

Submission on the New Disability Employment Support Model

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Overview

Volunteering offers opportunities for social, economic, and cultural participation, and facilitates pathways into the paid workforce. As such, Volunteering Australia welcomes the consideration of volunteering in the development of the new Employment Services Model, and in particular in the new Disability Employment Support Model. However, the incorporation of volunteering into employment support programs must ensure that organisations which facilitate volunteering opportunities receive adequate funding for the appropriate functions. Further, if volunteering is to be included in a future mutual obligation system, the new Model should include provisions to make volunteering more accessible.

Volunteering Australia recommends that the following considerations are addressed in the development of the new Disability Employment Support Model:

- Volunteering can be a powerful pathway to employment for people with disability. Programs should be supported to connect people with disability with appropriate and meaningful volunteering opportunities, and to equip volunteer involving organisations to more readily and effectively involve volunteers with disability.
- To improve accessibility, job seekers with disability who receive income support should have the opportunity to reduce their mutual obligation requirements by volunteering virtually.
- The mutual obligation system should be streamlined by simplifying the process of reporting voluntary work and providing clear information on volunteering and income support payments to volunteer involving organisations.
- The promotion of volunteering as a pathway to employment and as a mutual obligation activity increases the demand for volunteering support services. The current gap in funding for these services must be urgently addressed.

Introduction

Background and context

The volunteering ecosystem is facing immense challenges, particularly as the nation transitions to the next phase of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The proportion of Australians doing voluntary work fell from 36 per cent in late 2019 to 24.2 per cent in April 2021, amounting to an estimated loss of 2.3 million from Australia's volunteer force.¹ Troublingly, almost half of those who stopped volunteering during the first year of COVID-19 had not resumed by April 2021, despite the easing of lockdown and physical distancing restrictions in many jurisdictions at that time.²

In response to these challenges, work has recently commenced on a sector-led National Strategy for Volunteering, funded by the Department of Social Services and facilitated by Volunteering Australia. The National Strategy for Volunteering will provide strategic direction for the sector and enable

¹ https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/5/Volunteering_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic_-_April_2021.pdf

² *ibid*

volunteering across Australia to be effective, inclusive, and sustainable. Barriers to volunteering, including those faced by people with disability, will be considered in the development of the National Strategy.

Work has also recently concluded on the redesign of the Volunteer Management Activity, with the aim to create a thriving, inclusive, and diverse volunteering culture which meets the changing demands for capable and committed volunteers in communities across Australia. The Volunteer Management Activity aims to build the capacity of volunteer involving organisations through online volunteer management services and support to break down barriers to inclusion for identified priority groups, namely people with disability, First Nation peoples, and newly arrived migrants.³

About the new Disability Employment Support Model

The New Disability Employment Support Model (the new Model) is currently being developed by the Department of Social Services. It is set to replace the current Disability Employment Services (DES) program, which a mid-term review found was not meeting its objectives efficiently and effectively. The new Model aims to support people with disability to find and maintain employment, and businesses who employ people with disability to ensure their employment is successful.⁴ The new Model is due to commence after 30 June 2023.

About this submission

This submission contributes evidence on the value of volunteering as a pathway to employment and on the supports required to reduce barriers to inclusion for people with disability. It also provides input on the use of volunteering as an activity to potentially fulfill mutual obligation requirements for job seekers. It concludes by outlining the resourcing and funding implications for volunteering support services of including volunteering in the new Model.⁵ To provide recommendations supported by available evidence, this submission focuses on formal volunteering, which is undertaken through an organisation or group.⁶

The new Model presents an opportunity to place the choice and control of people with disability at the heart of the employment support system. People with disability are the experts of their own experience and are often able to gauge more effectively what is or is not possible for them. This perspective should guide decision making around the incorporation of volunteering in employment pathways.

This submission responds to the following questions from the Consultation Paper:

³ <https://www.dss.gov.au/communities-and-vulnerable-people/programmes-services/volunteer-management>

⁴ <https://www.dss.gov.au/new-disability-employment-support-model>

⁵ This submission uses the term 'volunteering support services' to refer to place-based organisations that promote, resource, and support volunteering in local communities. These are also known as Volunteer Support Organisations and Volunteer Resource Centres.

⁶ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/FAQs-Launch-of-Definition-280715-final.pdf>

1.2. Should a future disability employment support program include employment pathways such as casual and part-time employment, community engagement, voluntary work and short-term unpaid work experience?

6.2. How should a future [mutual obligations] program consider other forms of participation and engagement, such as voluntary work or community engagement?

This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies.

Volunteering as a pathway to employment

The capacity of volunteering to facilitate pathways into paid employment is well established. Undertaking voluntary work can equip applicants with work-relevant skills and experience. Research undertaken by employment company SEEK found that 95 per cent of employers identify that volunteering is just as credible as paid work.⁷ Further, 92 per cent of employers identified that relevant volunteering experience gave a candidate an advantage in job interviews.⁸ Volunteering also creates opportunities to make new connections and to maintain existing skills while searching for paid work. A quantitative study from the US found that people who volunteered were 27 per cent more likely to find employment than those who did not volunteer.⁹

The potential of volunteering to lead to paid work makes it an important option for people seeking employment, including people with disability. In qualitative research, people with disability have indicated that their volunteering helped them to build personal skills, access networking opportunities, and find paid roles.¹⁰

Despite its benefits, people with disability often face significant barriers to engaging in meaningful volunteering. Prior research has indicated that people with physical disability are less likely than those without disability to engage in formal volunteering and are less likely to be connected to opportunities that encourage them to apply for voluntary roles.¹¹ While recent data indicates that people with disability volunteer at a similar rate to people without disability,¹² interview research has found that low expectations from society and from organisations often prevent people with

⁷ <https://www.seek.com.au/career-advice/article/3-reasons-volunteering-can-put-you-ahead-of-the-pack>

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ https://americorps.gov/sites/default/files/evidenceexchange/FR_2013_VolunteeringasaPathwaytoEmployment_1.pdf

¹⁰ Galit Yanay-Ventura, ““Nothing About Us Without Us” in Volunteerism Too: Volunteering Among People with Disabilities,” *Voluntas* 30, no. 1 (2018): 147-163, doi:10.1007/s11266-018-0026-7

¹¹ Carrie L. Shandra, “Disability and social participation: The case of formal and informal volunteering,” *Social Science Research* 68 (November 2017): 195-213, doi: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2017.02.006

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics (June 2021) ‘Table 3.3: Persons aged 15 years and over, Social Experiences—By Sex and Health Characteristics, proportion of persons’ [data set], *General Social Survey 2020*, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/latest-release>

disability from engaging in meaningful volunteering roles.¹³ Volunteers with disability may also be underestimated by organisations and assigned jobs well below their capability.¹⁴ This was emphasised as a key determinant of volunteer dissatisfaction by the lived experience Project Advisory Group for the Victoria ALIVE project, a program by Volunteering Victoria which aimed to improve disability inclusion in the volunteering community sector.¹⁵ As a consequence of this, volunteers with disability may find their roles unfulfilling, and may miss out on the personal and social benefits of community engagement.

Research has also found that the link between participation in volunteering and the likelihood of finding paid work depends on external factors, like the volunteer role, the nature of support provided,¹⁶ and the presence of defined mechanisms to facilitate employment outcomes.¹⁷ Taken together, this evidence suggests that for volunteering to function as a viable path to employment for people with disability, support must be provided to both people with disability and volunteer involving organisations to improve access and inclusion. These two factors are examined in the following sections.

Supporting meaningful volunteering

Having access to appropriate support can remove a substantial barrier between volunteer involving organisations that are enthusiastic about improving inclusiveness and prospective volunteers with disability. Programs which support meaningful placements in volunteer involving organisations, such as the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program offered by VolunteeringACT, Volunteering Tasmania and the Centre for Volunteering, can be an invaluable resource.

Participants in this program have often reported that their volunteering has supported pathways into the paid workforce. This is attributed to the Program's human-centred approach, which focuses on facilitating one-to-one sessions with participants. This allows for easier identification of intersecting issues, which leads to the development of more sustainable solutions built around the participant. For example, the following case study and participant feedback demonstrates what is possible within the program:

A woman visited our Community Info Hub looking for assistance in volunteering. She had been searching for either a paid or voluntary position for a long time and was finding it difficult to gain the experience she needed. English was her second language, and although she had been in Australia for a while, her key focus had been motherhood.

¹³ Becky L. Choma and Joanna Ochocka, "Supported Volunteering: A Community Approach for People With Complex Needs," *Journal on Developmental Disabilities* 12, no. 1 (2006): 14, doi:10.1.1.492.1063; Aneta Marková, "Volunteering of people with disability," *Kontakt* 22, no. 3 (2020): 205, doi:10.32725/kont.2020.013

¹⁴ Choma and Ochocka, 14

¹⁵ <https://www.victoriaalive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Vic-ALIVE-Project-Final-Report.pdf>, 17

¹⁶ 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

¹⁷ <https://www.victoriaalive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Vic-ALIVE-Project-Final-Report.pdf>, 28

She met with a staff member from our Inclusive Volunteering Program and joined the program that day. She was matched with a role that met her motivations, as an administrative volunteer role at a local hospital. After volunteering with the hospital for about 4 months we received this feedback:

"I am delighted to inform you that I have been offered a job as an Administration Officer. It's a permanent full-time opportunity. I will be forever grateful to you for assisting me via the Inclusive Volunteering Program. I will always be thankful to the volunteering community as well. Thank you for helping a mother to get back into the workforce after a maternity break. Thank you for being so helpful and supportive in my journey."¹⁸

Services which connect people to volunteer roles can be crucial to facilitating meaningful and sustainable volunteer placements. Research conducted as part of the Victoria ALIVE program similarly identified supported volunteer placement services as a key recommended initiative for facilitating disability-inclusive volunteering.¹⁹

Removing barriers to volunteering

It is also important that volunteer involving organisations take steps to reduce barriers to volunteering for people with disability. This requires the appropriate resourcing, including education and training on inclusive practices. Providing education and training is a key aspect of the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program. The following case study from the Program recorded in October 2021 highlights the benefits of this training.

"Upon first interaction with the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program, the host organisation's volunteer manager was open to being involved, but was sceptical about the amount of support a participant might require. The volunteer coordinator's attitudes were not inherently exclusive, but they were applying unconscious bias and judgments in their interactions with the participant.

After the participant's completion of a trial period, alongside regular check-ins and discussions with the program coordinator, the volunteer manager expressed that the participant was capable of more than they had originally thought. They assigned more challenging and engaging tasks to the participant which were more aligned with the participant's SMART goals. The participant's support worker also noted a shift in attitude from the volunteer manager, which had a flow-on effect to the participant's confidence and sense of agency. The volunteer manager expressed gratitude for the enormous value the participant has brought to the organisation. The key learning for the volunteer manager was not to assume someone's ability without asking the question. It was a "light-bulb" moment for them, where they could see a real-life example of their

¹⁸ Case study provided by VolunteeringACT; <https://www.volunteering.com.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

¹⁹ <https://www.victoriaalive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Vic-ALIVE-Project-Final-Report.pdf>, 34

discussions with the program coordinator in practice. They will apply this learning throughout their organisation over time.

The volunteer manager began as someone who would have considered themselves to be very inclusive: accepting, welcoming, and curious about people from all backgrounds and abilities. Through the sharing of resources and consultation with the program coordinator about inclusive practices, the volunteer manager began to recognise that they were applying unconscious bias and assumptions onto the volunteers they were dealing with. The volunteer manager is now conscious about asking volunteers how much support, if any, they will need in order to complete their duties. While this shift in attitude may appear to be small, it is such a significant first step in the right direction. It affects every single volunteer's experience within that organisation, as well as opening the door for the volunteer manager to consider their inclusive practices more broadly.”²⁰

Given its strong potential to support the search for employment for people with disability, volunteering should be included as an employment pathway in the new Disability Employment Support Model. People with disability should be supported to find suitable and meaningful volunteering opportunities if this is the option they choose. Achieving this aim will require programs which both connect people with disability to appropriate roles and empower organisations to engage volunteers with disability in impactful voluntary work which takes advantage of their skills. To support volunteering as an employment pathway for people with disability, resourcing for such programs should be allocated under the new Model.

Volunteering and mutual obligation requirements

As highlighted above, volunteering provides valuable opportunities which improve the chances of finding paid employment. As such, people with disability receiving unemployment payments should have equal opportunity to fulfil their mutual obligation requirements by volunteering, if they feel this is the right option for them.

However, two aspects of the current approach to volunteering as a mutual obligation activity should be reassessed as part of the development of the new Model.

Accessibility and virtual volunteering

Firstly, Volunteering Australia notes the requirement that volunteering, like other annual activity requirements, must be undertaken face-to-face through an approved organisation.²¹ The requirement to volunteer only in person, without the option to volunteer virtually or remotely, creates accessibility issues and exacerbates existing barriers to volunteering. This is particularly relevant at a time when many volunteering opportunities have adapted to online modes of delivery in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Research on the experience of volunteering during the

²⁰ Case study provided by VolunteeringACT; <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

²¹ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/revise-V-A-factsheet-2021-Updated-March-2021.pdf>

pandemic found that some respondents identified benefits of remote volunteering, the most reported being the reduction of barriers.²²

Allowing job seekers the choice to count voluntary work towards their mutual obligations requirements can support individuals to increase their likelihood of securing paid work, alleviate the burden on both applicants and employers of excessive job application requirements, and reduce the stress and isolation experienced by many job seekers. However, steps should be taken to make this option accessible to people with disability. This should include the provision of appropriate supports, including the option to undertake voluntary work from home in organisations that support virtual or remote volunteering.

Simplifying the system for volunteer involving organisations

Secondly, the mutual obligation system is complex and not widely understood by volunteer involving organisations. This can create challenges, as organisations struggle to assist volunteers to undertake applicable roles, provide evidence of their volunteering, and report voluntary commitments through the *jobactive* system to be eligible for payments. If volunteering is to be promoted as a mutual obligation activity, this process should be streamlined, and simple guidance drafted to support this change. Further, organisations should be provided with clear resources and training to support their volunteers to fulfil their requirements. Services Australia staff should also receive additional training to improve their knowledge and understanding of voluntary work in the job seeking context, and its role within the new Model.

Pathways to employment, mutual obligations, and volunteering support services

Volunteering support services play a crucial role in facilitating safe, effective, and sustainable volunteering by connecting prospective volunteers to formal roles and supporting organisations to recruit, retain, and manage their volunteers. In the context of employment support services, this is primarily achieved by providing information and referral services to job seekers.

Under the current Disability Employment Support (DES) program, providers are responsible both for supporting people with disability into suitable employment and for assisting people with disability to fulfil their mutual obligation requirements under the relevant income support system.²³ This often includes undertaking voluntary work through an approved not-for-profit organisation. Where volunteering is chosen as the preferred activity by participants, providers can refer their clients to volunteering support services, which are then responsible for connecting participants with volunteering opportunities.

Under the current model, these services do not receive the financial support they need to remain operational. They do not receive any of the money allocated to private employment service providers, and volunteer referral activities are outside the scope of the Volunteer Management

²² Case study provided by VolunteeringACT

²³ <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Consultation-Paper-New-Disability-Employment-Services-Model.pdf>, 13

Activity, which was recently revised. Consequently, these services do not receive consistent Commonwealth funding under any existing funding arrangement. Volunteering support services should not be used to fulfil the role of private employment service providers without receiving any of the designated funding for this function.

Volunteering support services provide significant economic value to the volunteering ecosystem, saving volunteer involving organisations an average of \$9,500 per year by reducing recruitment, management, training, and retention costs.²⁴ Volunteers placed by volunteering support services are also 28.5 per cent more likely to be retained by the organisation and 38.8 per cent more likely to volunteer for more hours.²⁵ However, in a recent survey, increased costs of maintaining services and inadequate funding were identified by volunteering support services as their most critical challenges.²⁶

The Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program operating across Tasmania, NSW, and the ACT, has been very effective in blending the functions of DES Registered Providers and volunteering support services, to provide positive and sustainable outcomes for people with disability. Future funding models must keep pace with the shifting external landscape and, potentially, increasing referrals to these services. For example, in the ACT, since the start of the program in November 2020, one in five organisational referrals came from DES providers.²⁷ If this continues to increase at a similar rate year-on-year, greater funding must be provided for volunteering support services to work with individuals.

If volunteering support services are to be utilised in the new Model, this gap in funding must be urgently addressed. Consideration should be given to the expected demand for services and the current and future resourcing needs of these organisations, which should include a clear strategic plan to ensure that funding is accessible and sustainable.

Recommendations

1. Develop policies which support people with disability to engage in volunteering, including the funding of programs which connect people with disability to tailored and meaningful volunteering opportunities, and the resourcing of volunteer involving organisations to improve accessibility.
2. Allow people with disability who receive income support the flexibility to fulfill their mutual obligation requirements by volunteering virtually or remotely if they choose to do so.
3. Support volunteer involving organisations to facilitate volunteering to fulfil mutual obligations where agreed by the participant, including through the provision of information and resources and, where possible, the simplification of reporting requirements for job seekers.

²⁴ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Value-of-Volunteering-Support-Services.pdf>, 16

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Value-of-Volunteering-Support-Services.pdf>, 25

²⁷ Information provided by VolunteeringACT

4. Address the urgent funding gap for volunteering support services. This means ensuring that these services receive adequate and ongoing resourcing to support the demand for volunteering opportunities as employment pathways and as mutual obligation activities.

Authorisation

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



Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This submission has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.



About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote, and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

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