



Submission: ACT Age-Friendly City Plan 2025-35

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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 (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 submission to the consultation on the ACT's Age-Friendly City Plan 2025-35.

Volunteering is a significant and vital contributor to health and wellbeing, connection, participation and belonging for older Canberrans and must be considered, promoted and supported through the new Age-Friendly City Plan.

At the same time, there are numerous volunteer-involving programs occurring across our region that provide important supports for older Canberrans and build and foster positive health, connection and belonging. Many of these programs are funded by the Federal Government through national initiatives. The new Age-Friendly City Plan presents a timely opportunity to align with and leverage such national commitments to build, support and tailor local responses and volunteer-programs that involve older volunteers and provide support to Canberrans aged over 65 years.

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 support volunteering and volunteer programs as key contributors to healthy ageing in the Canberra Region.**
- 2. Recognise and promote volunteering as a way for older people to stay connected to the workforce and topics of interest, and continue contributing their knowledge, skills and expertise.**
- 3. Promote and support volunteer-led programs as vital contributors to removing access and connection barriers for older Canberrans and enacting the ACT's Social Recovery Plan.**
- 4. Promote and support volunteering and volunteer programs as important and significant contributors to social connection and belonging amongst older Canberrans.**
- 5. Support the ACT Volunteering Strategy as a cross-government initiative and recognise the importance of alignment between the Age-Friendly Plan and relevant Volunteering Strategy objectives and actions.**

Focus Area 1 - Health

Volunteering is an important contributor to healthy ageing in the Canberra region and should be recognised and promoted as such within the new Age-Friendly City Plan.

Volunteering provides a dual impact of improving the wellbeing of people participating in volunteering, as well as the contribution volunteering activities embedded within service delivery models make to enhancing the wellbeing of others accessing those services.

Volunteering creates important opportunities for older people to remain connected to their communities, interact socially, and engage in meaningful occupation of time. Participating in 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.¹ The mental health benefits of volunteering vary among different cohorts and are especially pronounced for older people.² Recent research has also found an association between volunteering and reduced mortality and improved physical functioning, particularly amongst older volunteers.³

Rod's Story

Rod is in his seventies and has been volunteering at VolunteeringACT's Community Information Hub for over six years. As a retired tradesman, Rod wanted to do something that would keep him active. *"Volunteering has been very beneficial for my health,"* says Rod, *"I was an active tradesman and didn't want to stop and just do nothing, I wanted to stay active. This has helped me do that."* Rod particularly enjoys the opportunity to meet and talk to all kinds of different people as part of his role. *"My favourite thing about volunteering is helping and talking to so many different people."*

Volunteer-operated programs are often at the forefront of core support services for older people in the Canberra region, including aged care. Nationally, volunteers are an essential component of the aged care system and the delivery of person centred and quality care.^{4,5} Volunteers can often 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 may have to operate within strict parameters or has a narrow remit. For example, volunteers in aged care

¹ [Benefits of volunteering | healthdirect](#) and [Purposeful activity - volunteering | Head to Health](#)

² McDermott, J (2023) [Volunteering and Mental Health](#), Volunteering Australia,

³ Nichol B, Wilson R, Rodrigues A et al (2024) Exploring the Effects of Volunteering on the Social, Mental, and Physical Health and Well-being of Volunteers: An Umbrella Review, *Voluntas*, **35** (97–128): <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-023-00573-z>

⁴ Department of Health and Aged Care (2023) [Volunteers in Aged Care are highly valued](#)

⁵ Department of Health (2021) [Final Report: Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety](#)

often deliver services not provided by the paid workforce, such as companionship, additional transport etc.

Jeanette's Story – Volunteering in Aged Care

Jeanette decided to volunteer with the Aged Care Volunteer Visitors Scheme (ACVVS) through Meridian, following her experiences of visiting her father in a nursing home, and noticing how many of the residents had no visitors. She would often end up chatting with several of them and was pleased to find an opportunity to provide companionship to people in aged care as a volunteer. Her experience highlights the vital support volunteers provide to older people to enhance health and wellbeing.

“Vera is in her early 90s. Her nearest family is two hours’ drive away. Vera’s health is declining, and she can no longer drive, making her isolated from activities in the retirement village and lonely. My role was to visit Vera at least fortnightly. We would have tea and biscuits and sit in the sun in her courtyard chatting. I was meant to stay an hour, but the time went very quickly. We chatted about her family and what she had done when she was younger. Vera’s stories had us laughing. She was a similar age to what my mother would have been, which made it easy to keep the conversation flowing. I got a great deal of pleasure from being able to give Vera someone to talk to and to see her laughing. I know that my health and wellbeing benefitted because it gave me such great satisfaction to be able to contribute to the wellbeing of someone in the community. As an ACVVS volunteer, I gained an even greater appreciation of the contribution older generations have made to our society and the importance of not losing their knowledge and keeping them involved in our community.”*

**Name has been changed*

Recommendation: Recognise and support volunteering and volunteer programs as key contributors to healthy ageing in the Canberra Region.

Focus Area 2 – Employment and financial security

As recognised within the Discussion Paper, volunteering offers many older Canberrans an opportunity to contribute their knowledge, skills and subject-matter expertise and stay connected to the workforce in a way that works for them. Volunteering can play an important and valuable role in a person’s transition from employment to retirement.

For example, many of the ACT’s environmental volunteers bring invaluable skills, knowledge, and experience to their roles. New Park Rangers will often meet with environmental volunteer

groups to be shown around reserves as they are considered the local experts on the land and ecosystems they help maintain and preserve. Many of the older volunteers in this sub-sector come from relevant professional backgrounds, such as retired CSIRO scientists, ex-firefighters etc., and bring extensive knowledge and expertise to their roles.

The Age-Friendly City Plan should actively promote and improve public understanding of the role volunteering can play in supporting a person's transition to retirement and providing opportunities for older people to continue contributing their knowledge, skills and life experiences through voluntary roles.

Recommendation: Recognise and promote volunteering as a way for older people to stay connected to the workforce and topics of interest, and continue contributing their knowledge, skills and expertise.

Focus Area 4 – Access and Connection

Volunteer-operated programs are already contributing to increasing access and connection amongst older ACT residents.

VolunteeringACT is one of multiple community organisations who receive Federal Government funding from the Department of Social Services to implement the **Be Connected** program locally. This program aims to increase the skills, confidence and online safety of older Australians.⁶ VolunteeringACT's *Be Connected* program connects older Canberrans with younger volunteers who teach them how to use the internet and everyday technology, either through group or one-to-one sessions. In an increasingly digitally driven society, it can have a powerful effect on an older person's access and connection.

For example, an older homeless gentleman was the first participant to access the program at VolunteeringACT's Community Information Hub. He had recently received a new mobile phone and was unsure how to use it. The *Be Connected* volunteer took him through how to set up and use his phone, including how to download free music and games. The participant was very excited and grateful for the ongoing enjoyment this would give him, and he left the program very happy. Surveys undertaken before and after his participation showed that his digital skills improved from 30% to 71% after just five one-hour sessions.

⁶ eSafety Commissioner (2024) [Be Connected](#).

There is great potential for the ACT Government to leverage and align with national initiatives like *Be Connected* to tailor, support and invest in local volunteer programs that actively break down access and connection barriers amongst older ACT residents.

There is also an opportunity for ACT Government to recognise how existing services already assist older Canberrans, and how they could be utilised more with expanded investment. For example, VolunteeringACT's Community Information Hub and My Community Directory provide an essential function by linking ACT residents with the information and services they need and providing opportunities to connect with others. It is important to maintain and expand investment in these frontline services to ensure they remain accessible and relevant to the needs of older Canberrans and can be delivered in more ways, across more ACT localities, if required.

VolunteeringACT also has a key role in supporting ACT Government's Social Recovery Plan and related activities, including standing up volunteer-led recovery and communications initiatives during emergencies. It is important to ensure that Social Recovery partners have the resourcing they need to effectively reach and communicate with older Canberrans during these occurrences, as they are often more at risk in emergency situations than other age groups.

Recommendation: Promote and support volunteer-led programs as vital contributors to removing access and connection barriers for older Canberrans and enacting the ACT's Social Recovery Plan.

Focus Area 5 – Respect, Inclusion and Belonging

Around one in five older Australians and a third of older people living in residential care are socially isolated.⁷ As recognised in the discussion paper, "*volunteering can benefit older people by improving life satisfaction, and bringing a new sense of purpose, identity and sense of belonging.*"⁸

Volunteering is a nationally recognised indicator of social cohesion and is proven to help individuals develop stronger social networks and interpersonal relationships.^{9,10} 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

⁷ Aged Care Research and Industry Innovation Australia (2024) [Social Isolation](#)

⁸ Stuart J, et al (2020) [The impacts of volunteering on the subjective wellbeing of volunteers: A rapid evidence assessment](#), What Works Wellbeing.

⁹ McDermott, J (2023) [Volunteering and Mental Health](#), Volunteering Australia, p3

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

community.¹¹ The link has also been acknowledged within the new National Wellbeing Framework, with volunteering included as a measure of the Social Connection Indicator.¹²

Through volunteering in their community, individuals become more 'outwardly focused', which can lead to a reduction in social isolation and foster a greater sense of social connection and belonging.¹³ Research indicates that social interaction involving providing support to others is a particularly beneficial form of social connection and creates a positive emotional state, replacing stress-causing emotions, including loneliness.¹⁴

Marion's Story – Volunteering at Questacon

Marion is in her 80's and has been volunteering for 36 years, sharing her scientific knowledge and expertise via her volunteer role at Questacon, encouraging visitors to play with exhibits so they can understand how things work. Volunteering also helps Marion with her health and wellbeing, and to stay connected with the Canberra community. Marion was awarded the Senior Volunteer of the Year at the 2023 Volunteering Awards in recognition of her incredible and long-standing contribution.

When asked why she volunteered, Marion said, "36 years ago I was motivated to volunteer because I was at home with a microscope writing reports and felt like I needed more involvement with people. What better place than Questacon to interact with people and get to explain science to the young and old? However, today's motivation is very much the people I volunteer with and their similar interests. Volunteering at Questacon is both for me and the visitors. It stretches my mind and I'm continually learning. Being a woman in Science, I am a role model to the younger generation. Encouraging all to have an interest in and understanding of basic science".

Marion also talks about how much fun she has in her role, the importance of interacting with others and how this benefits her wellbeing. *"I love the interaction with visitors and my volunteer peers. Questacon staff have become my extended family. They are very encouraging, caring and supportive. I'm still volunteering after 36 years as it keeps my mind sharp, keeps me physically active, it's engaging and I'm still contributing to society. Volunteers at Questacon engage with a large range of people. It's extremely inclusive and attracts visitors from all over*

¹¹ ACT Government (2023) [ACT Wellbeing Framework - Explore overall wellbeing](#)

¹² Australian Government (2023) [Measuring what Matters statement](#), p56

¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021), [Determinants of wellbeing: Social connection](#)

¹⁴ McDermott, J (2023) [Volunteering and Mental Health](#), Volunteering Australia, p5

the world. I love seeing and learning how people from different societies interact and react when you are explaining exhibits to them.”

Volunteer-operated programs across the ACT provide opportunities for interaction via different one to one and/or group programs such as befriending activities, or volunteer mentoring, with extremely effective results.

The Commonwealth is leading the way in supporting volunteering in aged care. The national Aged Care Volunteer Visitors Scheme (ACVVS) funds community organisations to recruit, train and match volunteers with aged care recipients in their local area. Volunteers provide friendship and companionship to older individuals who are experiencing loneliness or would benefit from regular visits and companionship.¹⁵

[Meridian](#) delivers an ACVVS program in the ACT that employs a person-centred approach, respecting the cultural heritage, personal experiences, and unique backgrounds of older individuals to create meaningful connections. This free service is available to recipients of government-subsidised residential aged care services or home care packages, including those on waitlists.

Meridian currently operates with a group of around 20 volunteers who actively participate in the program, with many more at various stages of onboarding and training. Each volunteer commits to regular visits, either weekly or fortnightly, to one or two recipients. These visits are tailored to accommodate the specific preferences, needs, and mobility of each recipient. Activities during these visits range widely, including watching TV together, enjoying tea or coffee, reading books, listening to music, sharing stories, taking walks, engaging in hobbies, and playing board games. This personalised approach ensures that every interaction is meaningful and enhances the companionship and well-being of both the recipients and the volunteers involved.

“The visits from my volunteer have made a huge difference in my life. I feel less isolated and more connected to the world.” - Meridian ACVVS program recipient.

Recommendation: Recognise and promote volunteering and volunteer programs as important and significant contributors to social connection and belonging amongst older Canberrans.

¹⁵ Department of Health and Aged Care (2024) [Aged care volunteering and the Aged Care Volunteer Visitors Scheme](#)

Investment in sustainable 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. Data from the recently published State of Volunteering in the ACT Research Report (2024) has shown that **for every \$1 invested in volunteering, \$5.40 is returned**.¹⁶

As recognised in the Discussion Paper, *“there is a need to better support existing older volunteers, so they remain, and to attract new volunteers”*. While volunteers offer their time for free, there are costs associated with running volunteer programs and they require adequate and sustainable 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 the vital volunteer management function. A report released by ACTCOSS in 2021 found that only 25% of 88 surveyed community sector organisations were adequately funded to manage volunteers.¹⁷

A Draft **ACT Volunteering Strategy** has been co-designed by the ACT volunteering ecosystem in partnership with ACT Government and is currently going through a Cabinet Exposure process for final endorsement. This Strategy will provide a clear roadmap for the Canberra region to respond to shifting sector priorities and needs, achieve National Volunteering Strategy¹⁸ objectives in line with ACT priorities, and foster an inclusive, ethical, and sustainable ACT volunteering ecosystem. This will include broader promotion of volunteering and its benefits across all ages and population groups, capacity and capability building for volunteer-involving organisations, and seeking more secure ongoing funding for ACT volunteer programs into the future.

Within the co-design process, connections to other key ACT Strategies and Plans have been identified throughout and the first draft three-year action plan outlines multiple actions that have

¹⁶ VolunteeringACT (2024) [State of Volunteering in the ACT Report 2024](#), p2.

¹⁷ ACTCOSS (2022) [Counting the costs – Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector](#), p1

¹⁸ Volunteering Australia (2023) [National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033](#)

natural synergies with other ACT strategic priorities and action plans, including the Age-Friendly City Plan.

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 cross-government initiative to be effective and ensure that the needs of volunteers are considered in all relevant decision-making processes. Making volunteering a cross-portfolio issue is a priority with the National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033, and therefore a critical step for both safeguarding and elevating volunteering in the ACT. This will help ensure the ACT remains responsive to how the local and national volunteering landscape has evolved over the past decade, as its population continues to expand.

This consultation provides a timely opportunity to recognise and promote the significant benefits volunteering provides to the ACT's older community and establish ongoing support and a cross-directorate commitment to implementing the ACT Volunteering Strategy.

Recommendation: Support the ACT Volunteering Strategy as a cross-government initiative and recognise the importance of alignment between the Age-Friendly Plan and relevant Volunteering Strategy objectives and actions.

Authorisation

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

Jean Giese
Chief Executive Officer
