.⁵

There is great potential for increasing understanding and recognition of the significant and multi-faceted contribution of volunteering to the ACT and changing how it is perceived. The ACT Volunteering Strategy (currently in development) incorporates a key focus on raising public awareness and ensuring that the ACT volunteer workforce is seen, heard, valued, and fully recognised for the far-reaching positive impacts.

Recommendation 2: Recognise and promote the significant and multi-faceted contributions of volunteering to the ACT community.

¹² VolunteeringACT (2024) [VACT Submission to the ACT Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness](#)

¹³ ACT Government (2020) [ACT Wellbeing Framework](#)

¹⁴ Australian Government (2023) [Measuring What Matters Framework](#)

¹⁵ Nichol B, Wilson R, Rodrigues A, Haighton C (2023) Exploring the Effects of Volunteering on the Social, Mental, and Physical Health and Well-being of Volunteers: An Umbrella Review, *Voluntas*, May 4:1-32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-023-00573-z>

¹⁶ Legislative Assembly for the ACT (2022) [Inquiry into environmental volunteerism](#), p7

The Dynamic between Paid Work and Volunteering

Volunteering and paid employment are both distinct and strongly linked. While volunteering may be motivated by contributing to the common good, it can still act as a legitimate pathway to paid employment. Participation in volunteering provides vital workplace experience and enables volunteers to become job ready, increasing their chances of obtaining meaningful, long-term employment.

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. For example, research demonstrates that volunteering can help people with disability build personal skills, access networking opportunities, and find paid roles.¹⁷ Volunteering can also provide a vital 'bridging' activity for young people to aid their transition from education to the workplace and enable them to try out different work settings and roles and acquire new skills in preparation for paid employment.

Given their significant contribution across multiple sectors, volunteers must be regarded as an integral part of the ACT workforce in a way that accounts for them within strategic and funding planning process and allocations. Volunteers need to be included as standard in ACT workforce development initiatives and volunteer and volunteer-involving organisation expertise should be listened to, respected, and responded to within such initiatives. At the same time, there is a need to ensure the right balance between appropriate safeguarding for the ACT's volunteering workforce, without their over-regulation at a practical implementation level.

The ACT Volunteering Strategy (currently in development) incorporates key objectives and tangible actions that aim to ensure volunteering is considered in relevant ACT government strategic planning, service design and delivery, as well as ensuring that ACT volunteers are free from exploitation and feel safe and supported in their roles. For example, some volunteers are required to obtain a Working with Vulnerable People (WWVP) Card to undertake their role. Many volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations experience challenges with this process, including long waiting times and difficulties accessing information and support. This can place unnecessary burden on the limited resources of volunteer-involving organisations and, in some situations, result in volunteers deciding not to pursue a position. It is important that the ACT volunteering ecosystem¹⁸ is engaged in the development and delivery of initiatives

¹⁷ Yanay-Ventura, G (2018) "Nothing About Us Without Us" in *Volunteerism Too: Volunteering Among People with Disabilities*, *Voluntas*, 30(1): 147,163, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-0026-7>

¹⁸ The term 'ACT Volunteering ecosystem' refers to the network of people in the ACT who are involved in or connected to volunteering in some way, including helping others to understand, recognise and support volunteering to thrive in our region. They may be doing this as individuals or as part of an organisation, group, institute, or agency.

such as the WWVP Scheme to ensure that the unique nature of volunteering is considered in their implementation and adequate and accessible supports and tailored information are made available.

Recommendation 3: Recognise and promote volunteering as a legitimate pathway to paid employment.

Recommendation 4: Ensure volunteering is included as standard in ACT workforce development initiatives.

Sustainability and Resourcing

While volunteers offer their time willingly for free, there are costs associated with running volunteer programs and they require adequate funding to ensure their viability. Volunteers need 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, without compromising volunteer safety and wellbeing. Further, many programs run by volunteer-involving organisations involve supporting people with complex needs, which requires significant resourcing to ensure safety and quality (for example, programs for people with complex mental health needs). A report published by ACTCOSS in 2021 found that only 25% of 88 surveyed community sector organisations were adequately funded to manage volunteers.¹⁹

There is a clear need to ensure that funding agreements include allocations that cover the full cost of volunteer programs and changes to ACT grant and contract arrangements is needed to tackle this issue. Volunteering is a cross cutting activity, that does not just occur within one workstream, or government portfolio – it occurs across many, with thousands of volunteers currently active within several ACT Government services, across multiple directorates. With a steadily rising Canberra population year on year, resourcing needs to keep pace with those population level increases, as there is a direct relationship between population numbers and a) increasing numbers of volunteers and b) rising service demand in all the key program areas volunteers help to support and staff. Therefore, it is vital that responsibility for resourcing volunteer programs and implementing the ACT Volunteering Strategy (currently in development) is led and coordinated more centrally as a cross-government function.

¹⁹ ACTCOSS (2022) [Counting the costs – Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector](#), p1

The ACT Volunteering Strategy co-design and development already involves this type of cross-government approach to try and create the right conditions in the ACT for volunteering to thrive – directly in line with the same objective outlined in the National Strategy for Volunteering.²⁰ Making volunteering a cross-portfolio issue is a critical step for safeguarding and elevating volunteering in the ACT, and ensuring the needs of volunteers and the organisations supporting them are enshrined within all relevant policy and program development activities, going forward. 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 for the practical solutions and projects needed to implement the forthcoming ACT Volunteering Strategy, across all relevant ACT Government directorates.

Recommendation 5: Ensure that volunteering is repositioned as a cross-government responsibility and that the full cost of volunteer programs is adequately and sustainably resourced.

Challenges Faced by Volunteers

Financial strain is a significant barrier to volunteering in Australia and one that is currently compounded by rising cost of living challenges. Recent research undertaken by Volunteering Australia to inform the development of the new National Strategy for Volunteering, found that 16.6% of people did not volunteer in the past 12 months for financial reasons.²¹ Financial barriers were particularly significant for young people, with 25.5% of those aged 18 to 34 years indicating that they did not volunteer for financial reasons.²² Further, when current volunteers in the ACT were asked about barriers to volunteering more in 2023, 19% reported cost as an inhibitor.²³

Whilst volunteers do not expect to be rewarded or remunerated for their contribution, ensuring that volunteers are not out-of-pocket for contributing their time is essential to protecting the interests of volunteers. This is a key element of Strategic Objective 1.3: Ensuring Volunteering is Not Exploitative, outlined in the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033). The soon to be released 'State of Volunteering in the ACT Report 2024' found that volunteers in the ACT reported spending an average of \$243 per month or \$12.76 per hour they volunteered of their own money, which equated to 64.6% of the financial burden associated with volunteering.²⁴ Via

²⁰ Volunteering Australia (2023) [National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033](#)

²¹ Volunteering Australia (2022) [Volunteering in Australia – the Volunteer Perspective](#), p36

²² Volunteering Australia (2022) [Volunteering in Australia – the Volunteer Perspective](#), p38

²³ State of Volunteering in the ACT Report 2024 –due for publication May 2024.

²⁴ State of Volunteering in the ACT Report 2024 –due for publication May 2024.

our peak body and capability building remit, VolunteeringACT ensures that our members and wider stakeholders are aware of best practice regarding volunteer expenses, and that it should never cost a volunteer to participate in that activity. However, there are currently programs and volunteers in the ACT that are not currently connected to VolunteeringACT, and the recent research will enable us to target this support and advice to where it is needed, to improve this across the region. It follows that the ACT Government must consider ways to reduce out-of-pocket expenses for volunteers. One way to do this is to ensure that the full cost of volunteer programs is funded as standard within relevant service funding agreements, as outlined in the previous section of this submission.

It must also be recognised that certain cohorts experience more challenges and barriers related to volunteering than others. For example, language can be a barrier for culturally and linguistically diverse community members and people with disability may face accessibility barriers. The recent State of Volunteering survey in the ACT found that 18.8% of volunteers identified language as a barrier to volunteering while 47.1% of volunteers living with disability reported feeling that their disability constrained their ability to volunteer with others.²⁵

A core remit of VolunteeringACT's work is to support and build inclusive practice across the volunteering ecosystem to ensure that all ACT residents who wish to volunteer can do so in a way that works for them. For example, 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 facilitates 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 also provides training and works with organisations to help them become more inclusive as they involve people with all abilities and from all backgrounds in their workplace. Unfortunately, funding for this program is currently at risk due to the short-term nature of Federal government funding agreements, which is an issue that compromises sustainability of programs across the volunteering sector.

The forthcoming ACT Volunteering Strategy includes a focus on ensuring that volunteering is inclusive and accessible and that people of all demographics and backgrounds are supported to access volunteering opportunities in a way that works for them. This will incorporate improving our understanding of First Nations communities approaches to volunteering as well as engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, young people, and other

²⁵ State of Volunteering in the ACT Report 2024 –due for publication May 2024.

cohorts to understand the challenges they may face when trying to volunteer, and how to better support these individuals to access meaningful and culturally safe volunteering experiences.

Recommendation 6: Support and invest in building and sustaining inclusivity and accessibility across the ACT volunteering ecosystem.

Conclusion

Volunteering is a distinct form of unpaid work that plays a vital role in the ACT and contributes to building healthier and more resilient individuals, communities, and natural environments. The most effective and coordinated approach the ACT government can take to address the key themes and recommendations in this submission is through cross-directorate support and investment in the forthcoming ACT Volunteer Strategy. The Strategy will establish a shared understanding of volunteering across the whole ACT Volunteering ecosystem and its value to the region; provide a clear strategic direction for the future of volunteering; ensure ACT volunteer- involving organisations have the capacity and capability to offer safe, ethical, and inclusive volunteering opportunities; and drive investment to achieve longer-term outcomes in line with ACT priorities.

Recommendation 7: Address the recommendations in this submission and provide coordinated whole-of-government support for volunteering by endorsing the ACT Volunteer Strategy and first three-year Action Plan (currently in development).

Authorisation

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

Jean Giese
Chief Executive Officer