



Submission to the New Disability Employment Support Model Consultation

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VolunteeringACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra region. VolunteeringACT pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their vital ongoing contribution to our lands.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges volunteers of all genders and sexualities, with all abilities and from all cultures. Their skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering services and programs, and in making Canberra a better place to live. We also acknowledge the contribution of the volunteer involving organisations that contribute to the health and happiness of our community.

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Overview

- Volunteering provides an important option for people with disability as a pathway to employment and should be considered as a form of participation and engagement where appropriate and if this is their choice.
- The new Disability Employment Support Model (the Model) should be flexible in allowing people with disability to count their volunteering activities (including virtual volunteering) towards fulfilling their mutual obligations within the job seeking process if they choose to.
- There is strong evidence that programs allowing for more time to work one to one with individuals to tailor a volunteering opportunity as an employment pathway leads to much better and more sustainable employment outcomes in the longer term.
- Greater resourcing is needed for volunteer involving organisations to improve inclusivity and accessibility, and future funding arrangements need to consider the 'real' costs of facilitating quality volunteering opportunities, with funding increases year on year built in to enable organisations to keep pace with likely increasing demand as inclusivity and accessibility to volunteering for people with disability improves and becomes more widespread.
- Greater recognition and resourcing should be given to organisations involved in connecting people with disability to meaningful volunteering activities as a pathway to employment, on behalf of Registered Providers.
- Current data capture and reporting needs to move away from an emphasis on numbers of individuals placed in employment to measuring the quality of that employment, the distance-travelled and skills/knowledge acquired by individuals over time, and a greater focus on capturing longitudinal data on meaningful and sustainable employment outcomes.
- The new Model presents an opportunity for people with disability to engage in co-production activities and be at the centre of designing, delivering, and evaluating disability employment programs, educating others about the wide range of disabilities and what works best to support people, and building the capability of all agencies operating within the disability employment space, including the NDIS.
- There is a need for better education of employers around the benefits and added value of employing people with disability, including overturning negative perceptions from employers about the level of support they would need to provide, and levels of risk involved.

Recommendations

VolunteeringACT makes the following recommendations for the development and implementation of the new Disability Employment Support Model.

1. Greater funding flexibility to fully resource the delivery of programs that connect people with disability to tailored and sustainable volunteering opportunities, offer ongoing support, and build capability of volunteer involving organisations to improve inclusivity and accessibility.
2. Include voluntary work as an employment pathway and allow people with disability the choice of counting their volunteering towards fulfilling their mutual obligations if they wish to – including virtual volunteering activities.
3. Consider how people with disability can directly connect their lived experience to building capability around disability employment approaches amongst agencies involved in program delivery.

4. Invest in a National marketing campaign to highlight the added value and opportunities for learning/education people with disability can bring to a workplace via volunteering and paid work and tackle negative perceptions employers and other agency staff may have around what is possible.
5. Expand data collection and reporting methods to emphasise quality of volunteering and employment placements, longitudinal outcomes and 'distance-travelled' by people with disability over time, as measures of success.

Introduction

Volunteering is a key determinant of social inclusion, participation, and connection, and a proven pathway to both education and employment. Participation in volunteering provides vital workplace experience and enables volunteers to become job ready, increasing their chances of obtaining meaningful, long-term employment. Research demonstrates that participation in volunteering can improve an individual's chances of gaining employment by 27 per cent.¹ Despite the known outcomes of volunteering and its relationship to employment, there has historically been little investment in this area in Australia.

Volunteering can be particularly beneficial for people with disability but can present challenges and additional barriers to their participation, meaning people with disabilities are underrepresented among Australian volunteers. The new Disability Employment Support Model (the Model) presents an opportunity for greater investment in this space and for placing choice and control for people with disability at the heart of exploring different pathways to employment that might suit them. People with disability are the experts of their own experience and are often able to gauge more effectively what is or isn't possible for them. This perspective needs to be at the centre of decision making around where volunteering activities may fit within an employment pathway approach, with improved training and support on offer for all agencies involved in delivering disability employment support programs.

Recommendation 1: Greater funding flexibility to fully resource the delivery of programs that connect people with disability to tailored and sustainable volunteering opportunities, offer ongoing support, and build capability of volunteer involving organisations to improve inclusivity and accessibility.

Historically, funding for these types of programs has changed over time, from being 100% funded to work with individuals, to now being more focused on working with volunteer involving organisations, to reduce barriers to volunteering. It is clear the greatest impact on future sustainability of effective and inclusive volunteering is through building capability of organisations to improve inclusivity and access. However, this should not come at the expense of being able to undertake a more holistic approach on an individual basis. There are clear benefits to both the individual and volunteer involving organisations if the time can be taken to place the person at the centre of creating a tailored pathway to sustainable employment for them. Both aspects of this work are as equally important as the other for achieving the outcomes aspired to within the Disability Employment Strategy.

¹ Spera, C., Ghertner, R., Nerino, A., & DiTommaso, A. (2013). *Volunteering as a pathway to employment: Does volunteering increase odds of finding a job for the out of work?* Office of Research & Evaluation, Corporation for National and Community Service.

Although Registered Providers are funded to connect people with disability to volunteering opportunities, they are increasingly reliant on referrals into volunteer support services, offering volunteering activities to people with disability. For example, one organisation within our networks in the ACT is a registered non-profit organisation but are not currently recognised as a registered provider by Centrelink. However, they are working with significant numbers of people with disability, offering them volunteering opportunities following referrals from registered providers and being asked to provide information to support applications to NDIS to secure a package for individuals, but are not receiving any funding themselves to undertake this work. This is placing a heavy and unsustainable burden on that service and is a gap in funding that urgently needs addressing.

A similar experience is occurring within the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program operating across Tasmania, NSW, and the ACT. This program has a working relationship with DES Providers to facilitate inclusive volunteering opportunities for people with disability and a proven track record of delivering positive and sustainable volunteering outcomes for them. However, future funding models must keep pace with the shifting external landscape and potentially increasing referrals to the service from registered providers. For example, in the ACT, between the start of the program in November 2020 - present, one in five organisational referrals came from DES providers².

One of the clear benefits of this program and what it offers is the truly human-centred approach and the one-to-one time spent on understanding an individual's circumstances. This holistic lens allows for easier identification of intersecting issues, and how to address all relevant factors that may be causing barriers. This may require more intensive work initially to uncover the right supports and build solutions around an individual participant, but the longer-term outcomes are more sustainable, where a participant has a greater chance of sticking with the program, is not set up to fail, and goes on to thrive. For example, of 12 currently placed participants in the ACT program; three have been in their role for over 12 months, three have been in their role for over eight months, and six have been in their role for over six months.³

The following case study and participant feedback also demonstrates what is possible within a more tailored approach:

A woman visited our community info hub looking for assistance in volunteering. She had been searching for either paid or voluntary work 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.

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."⁴

² <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

³ <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

⁴ <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

Another key aspect of this Program is education and training for volunteer involving organisations on inclusive practices. The below case study 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 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.”⁵

VolunteeringACT also received feedback that often, funding is provided to 'get people through the door' of a job or volunteering placement, but no resourcing is provided for the ongoing 'on the job' support that is also needed to keep people with disability in those jobs or placements. People with disability also frequently express that they do not want incentives for employment, they would rather that money went towards resourcing adequate, ongoing support. It is the ongoing support that is crucial for ensuring people are not set up to fail and their volunteering/work experience remains a positive and sustainable one and future funding arrangements should factor in these additional costs.

Recommendation 2. Include voluntary work in employment pathways and allow people with disability the choice of counting their volunteering towards fulfilling their mutual obligations if they wish to (including virtual volunteering activities).

People receiving unemployment payments should have the flexibility to choose to fulfil their mutual obligation requirements via their volunteering activities, if they feel this is right for them, and voluntary

⁵ <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

work should be recognised by Centrelink as an activity within job-seeking agreements. This applies across all age brackets but is particularly important for younger people with disability. The consultation paper asks questions regarding the transition of young people with disability from school/education into suitable employment pathways and there are gaps in the system for ensuring young people with disability are supported through those important transition points.

Long term unemployment is a major concern for people with disability, as additional barriers they face can make it harder to find suitable opportunities, and for younger people this can be even more complicated due to their lack of experience. Being disconnected from the workforce can have a considerable knock-on effect, and potentially limit their future life chances and trajectory to participate in society and maintain their independence. The new Model presents an opportunity to include volunteering as a recognised 'bridging' activity for young people to aid their transition from education to the workplace and enable them to try out different work settings/roles and acquire new skills in preparation for paid employment further down the track.

For many people with disability, the option to engage in volunteering activities that can be undertaken remotely can remove significant barriers to participation and increase accessibility to a wide range of programs. The prolonged impact on COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns has contributed to more services and activities moving to an online format. Within the volunteering sector, many organisations have managed to retain their volunteers by using remote technology to keep them engaged through the pandemic, and a longer-term impact is that more organisations are introducing full or hybrid working from home arrangements. However, the rules around volunteering and mutual obligations have not shifted in line with those changes in the external environment, with in-person volunteering activities only being counted. These need to be expanded to include virtual volunteering activities if people wish to choose them.

In expanding options to include volunteering, it is vital that agencies involved in connecting people with disability to employment pathways have better awareness of volunteering activities and what they offer, and appropriate training to ensure they have the required knowledge to properly assess and support people with disability into the right option.

Although some people with disability may wish to link their voluntary work to their employment search, it is also important to recognise that others who may be engaged in volunteering activities are sometimes doing so for reasons other than seeking employment, such as social interaction, making friends, or improving health and wellbeing etc. Volunteering is an important option alongside other pathways where the participant can exercise choice therefore, it is critical that Centrelink staff have access to training that enables them to have conversations with individuals about the best employment pathway at that point in time, so they do not feel pushed into an option that is not right for them.

Recommendation 3. Consider how people with disability can directly connect their lived experience to building capability around disability employment approaches amongst agencies involved in program delivery.

Throughout discussions with organisations working in this space, a recurring theme is the many strengths people with disability can bring to the overall development and implementation of the new Model, particularly when it comes to educating others around the wide range of disabilities people can present with and the best ways to support them to engage with volunteering/employment opportunities in a

workplace. The new Model aspires to move away from deficit language and frame things more around people's strengths.

One way to achieve this is to provide more co-production opportunities for people with disability to lead the design, delivery and evaluation of employment pathways including volunteering opportunities, training, and capability-building activities.

There is strong evidence from similar programs operating internationally that a co-production approach where people with lived experience are at the heart of not only designing but delivering and assessing impact of programs is transforming systems and producing strong outcomes. For example, Opportunity Nottingham in the UK is part of a National Lottery funded initiative to tackle multiple and complex needs. That approach includes creating paid 'Beneficiary Ambassador' positions for people with lived experience of using multiple and complex needs services, to directly shape design and delivery of the service and implement an ongoing 'Experts by Experience' model.⁶

The Disability Employment Support Model could consider how to provide more opportunities for people with disability to contribute their unique expertise to this, either via structured volunteering activities or paid employment, which in turn offers new opportunities within participating agencies and including DSS.

Several organisations within our networks stressed a particular need for staff that are employed within NDIS support coordinator roles and at Centrelink to have access to training and support so they have a thorough understanding of the wide range of disabilities people have, that they understand people with disability have ongoing support needs in sustaining volunteering or employment placements, and that these needs can fluctuate or change over time. It is important that people involved in delivering disability employment services have refresher training at regular intervals and that people undertaking the assessments are considering the most up to date information relating to an individual's capabilities and support needs when doing so. The suggestion was made that this is an area people with disability could be directly involved in delivering.

Recommendation 4. Invest in a National marketing campaign to highlight the added value and opportunities for learning/education people with disability can bring to a workplace via volunteering and paid work and tackle negative perceptions employers and other agency staff may have around what is possible.

Many of the inclusion and accessibility barriers to the workplace for people with disability can be perceived rather than actual and the consultation paper poses several questions around how best to improve employer confidence. During consultations with organisations in our networks, the issue of risk and risk management was raised several times, indicating that greater education is needed for employers around what supporting a person with disability in the workplace into a volunteering or paid role requires in practice.

The following case study from the ACT Inclusive Volunteering Program highlights barriers people with disability can experience from employers, based on their assumptions:

⁶ www.opportunitynottingham.co.uk/lived-experience/

Elizabeth* (not real name) is 33 years old. She has been living in Canberra with her husband for 18 months, they moved here from Adelaide for her husband's work. In Adelaide Elizabeth worked in retail stores and volunteered for a couple of different charities using both her retail skills and her bookkeeping skills.

Elizabeth has completed a certificate in bookkeeping and then a bachelor's in business, which she graduated from four years ago. She was six months through an advanced diploma in Accounting when she suddenly experienced extreme headaches and reduced sight. She presented at both her family doctor's and the local emergency room and was diagnosed with a migraine and prescribed rest. The headaches reached a very extreme point. Elizabeth returned to the emergency room and a doctor diagnosed her with temporal arteritis. By this stage she had lost complete sight in her left eye and had only 20% sight remaining in her right eye. Her loss of sight was permanent. At age 29 Elizabeth was diagnosed as legally blind.

Elizabeth began the long slow process of adjusting to her new state. She left her studies on pause, and begun learning how to walk, how to find her way around, how to navigate life without sight. Just as she was getting used to navigating Adelaide she relocated to Canberra. After taking the first 12 months to find her way around Canberra and connect with the local community and community organisations, Elizabeth decided she wanted to start volunteering again. She wanted to use her extensive education and skills in business and accounting to volunteer and give something back to the community.

When speaking or emailing a staff member from a potential volunteer involving organisation Elizabeth let them know she had a vision impairment. She wanted to be upfront and honest and explain the long break between study and work or volunteering experience. Six months later, Elizabeth was still looking for a volunteering role. She saw a role advertised for 8 hours a week providing accounting support to a community organisation that provided transport for people living with a disability. She was told that they just didn't think they could provide the extra support she would need if she was to start volunteering with their organisation.

When our coordinator met with Elizabeth, they asked the simple question – what support, if any, do you need to start volunteering? The answer was simple, *"I'll need someone to show me how to get from the bus stop to the organisation the first time I visit"*.

That's all the support that was needed. The participant already had access to all the necessary software, already knew and was capable of making concessions for the loss of sight, the only support required was to navigate a new street the first time.⁷

Elizabeth's experience demonstrates how people with disability often do not even have the chance to engage in an initial dialogue with employers around what is possible, and the level of skill they may already have in navigating the workplace. The decision is too often made that it is 'too hard' to even consider them for voluntary or paid work.

The new Model also presents an opportunity for DSS to invest in a range of marketing and communications activities focusing on the strengths and abilities of people with disabilities, with a focus on the Social Model of disability⁸, to help move away from deficit language and framing.

⁷ <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/inclusive-volunteering-program/>

⁸ <https://pwd.org.au/resources/disability-info/social-model-of-disability/>

Recommendation 5. Expand data collection and reporting methods to emphasise quality of volunteering and employment placements, longitudinal outcomes and ‘distance-travelled’ by people with disability over time, as measures of success.

The consultation paper asks specific questions relating to what success will look like for people with disability, but also the community, employers, service providers and government etc. There is a need to move away from purely numerical measures of success, focussed on numbers of people placed in volunteering or employment opportunities, as historically, this approach has led to a significant limiting of choice.

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

More measures that reflect the overall journey and distance-travelled a person with disability undertakes through an employment pathway, rather than just recording where they are volunteering/working would assist in collecting more outcomes-based data and provide greater opportunity for people with disability to self-assess their progression over time. For example, tools such as the Outcomes Star⁹ could work well within this setting, especially if co-designed with people with disability. A greater emphasis on the quality of the volunteering/employment opportunities they are connected to and how well-matched these are to an individual’s needs and employment aspirations would also be more useful.

A greater emphasis on longitudinal data to measure success over time would be a more effective method of capturing sustainability of outcomes of the different employment pathways. For example, perhaps contacting people placed in volunteering and employment opportunities at periodical intervals such as six months, 12 months, 2 years etc. to ensure that the Model and funded programs are providing meaningful, longer-term outcomes and value for money. This approach is already in place within the Inclusive Volunteering Program and provides vital information for continuous improvement.

It would also be useful to expand measures to capture the experiences of family members and other persons of significance involved in the lives of people with disability, to show the wider impacts of high quality and sustainable volunteering and employment opportunities.

About VolunteeringACT

VolunteeringACT is the peak body for volunteering and community information in the Canberra region, as well as being a service provider of 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 connects people to volunteering opportunities; supports volunteer involving organisations with training, advice, and volunteer recruitment; makes sure information on services and

⁹ [Outcomes Star - Outcomes Star](#)

supports is easily accessible to everyone through our Community Information services; supports people experiencing disadvantage; and provides programs to help people reconnect with their community and access supported volunteering roles.

VolunteeringACT is a people driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of 189 members, advocates for and supports volunteers, and engages with the broader Canberra community. This submission is informed by our experience of delivering Inclusive Volunteering Programs for people with disability and ongoing consultations with these stakeholders.

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

Authorisation

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



Ms Jean Giese
Chief Executive Officer

This submission endorses and complements the submission by Volunteering Australia.