



Better Connections Wheatbelt Volunteering

**Exploring the issues relating to volunteer involving
community organisations and volunteers in selected
Wheatbelt communities in Western Australia**

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Copies of this report, and its companion report produced by Dr Megan Paull *Barriers to Volunteering by Newcomers in Wheatbelt Towns in Western Australia*, may be obtained upon request from Volunteering WA.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volunteering is strongly recognised as a key factor in the building and maintenance of strong viable communities especially in regional and remote communities.

The operating environment for many volunteer reliant community organisations raises significant challenges as organisations increasingly rely on volunteers to help achieve program outcomes and service delivery. These challenges are providing pressure and stress on the volunteers that, unchecked, could result in communities that cannot sustain the rigours of rural life. Community connectedness, social inclusion and belonging, long attributed to the rewards of community volunteering are at threat of erosion if volunteer burnout and issues surrounding recruitment and retention of volunteers are left unchecked.

Many Wheatbelt towns are challenged by dwindling or ageing populations and this can result in a diminished pool of residents who are able and prepared to take on volunteer roles.

Other towns in the Wheatbelt, particularly those closer to the metropolitan area are experiencing a population growth from younger families seeking affordable housing, tree changers and families of fly-in/fly-out resource industry workers. This is causing an overload of work on volunteer services, particularly in the emergency services and human services area.

To ensure growth of strong, healthy communities, newly arrived residents in these towns can and should be encouraged to volunteer, thus enhancing the community's capacity to deliver essential (ie emergency) services and desirable services (ie heritage, environmental, community, educational, leisure).

Not every rural or remote area is the same. There are different issues, different problems and different opportunities – one size does not fit all.

The Better Connections – Wheatbelt Volunteering Project has attempted to investigate the status of community volunteering in 16 Wheatbelt locations. The intent was to offer recommendations for strategies to take a proactive approach to building the sustainability of Wheatbelt communities through the maintenance of strong, viable community organisations.

Key findings

- Many volunteers in Wheatbelt community towns report concern for the future of their organisations with regard to volunteer efforts. Many stress over a lack of volunteers expressing interest in being involved and staying involved in the management organisations.
- Lack of numbers – vicious cycle – because fewer volunteers means heavier workload and the thought of heavy workloads influences the ability to attract volunteers.
- Many Wheatbelt community organisations were concerned about the “red tape” they have to go through to remain viable or host programs and events.
- Delivery of awareness-raising training and education on issues relating to volunteer recruitment, retention and reward is important to rural and regional communities. It is important, however, to find innovative and effective strategies to engage community organisation members to attend training.
- Local government agencies play a vital role in supporting volunteer efforts within rural and remote communities. There appears to be a direct relationship between the perceived support community organisations receive from their local shire and the satisfaction levels of volunteers.

Focus areas – The way forward

The research and consultative process undertaken by this project has provided some insight into strategies that, if implemented, will bring about positive outcomes for volunteer reliant community organisations in the Wheatbelt.

These can be summarised under the following three focus areas:

- *Delivery of training, education and support for community members*
- *Promotion of the importance of volunteering in the rural setting*
- *Supporting community organisations at ground level*
 - *Facilitating volunteer uptake*
 - *Engaging rural businesses and staff*
 - *Facilitating collaborative practice/operations*
 - *Facilitating co-location*

To address these focus areas thirteen recommendations have been developed.

As a response to this report and the findings of the research project a further paper will be developed proposing an approach to addressing these recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

Local community organisations are supported to implement successful volunteer recruitment and retention of methods such as induction packages for organisations, creating job descriptions and articulating beginning and end dates for volunteer positions.

Recommendation 2

Local community organisations develop strategies to promote the role that volunteering plays in their organisation.

Recommendation 3

Local governments support community organisations by developing resources that promote the importance of volunteering in the community and the range of volunteering opportunities that exist.

Recommendation 4

Community organisations are supported to review the volunteer tasks required and develop volunteer position descriptions so that workload is distributed more evenly. Smaller roles will help those that are “time poor” as well as those that are currently saddled with huge workloads.

Recommendation 5

Community organisations are supported to promote positive case examples of volunteer efforts particularly where young people are involved.

Recommendation 6

Community organisations are supported to develop skills to implement succession planning for key volunteer roles. Some of the knowledge development should focus on understanding the ageing volunteer and also the motivators for younger volunteers.

Recommendation 7

Community organisations are supported to develop communication strategies and procedures for the early recognition of volunteer burn out and subsequent response to this issue.

Recommendation 8

Community organisations review their operations to include diverse/varied social functions that cater to individual age groups. Older volunteers may support one type of function or occasion and younger volunteers may attend another.

Recommendation 9

Community organisations are provided with support to develop relevant volunteer management policies and procedures including exit procedures.

Recommendation 10

Local or state government, development commissions or peak bodies recognise the importance of the leadership role in community organisations and implement strategies to foster and support people to become leaders in their community.

Recommendation 11

Volunteer Management training organisations ensure that sessions delivered to rural and remote community organisations are relevant to the region and are based on knowledge of the volunteer issues facing those communities.

Recommendation 12

Strategies are developed to encourage community organisation representatives to attend training sessions on Volunteer Management practice and club development when delivered in their local region.

Recommendation 13

Local Community Newspapers embrace the volunteer effort by promoting news, events and volunteer activities on a regular basis with dedicated space in every addition.

BACKGROUND

Volunteering WA (VWA) aims to build strong communities through the provision of a range of resources, services and support to the Volunteering Sector so that:

- people in Western Australia are aware of, and understand, the nature and scope of volunteer activity and its contribution to the health and well-being of the community
- volunteers are linked to community organisations through VWA's Volunteer Referral Service, (now online) and state-wide Volunteer Resource Centres
- organisations are supported with promotion, recruitment and retention of volunteers through media activity and special events
- organisations have access to current volunteer and volunteer management resources, training research and advice
- a body of volunteering professionals is in place, capable of serving Western Australia's community needs

As a member-based organisation we encourage all volunteer involving organisations to access our services and support structures. These services are provided to assist volunteer reliant organisations attract and retain volunteers through good volunteer management practice.

Many Wheatbelt towns are challenged by dwindling or ageing populations and this can result in a diminished pool of residents who are able and prepared to take on volunteer roles. Volunteer burnout can occur when a small pool of volunteers takes on multiple volunteer roles.

Other towns in the Wheatbelt, particularly those closer to the metropolitan area are experiencing a population growth from younger families seeking affordable housing, tree changers and families of fly-in/fly-out resource industry workers. This is causing an overload of work on volunteer services, particularly in the emergency services and human services area.

To ensure growth of strong, healthy communities, newly arrived residents in these towns can and should be encouraged to volunteer, thus enhancing the community's capacity to deliver essential (emergency) and desirable services (heritage, environmental, community, educational, leisure, etc).

Not every rural or remote area is the same. There are different issues, different problems and different opportunities – one size does not fit all.

RESEARCH

Whilst there are considerable anecdotal comments and discussions about the issues facing rural and remote communities, research of literature revealed limited survey or research data to support arguments and assumptions.

As part of the Better Connections project VWA partnered with a tertiary institution, Edith Cowan University, to conduct a research project to explore future ways of addressing and resolving the issues of engagement, recruitment and retention of newly arrived residents for volunteer roles.

The research paper has been developed in addition to the development of this report through the partnership with Dr Megan Paull and Edith Cowan University.

Latest Federal Government census statistics indicate that although regional volunteering is still higher than that of metropolitan areas, volunteering in regional areas has fallen by some 7% between 2000 and 2006^{5,7}, causing great concern to regional communities particularly when the level of basic services and infrastructure has been decreased or centrally re-located.

Research indicates the most effective tool for recruiting volunteers is “word of mouth” and to personally ask a person to be a volunteer. Almost two thirds of those who became involved in volunteering in the last 10 years were asked by someone (35%) or did so because they knew someone involved (29%).⁵

Retention of volunteers is a far more complex process and an issue that is presenting enormous challenges to Wheatbelt towns, regardless of whether their population base is dwindling or growing.

Volunteer involving organisations face increasing regulatory requirements, compliance and red tape. Occupational health and safety, insurance, background checking (police and working with children checks), funding applications, accountability and reporting can pose significant challenges for organisations that operate with limited resources and uncertain funding futures²⁹. The Better Connections project team found this of particular importance to regional communities involved in the project.

Research has demonstrated that involvement in productive activities, particularly volunteering, has important social and individual benefits in the aging environment to those aged 50 and above. A negative perception of volunteer work, fear of encountering ageism, and concerns about the increasing regulatory requirements can discourage members of the community from becoming involved in volunteering³⁰.

Volunteer motivation is varied, but community service organisations can put strategies in place to encourage existing and newly arrived residents to engage in the community through volunteering.

The Regional Women’s Advisory Council²⁵ found that the most serious barrier to volunteering was people feeling negative about their community. This has been reinforced by this study. The second most serious barrier was the reluctance of some to get involved²⁵. When young people see this reluctance in others, they are less likely to volunteer themselves.

A case study in Humboldt County California conducted by the Volunteer Centre of the Redwoods²³ found that isolation is both a benefit and a challenge for remote rural communities when it comes to volunteering. Also, the study noted that it is crucial to identify and acknowledge the important role of “gatekeepers,” the individuals that can provide insight into local culture and ease acceptance in the community.

The research and community workshops in each participating Wheatbelt area of this project looked at various issues including;

- communities that have or are perceived to have a “volunteer gatekeeper” in place. This has been identified as one reason that makes communities appear unwelcoming to newcomers
- co-locating models for emergency services and other services

research

- changing volunteer expectations and needs
- changing volunteer demographics
- mentoring models

According to Williams³³ it is now widely accepted that people's involvement in their community bolsters community spirit and encourages local solutions to be sought to local problems, and that encouraging such involvement is a worthwhile venture. Community involvement can and should be nurtured through the development of community-based groups. Participation in community-based groups is seen as an expression of a more mature participatory culture.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

In August 2007 a letter was sent to 43 Local Governments in the Wheatbelt region inviting them to participate in the project. Of the 43 groups, the following 16 Shires chose to participate in the project:

Brookton	Mukinbudin
Dalwallinu	Narrogin
Dowerin	Northam
Gingin	Nungarin
Goomalling	Pingelly
Koorda	Toodyay
Lake Grace	Wyalkatchem
Merredin	
Moora	

The methodology used for the Better Connections Project research included the administration of a survey, community consultation and informal workshops.

The Wheatbelt Community Organisations Survey was accessible online and by hard copy and was open to residents in any of the participating shires who are involved in a community organisation. The survey was conducted between July and September of 2008.

A series of five community engagement forums were held in Toodyay, Merredin, Lake Grace, Narrogin and Dalwallinu. The forums were open to all residents who are involved in community organisations. Community members were invited, via newspaper advertisements and Local Government Authority efforts, to attend the forums in order to learn about both the Better Connections Project and the Wheatbelt Community Organisations Survey. The aim was to engage community members in the project with the intention that those present would share their knowledge and subsequently encourage others to participate in the survey.

The five forum locations were selected because of their representative nature. Toodyay, due to its proximity to Perth; Merredin, because it is the major commercial and retail centre for the eastern Wheatbelt, Lake Grace, because of its isolation; Narrogin, because it is a main centre in the southern Wheatbelt, and Dalwallinu because of its population diversity.

At each of the forum locations 100 survey information flyers were distributed along with 50 hard copies of the survey. Community members were invited to take flyers and survey hard copies for distribution amongst their own personal networks. The Local Government area representative was provided with an electronic and hard copy version of the survey information flyer to distribute throughout the community.

Meetings were held with the Local Government area representatives from the remaining 11 participant shires. Each representative was provided with both electronic and hard copy versions of the survey information flyer for distribution throughout their community.

In addition, the mass provision of hard copies of the survey was delivered to several shires. The Shire of Moora requested 200 hard copies of the survey and the Shire of Goomalling requested 500 hard copies of the survey for distribution.

Volunteering WA received two direct requests for hard copies of the survey. An individual from the Shire of Northam request 12 hard copies of the survey, and an individual from the Shire of Koorda requested 12 hard copies of the survey.

In total 1024 hard copies of the survey were distributed in 10 shires. A reply paid envelope was provided with every hard copy. The return of hard copies of the survey from participating shires is detailed in Table 1.

In total 245 survey responses were received of which 59 were hard copies and 186 were submitted online. The percentage of hard copies of the survey submitted out of the total surveys submitted was 24 percent.

The following table summarises the surveys returned on line and by hard copy for each shire.

SHIRE	ON LINE	HARD COPY	% of total	HARD COPY DISTRIBUTION
Brookton	32		13.1%	
Dalwallinu	7	3	4.1%	50
Dowerin	1	2	1.2%	
Gingin	3		1.2%	
Goomalling	9	17	10.6%	500
Koorda	1	1	0.8%	12
Lake Grace	24	3	11%	50
Merredin	9	7	6.5%	50
Moora	8	11	7.8%	200
Mukinbudin	3	2	2.0%	25
Narrogin	17	4	8.6%	50
Northam	22		9.0%	12
Nungarin	12		4.9%	
Pingelly	9		3.7%	
Toodyay	29	51	3.9%	50
Wyalkatchem		4	1.6%	25
TOTAL	186	59	100%	1024

TABLE 1 Survey responses and hard copy distribution

Workshops

In October and November of 2008 Volunteering WA held a series of workshops in six different shires in the Wheatbelt region: Brookton, Moora, Dowerin, Lake Grace, Toodyay and Merredin. These locations were selected based on the number of survey returns (and hence level of community interest in the project). Residents of neighbouring shires were also invited to attend these workshops.

The topics covered during these workshops included:

- Planning for volunteer recruitment and retention
- Building relationships
- Rewarding accomplishments

FINDINGS

The qualitative data collected from the survey results has been attached in Appendix 1 of this document. The quantitative data and qualitative comments from the survey coupled with information collected from the community engagement and training sessions are outlined below under the subject areas of the survey.

Historically, has it been difficult for you to attract volunteers to your organisation?

The common theme for organisations that have not found it difficult to attract volunteers is the pursuit of an active volunteer recruitment and retention program that is widespread throughout the community. However, at times the program can be targeted to specific members of the community, if necessary. It is important that community members be made aware of the organisation and the volunteering opportunities that it has available. Many respondents commented that being able to communicate effectively what the organisation does and how it benefits the community is one of the key strategies for attracting volunteers. Asking people to help is another key strategy in recruiting volunteers; more often than not, people will help when asked to do so.

For organisations that have found it difficult to attract volunteers one of the most common themes to emerge from the responses was that people are scared off from volunteering by the prohibitive workloads. The volunteering positions that are perceived to be considerably demanding often make community members feel they are unable to balance the needs of the volunteer position with other needs such as work, family and leisure activities. This reinforces the importance of developing a job description for each volunteer role, and of articulating a start and finish date for volunteer roles.

Recommendation 1

Local community organisations are supported to implement successful volunteer recruitment and retention methods such as induction packages for organisations, creating job descriptions and articulating beginning and end dates for volunteer positions

Have you had any feedback on why people in the community do not want to volunteer for your organisation?

In response to this question, one of the main themes to emerge is that the voluntary roles require too much commitment and too much work. People can be scared off by what they perceive to be an excessive workload, and this was consistently raised as an issue.

Another important theme that emerged is that volunteering is perceived to be an activity for older people resulting in a reluctance from younger people to become involved. According to many respondents, younger people have indicated that they do not want to participate in a community organisation that is dominated by an older demographic. This is backed up by research that suggests that volunteering is a social outlet. The age demographic of a particular organisation may become a barrier to volunteering for some potential volunteers¹².

Furthermore a general lack of knowledge from the wider community about existing organisations and available voluntary opportunities was also reported by many respondents. Some discussions with groups explored the notion that “people do not know that their club needs volunteers because everything seems to be working just fine.”

Recommendation 2

Local community organisations develop strategies to promote the role that volunteering plays in their organisation.

Recommendation 3

Local governments support community organisations by developing resources that promote the importance of volunteering in the community and the range of volunteering opportunities that exist.

Are you happy in your role at the organisation?

Several main themes have emerged from the responses to this question. The first is that many people gain an enormous sense of personal satisfaction from contributing to their local community. However, although it is important, the satisfaction is not just from 'doing good things for others'. Many volunteers also enjoy personal challenges such as learning to work effectively with a diverse group of people, or being provided with the opportunity to meet people with different backgrounds. A sense of professional development is also gained by some volunteers when they are provided with the opportunity to broaden their role within the organisation. Many people enjoy being able to expand their knowledge and to subsequently put that knowledge to use in their community.

The level of satisfaction, however, is tempered by the lack of support from others. Many respondents felt that the bulk of the workload was often left to the same small number of people, and was not shared throughout the organisation. In a contrary argument to this some members of community organisations acknowledged that they do not contribute as much as others do, however this is because they find it difficult to manage the time commitments of voluntary work and full time paid employment.

Recommendation 4

Community organisations are supported to review the volunteer tasks required and develop volunteer position descriptions so that work is more evenly distributed. Smaller roles will help those that are "time poor" as well as those that are currently saddled with huge workloads.

The aging of volunteers is another key theme that emerged. Many organisations have an older volunteer team and in some cases this causes difficulties due to the perception by younger volunteers that the older, long term volunteers are not open to making changes within the organisation. There was an indication that long term volunteers sometimes react with hostility to those who suggest new ideas and different directions. This may be a contributing factor to the inability of some organisations to attract younger volunteers and members. Another contributing factor is greater mobility. It is suggested that it is simply easier for younger people to travel to a larger centre than it is for them to stay involved in sustaining their local community.

Recommendation 5

Community organisations are supported to promote positive case examples of volunteer efforts particularly where young people are involved.

Another theme that impacted on the happiness of the respondents is the perceived lack of support for community organisations from external groups such as local government authorities and regulatory authorities. Some respondents raised topics such as too much "red tape" when organising events. This indicates that there is a lack of understanding from within community organisations of the importance of issues such as risk management, and a lack of communication between community organisations and local government authorities or regulatory authorities.

Recommendation 5

Local government entities develop strategies to ensure that community groups understand the reasons for risk management and legislative requirements with regard to hosting events and initiatives. Support to complete application/operational requirements may be considered.

Are the volunteers in your organisation happy?

One of the major themes to emerge from responses to this question was that of the aging volunteer and succession planning in community organisations. Many respondents commented that the volunteer population is aging, but it is not being replenished by younger members of the community and this is impacting on the happiness of volunteers.

Two distinct streams of thinking were noticeable with regard to the aging volunteer. The first is that many older volunteers are frustrated with the heavy workload and lack of support from the wider community. As a result, many indicated that they are burning out. One of the most telling comments made was that although many older volunteers have issues of their own, such as health problems, they still feel a 'burden of duty' to contribute to their organisation because if they stop, they fear there will be no one to continue in the role. It is a commitment that weighs heavily on older volunteers in many communities.

The second noticeable stream of thought was that for many older volunteers, attending the community organisation becomes a social activity. Volunteers are happier if there is a strong social component to their volunteering task. Furthermore it seems that many older volunteers who have had a lengthy association with a community organisation are reluctant to terminate their relationship with the organisation.

Many respondents commented that they are happy to be performing a job that benefits the community. They are excited by the potential opportunities to improve their community. However their excitement is tempered by their frustration over the lack of resources.

Recommendation 6

Community organisations are supported to develop skills to implement succession planning for key volunteer roles. Some of the knowledge development should focus on understanding the ageing volunteer and also the motivators for younger volunteers.

Recommendation 7

Community organisations are supported to develop communication strategies and procedures for the early recognition of volunteer burn out and subsequent response to this issue.

Recommendation 8

Community organisations review their operations to include diverse/varied social functions that cater to individual age groups. Older volunteers may support one type of function or occasion and younger volunteers may attend another.

Do you seek feedback on why volunteers leave your organisation?

The main theme to emerge from responses to this question is that in many organisations, the follow up system in place is overwhelmingly one of personal contact. Most organisations have a one on one discussion with the volunteer in order to gain an understanding of why they are leaving. Of those organisations that do not seek feedback from volunteers who leave, many argued that the reason is 'obvious' and therefore it is unnecessary to ask why.

Recommendation 9

Community organisations are provided with support to develop relevant volunteer management policies and procedures including exit procedures.

Is communication within your organisation good?

Ninety percent of respondents agreed that communication within their organisation is good. However it is important to point out that 69% of total survey respondents are committee members and this may have skewed the results in favour of a positive response.

One of the main themes to emerge from responses to this question is that good communication is dependent upon all parties. Some of the onus needs to be on volunteers, who need to be committed to keeping up to date with what is going on.

Issues raised by non-committee member respondents include that the communication style in many organisations is ad hoc and examples of this include that regular meeting dates are not set and that information is often received at short notice.

Is information easily distributed throughout all levels of your organisation?

Eighty-nine percent of respondents said that information is easily distributed throughout all levels of their organisation. The main theme to emerge from this question is that it is important to always keep the lines of communication open as this helps to create strong bonds in the organisation. Many respondents commented that communicating by email has been hugely successful, however the issue was raised that those who do not use email tend to miss out on information.

Is there any conflict in your organisation?

Seventy percent of respondents answered that there is no conflict in their organisation. Again, 69% of respondents to the survey were committee members of community organisations, which may have skewed the results.

One of the main themes to emerge from responses to this question is that the current leaders of many community organisations have been in power for a long period of time, and that this is a source of conflict.

Many non-committee member respondents raised the issue that there was often conflict between those in an authoritative role in the organisation and the other volunteers. Other areas of conflict occurred between the generations, and between members of organisations who volunteer to support the organisation and those that do not.

Is conflict easily resolved in your organisation?

Eighty-eight percent of respondents said that conflict is easily resolved in their organisation. However one of the main themes to emerge from this question is that in times of conflict within organisations, volunteers often leave as opposed to working to solve the problem. This suggests that the conflict is not necessarily being resolved in the most productive manner. Alternatively it was also suggested that in a small town, where people live and work in close proximity to each other, it is wiser to resolve conflict in a mutually agreeable manner.

Does your organisation have effective leadership?

Eighty-seven percent of respondents agreed that their organisation has effective leadership. Once again this response rate needs to be placed in the context that 69% of respondents to the survey were committee members and in many instances comments such as "I hope the organisation has good leadership because I'm the leader," were made.

One of the main themes to emerge from this question is that leadership roles are generally positions people are reluctant to fill. As a result it is often the same person that stays in the role for a substantial period of time. The effects of the same long term leadership sometimes include a lack of innovation, the

inability to delegate and the inability to be proactive. Non-committee member respondents also raised the issue that often those who are willing to stand for a leadership role lack the necessary experience to provide effective leadership in a community organisation.

Recommendation 10

Local or state government, development commissions or peak bodies recognise the importance of the leadership role in community organisations and implement strategies to foster and support people to become leaders in their community.

Are others in your organisation given the opportunity to show leadership?

Ninety-six percent of respondents said that others in their organisation are given the opportunity to show leadership. The main theme to emerge from this question is that most community organisations hold an Annual General Meeting, where all committee positions are open for any member to nominate. However, not many people are willing to take up leadership roles; it has been suggested that the main reasons for this are that people fear they will be in the position for too long, some people are already in leadership roles in other organisations, and some people fear that they do not have the necessary skills to take up a leadership position.

Recommendation 11

Support is provided to community organisations to understand and implement successful volunteer recruitment and retention methods such as induction packages, creating job descriptions and articulating beginning and end dates for volunteer positions.

Would you say there are ample opportunities to try new ideas in your organisation?

Eighty-eight percent of respondents agreed that there are ample opportunities to try new ideas in their organisation. Two main themes emerged from this question. The first is that many community organisations welcome and encourage new ideas. However there are not enough resources available, and especially not enough volunteers, to pursue the idea. Alternatively when a new idea is suggested it is often left to the person who suggested it to bring it into fruition, without any support. The second theme to emerge was that in some organisations it is hard to get new ideas off the ground because the older members of the organisation do not like change and are happy to leave things as they are. In turn, this makes it difficult to foster an environment that is receptive to new ideas.

Delivery of education and awareness sessions

Training sessions were facilitated in several Shires in the Wheatbelt, namely Merredin, Toodyay, Dowerin, Lake Grace, Brookton and Moora. The facilitators used a presentation entitled “Volunteer recruitment and retention,” which has been developed by Jennie Loveridge at Volunteering WA. In each of the training sessions, it was found that the presentation was not necessarily applicable, as it was targeted to paid managers of volunteers. The facilitators still used the information from the presentation, but more as a framework for discussion of issues more applicable to organisations that are run by volunteers.

The six training groups were unique in terms of the people and personalities in attendance, but had some striking similarities in terms of feedback, frustrations, and group dynamics. All of the training groups, for example, expressed concern in the fact that they were having trouble recruiting volunteers, specifically younger volunteers. The groups also wondered how to recruit newcomers to the community into their groups. Many volunteers held up to five volunteer positions in the community, and indicated that “burden of duty” was one of the reasons they volunteered. Having said that, each volunteer indicated that s/he “enjoyed” volunteering for its social and community benefits.

The training groups also suggested that many of the groups in the community had “gate keeper” volunteers, or long-standing volunteers who tend to dominate meetings and events. This was a concern because many felt that practices of this nature discourage new volunteers from joining groups. Similarly, participants felt that the apparent “life long commitment to volunteering” that was modelled in the communities intimidated people with young families and careers.

The participants reported a concern over the level of support for volunteering in the community by their local shires. Only one shire was given positive recognition. One of the sessions was attended by an active representative from the local shire, but in all of the other municipalities, concern about lack of representation was expressed vehemently by the participants. Participants indicated that there was little or no local government support for volunteering, and that recognition events organised by local government were sparse or non-existent. In one session, a volunteer observed that the members of the local government did not have roots in the community, and their town was just a “stop on the career path”.

This paper notes these comments as the perspective of the session attendees.

Workshop recommendations

Based on the concerns expressed by the volunteers in the training sessions, the following recommendations were developed:

- Create position descriptions that indicate a beginning and an end, as well as a list of duties. This will help recruit volunteers, because they will be more aware of the boundaries of their projects. It will also help to quell the fear that many volunteers had - “If I put my hand up for this, I’ll get pushed into doing several other jobs as well”.
- Positions should be targeted to groups that the organisation wants to recruit. For example, organisations who want to engage youth were encouraged to create short-term projects that could allow volunteers to work on their own time.
- Community leaders should get together and meet with members of local government or CEOs to request support for volunteering across the community. Creating a united front and listing strategies and requirements makes it easier for local governments to understand the need in their community.
- Community members should meet with the editor of local newspaper to request advertisement space for volunteering each week.
- Consider consolidating the volunteer efforts for similar groups – ie. consider whether it makes sense to have several similar organisations with separate boards of directors and meeting times.
- List project with Visiting Volunteers Project - pamphlets were left in each session.
- Focus on delivery of training, education and support for community members.
- Organisations are encouraged to identify someone in their group to drive the volunteer recruitment and retention process.

In the end, most of the volunteers indicated that they had either learnt something new at the session, or had a new idea for their organisation. They indicated that the sessions were a good way to bring the volunteers from different groups together to share ideas, and expressed that they were happy they had made time to attend the sessions.

Recommendation 12

That Volunteer Management training organisations ensure that sessions delivered to rural and remote community organisations are relevant to the region and are based on informed knowledge of the volunteer issues facing those communities.

Recommendation 13

Strategies are developed to encourage community organisation representatives attend training sessions in relation to Volunteer Management practice and club development when delivered in their local region.

Recommendation 14

Local Community Newspapers embrace the volunteer effort by promoting news, events and volunteer activities on a regular basis with dedicated space in every addition.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Volunteering has a high social value and is critically important in maintaining social capital. It contributes to civic engagement, community participation, connectivity and social inclusion.

Protecting and building on the contribution of volunteers in regional areas requires an investment in the volunteering sector. It needs to be geared towards building the capacity of volunteer reliant community organisations resulting in sustainable community service delivery.

Research on Volunteer Management in Local Government by Cuthill and Warburton comments that active citizenship, expressed through volunteerism, may prove to be a key component of building just and sustainable communities. In this context, professional volunteer management should be a key concern for all local governments in Australia¹³.

Local and state government entities play a key role in influencing the future of volunteer reliant community organisations in rural and remote communities. Local governments should demonstrate to their community organisations the value they place on the work the groups do - trust and support must be developed during this process. Indeed facilitating strong volunteer management practice could constitute a key community development role for local government staff.

State Government entities should pay particular attention to the role of the volunteer in the regional setting and work with local government and regional development commissions to offer support that has sustainable outcomes. Community volunteer training and education and organisation capacity building is one area that lends itself well to a collaborative approach.

This paper provides a body of knowledge that backs up the anecdotal knowledge and recent research of those entities that are concerned for the future of volunteering in rural communities. It is important to use this knowledge to take the next step in developing a strategic and funded approach to make a difference. These steps must be taken in a collaborative environment that includes engagement of local and state government bodies, volunteer peak bodies, training authorities and community members to work together to bring about the necessary changes.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the wonderful efforts that are being made by many volunteers and volunteer groups in regional communities. In our travels we have come across wonderful examples of how volunteers have shaped and kept their community alive with their service. Our aim is to ensure you are recognised and supported.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The Wheatbelt Community Organisations Survey was conducted between July and September of 2008. The total number of respondents was 245. The survey results are as follows:

Q. What shire of the Wheatbelt do you live in?

	% of Total	No.
Mukinbudin	2.0%	5
Nungarin	4.9%	12
Koorda	0.8%	2
Toodyay	13.9%	34
Northam	9.0%	22
Goomalling	10.6%	26
Wyalkatchem	1.6%	4
Dalwallinu	4.1%	10
Merredin	6.5%	16
Pingelly	3.7%	9
Dowerin	1.2%	3
Gingin	1.2%	3
Moora	7.8%	19
Brookton	13.1%	32
Lake Grace	11.0%	27
Narrogin	8.6%	21

Q. How long have you lived in this shire?

Less than one year	3.7%	(9)
1-5 years	15.1%	(37)
5-10 years	16.3%	(40)
More than 10 years	64.9%	(159)

Q. What is the structure of your organisation?

Response	% of Total	No. of Total
All volunteer group run by a volunteer committee	61.5	136
All volunteer group with volunteer committee which pays for certain roles (eg administration duties)	14	31
All volunteer group which is part of a network of volunteer groups where head office has paid staff	14.5	32
All volunteer group which runs as an auxiliary to a larger organisation eg allied to a hospital or school	6.8	15
Volunteer supported local government organisation (eg meals on wheels)	3.6	8

Q. How old is your organisation?

Less than one year	0.9%	(2)
1-5 years	7.2%	(16)
5-10 years	8.1%	(18)
More than 10 years	84.3%	(188)

Q. Is your organisation incorporated?

Yes	68.3%	(151)
No	18.6%	(41)
Unsure	13.6%	(30)

Q. What is your organisational type?

Children & Youth	7.7%	(17)
Culture & Heritage	15.5%	(34)
Disability Services	1.8%	(4)
Emergency Service	16.4%	(36)
Environment	8.2%	(18)
Education	3.2%	(7)
Health	4.1%	(9)
Religious	4.1%	(9)
Seniors	3.2%	(7)
Service Clubs	5.9%	(13)
Sport & Recreation	19.1%	(42)
Other	21.8%	(48)

Q. What is your position in the organisation?

Committee member	68.6%	(157)
Paid staff	3.9%	(9)
Volunteer	44.1%	(101)
Club member	14.0%	(32)

Q. Are you happy in your role at the organisation?

Yes	87.5%	(189)
No	10.2%	(22)

Several main themes have emerged from the responses to this question. The first is that many people gain an enormous sense of personal satisfaction from contributing to their local community. However, although it is important, the satisfaction is not just from 'doing good things for others'. Many volunteers also enjoy personal challenges such as learning to work effectively with a diverse group of people, or being provided with the opportunity to meet a range of people with varying background. A sense of professional development is also gained by some volunteers when they are provided with the opportunity to broaden their role within their organisation. Many people enjoy being able to expand their knowledge and to subsequently put that knowledge to use in their community.

The level of satisfaction, however, is tempered by the lack of support from others. Many respondents felt that the bulk of the workload was often left to the same small number of people, and was not shared evenly throughout the organisation. On the other hand, some members of community organisations acknowledged that they do not contribute as much as others do, but indicate that this is because they find it difficult to manage voluntary work and full time paid employment.

The aging of volunteers is another key theme that emerged. Many organisations have an older volunteer team and in some cases this causes difficulties due to the perception by younger volunteers that the older, long term volunteers are not open to making changes within the organisation. Others suggest that they are greeted with hostility when they suggest new ideas and different directions. This may be a contributing factor to the inability of some organisations to attract younger volunteers and members. It is further suggested that it is simply easier for young people to travel to a larger centre than it is for them to stay involved in sustaining their local community.

The perceived lack of support for community organisations from external groups such as local government authorities and regulatory authorities was another issue that impacted on the happiness of volunteers. Some respondents raised topics such as too much “red tape” when organising events. This indicates that there is a lack of understanding from within community organisations of the importance of issues such as risk management, and a lack of communication between community organisations and local government authorities or regulatory authorities.

Q. Does your organisation have one or more of the following insurances?

Public Liability	67.5%	(141)
Volunteer Personal Accident	47.8%	(100)
Professional Indemnity	16.3%	(34)
Not sure	32.1%	(67)

Q. Historically has it been difficult for you to attract volunteers to your organisation?

Yes	71.0%	(149)
No	29.0%	(61)

The common theme for those organisations that have not found it difficult to attract volunteers is the pursuit of an active volunteer recruitment and retention program that is widespread throughout the community. However, at times the program can be targeted to specific members of the community, if necessary. It is important that community members be made aware of the organisation and the volunteering opportunities that it has available. Many respondents commented that being able to effectively communicate what the organisation does and how it benefits the community is one of the key strategies for attracting volunteers, along with asking people to help.

For those organisations that have found it difficult to attract volunteers one of the most common themes to emerge from the responses was that people are scared off from volunteering by the prohibitive workloads. The volunteering positions are perceived to be considerable and demand so much attention that community members feel they are unable to balance the needs of the volunteer position with other needs such as work, family and leisure activities. This reinforces the importance of developing a job description for each volunteer role, and of articulating a start and finish date for volunteer roles.

Q. Do you have enough volunteers to meet the needs of your organisation?

Yes	37.3%	(78)
No	62.7%	(131)

Q. If no, how many more volunteers would your organisation require?

1 - 5	32.0%	(41)
5 - 10	39.1%	(50)
10 - 15	16.4%	(21)
More than 15	12.5%	(16)

Q. How are newly recruited volunteers introduced to your organisation?

Volunteer Handbook	15.2%	(30)
Orientation	23.7%	(47)
Training Session	24.2%	(48)
Induction Package	13.6%	(27)
Social Event	36.9%	(73)
No Induction	36.9%	(73)

Q. Are the volunteers in your organisation happy?

Yes	73.5%	(150)
No	7.8%	(16)
Don't know	18.6%	(38)

One of the major issues to emerge from responses to this question was the aging volunteer and succession planning in community organisations. Many respondents commented that the volunteer population is aging but not being replenished by younger members of the community and this is impacting on the happiness of volunteers.

Two distinct streams of thinking were noticeable with regard to the aging volunteer. The first is that many older volunteers are frustrated with the heavy workload and lack of support from the wider community, which is leading to burn-out. One of the most telling comments made was that although many older volunteers have issues of their own to contend with, such as health problems, they still feel a 'burden of duty' to contribute their volunteer tasks to their organisation because if they stop then they fear there will be no one to continue in the role. It is a commitment that weighs heavily on many older volunteers in the community.

The second noticeable stream of thought was that for many older volunteers, attending the community organisation becomes more of a social activity rather than volunteering. Volunteers are happier if there is a strong social component to their volunteering task. Furthermore it seems that many older volunteers who have had a lengthy association with a community organisation are reluctant to terminate their relationship with the organisation.

Many respondents commented that they are happy to be performing a job that benefits the community. They are excited by the potential opportunities to improve their local community. However their excitement is tempered by the lack of resources.

Q. On average how long do volunteers stay with your organisation?

Less than 1 year	0.5%	(1)
1 - 5 years	33.3%	(69)
5 - 10 years	28.5%	(59)
More than 10 years	28.5%	(59)
Don't know	9.2%	(19)

Q. Do you seek feedback on why volunteers leave your organisation?

Yes	35.8%	(72)
No	47.3%	(95)
Don't know	16.9%	(34)

The main theme to emerge from responses to this question is that many organisations, the follow up system in place is overwhelmingly one of personal contact. Most organisations have a one on one discussion with the volunteer in order to gain an understanding of why they are leaving. Of those organisations that do not seek feedback from volunteers who leave, many argued that the reason is 'obvious' and therefore it is unnecessary to ask why.

Q. What are the most common reasons for why volunteers leave your organisation?

Move away	73.8%	(149)
Get too busy	54.0%	(109)
Attracted to other volunteer positions	7.9%	(16)
Employment	26.2%	(53)
Health	28.2%	(57)
Age	49.5%	(100)
Transport	5.9%	(12)
Politics	12.4%	(25)
Don't Know	7.9%	(16)

Q. Have you had any feedback on why people in the community do not want to volunteer for your organisation?

Yes	34.3%	(69)
No	52.2%	(105)
Not sure	13.4%	(27)

One of the main themes to emerge from this questions was that the voluntary roles seem to require too much commitment and too much work. People can be scared off by what they perceive to be an excessive workload, and this was consistently raised as an issue. Another important theme that emerged is that volunteering is perceived to be an activity for older people and as a result younger people are reluctant to become involved. Furthermore a general lack of knowledge from the wider community about existing organisations and available voluntary opportunities was also reported by many respondents.

Q. How does your organisation communicate with its members?

Newsletter	50.0%	(96)
Meetings	84.4%	(162)
Email	58.9%	(113)
Website	9.9%	(19)
Telephone	68.8%	(132)

Q. How does your organisation communicate with its volunteers?

Newsletter	46.7%	(84)
Meetings	86.1%	(155)
Email	60.0%	(108)
Website	9.4%	(17)
Telephone	77.8%	(140)

Q. Is communication within your organisation good?

Yes	90.4%	(178)
No	9.6%	(19)

Ninety percent of respondents agreed that communication within their organisation is good. However it is important to note out that 69% of total survey respondents are committee members and this may have skewed the results in favour of a positive response.

One of the main themes to emerge from responses to this question is that good communication is dependent upon all parties. Some of the impetus needs to be on volunteers to be committed to keeping up to date with what is going on.

Issues raised by non committee member respondents include that the communication style in many organisations is ad hoc; regular meeting dates are not set and that information is often received at short notice.

Q. Is information easily distributed throughout all levels of your organisation?

Yes	89.6%	(180)
No	10.4%	(21)

Eighty nine percent of respondents said that information is easily distributed throughout all levels of their organisation. The main theme to emerge from this question is that it is important to always keep the lines of communication open as this helps to create strong bonds in the organisation. Many respondents commented that communicating by email has been hugely successful, however the issue was raised that those who do not use email tend to miss out on receiving information.

Q. Is there any conflict in your organisation?

Yes	29.6%	(59)
No	70.4%	(140)

Seventy percent of respondents answered that there is no conflict in their organisation. However this result needs to be taken in the context that 69% of respondents to the survey were committee members of community organisations.

One of the main themes to emerge from responses to this question is that the current leadership of many community organisations have been in power for a long period of time, and that this is a source of conflict.

Many non committee member respondents raised the issues that there was often conflict between those in an authoritative role in the organisation and the volunteers. Conflict between generations was also noted, as well as between volunteers and paid staff.

Other areas of conflict include between the generations, and between members of organisations that do volunteer for the organisation and those that don't volunteer.

Q. Is conflict easily resolved in your organisation?

Yes	88.0%	(162)
No	12.0%	(22)

Eighty eight percent of respondents said that conflict is easily resolved in their organisation. However one of the main themes to emerge from this question is that people tend to leave organisations when there is conflict, which suggests that the conflict is not necessarily being resolved in the most productive manner. Alternatively it was also suggested that in a small town, where people live and work in close proximity to each other, it is wiser to resolve conflict in a mutually agreeable manner.

Q. Does your organisation have effective leadership?

Yes	87.9%	(175)
No	12.1%	(24)

Eighty seven percent of respondents agreed that their organisation has effective leadership, however once again this response rate needs to be placed in the context that 69% of respondents to the survey were committee members and in many instances the comment was made that 'I hope the organisation has good leadership because I'm the leader'.

One of the main themes to emerge from this question is that leadership roles are generally positions people are reluctant to accept. As such, it is often the same person that stays in the role for a substantial period of time. The effects of the same long term leadership sometimes include a lack of innovation, the inability to delegate and the inability to be proactive. Non committee member respondents also raised the issue that often the candidates that are willing to stand for a leadership role lack the necessary experience to provide effective leadership in a community organisation.

Q. How long has the current leadership been in place?

Less than 1 year	19.7%	(40)
1 - 5 years	54.7%	(111)
5 - 10 years	9.9%	(20)
More than 10 years	12.3%	(25)
Don't know	3.4%	(7)

Q. Are others in your organisation given the opportunity to show leadership?

Yes	96.5%	(191)
No	3.5%	(7)

Ninety six percent of respondents said that others in their organisation are given the opportunity to show leadership. Most community organisations hold an Annual General Meeting where all committee positions are open for nomination. However, not many people are willing to take up leadership roles; it has been suggested that the main reasons for this are that people fear they will be in the position for too long if they take it up, people are already in leadership roles in other organisations, or that people fear that they do not have the necessary skills to take up a leadership position.

Q. Would you say there are ample opportunities to try new ideas in your organisation?

Yes	88.4%	(175)
No	11.6%	(23)

Eighty eight percent of respondents agreed that there are ample opportunities to try new ideas in their organisations. Two main themes emerged from this question. The first is that many community organisations welcome and encourage new ideas. However there are not enough resources available, especially not enough volunteers in the organisation, to pursue the idea. Alternatively when a new idea is suggested it is often left to the person who suggested it to bring it into fruition, without any support. The second theme to emerge was that it is sometimes hard to get new ideas off the ground because the older members of the organisation do not like change and are happy to leave things as they are. In turn this makes it difficult to foster an environment that is receptive to new ideas.

APPENDIX B

Profiles of Wheatbelt shires participating in the Better Connections Project

The Wheatbelt region of Western Australia is 154 862 sq km in area and consists of 43 local government shires. Its total population is approximately 72 000 people, and between 2002 and 2007 the population decreased by 0.1 per cent ³².

The region is traditionally known as a wheat and sheep farming area, and historically has enjoyed a lower unemployment rate than the state average. However figures from 1996/7 to 2000/1 show that the Wheatbelt region, along with the central Goldfields region, had the lowest growth in annual average wage and salary income⁶. According to the ABS the decreased earnings in the Wheatbelt region reflects the wider phenomenon of population decline in rural and regional Western Australia. People are choosing to relocate to the more urbanised coastal areas, which enjoy greater earnings potential.

Following are individual profiles of the 16 Wheatbelt shires that participated in the Better Connections Project.

Shire of Brookton

- Location: 100 km south east of Perth
- Population: approximately 1000
 - Between 2002-2007 the shire's total population increased by 0.1% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15 years): 21.6%
 - working age adults (between 15 and 65 years of age): 60.9%
 - seniors (65+): 17.4% ²

Shire of Dalwallinu

- Location: 254 km north east of Perth
- Population: approximately 1400
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population of the shire decreased by 5.1% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15): 23.8%
 - working age adults (15 to 65 years of age): 64.2%
 - seniors (65+): 12% ²

Shire of Dowerin

- Location: 156 km north east of Perth
- Population: approximately 750
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population decreased by 1.7% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15): 22.4%
 - working age adults (15 to 65 years of age): 63.7%
 - seniors (65+): 13.8% ²

Shire of Gingin

- Location: 80km north of Perth
- Population: approximately 4500
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population increased by 1.0% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15): 18.4%
 - working age adults (15 to 65 years): 66.4%
 - seniors (65+): 15.2% ²

Shire of Goomalling

- Location: 132 km north east of Perth
- Population: approximately 1000
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population increased by 0.8% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15): 21.8%
 - working age adults (15-65 years): 64.5%
 - seniors (65+): 13.6% ²

Shire of Koorda

- Location: 238 km from Perth
- Population: approximately 450
 - Between 2008-2007 the total population decreased by 1.4 % ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15): 19.7%
 - working age adults (15 -65 years): 65.8%
 - seniors (65+): 14.4 percent of the total population ²

Shire of Lake Grace

- Location: 354 km south east of Perth
- Population: approximately 1500
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population decreased by 0.8% ³²
- Age Demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15 years): 21.7%
 - working age adults (15-65 years): 69.1%
 - seniors (65+): 9.2 percent of the total population. ²

Shire of Merredin

- Location: 257 km east of Perth
- Population: approximately 3400
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population decreased by 1.6% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15 years): 21.7%
 - working age adults (15-65 years): 65.9%
 - seniors (65+): 12.4% ²

Shire of Moora

- Location: 172 km north of Perth
- Population: approximately 2550
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population decreased by 1.1% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under 15 years of age): 22.8%
 - working age adults (15-65 years): 67.2%
 - seniors (65+): 10% ²

Shire of Mukinbudin

- Location: 296 km north east of Perth
- Population: approximately 600
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population decreased by 3.4% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15 years): 22%
 - working age adults (15-65 years): 64%
 - seniors (65+): 14% ²

Town of Narrogin

- Location: 192 km south east of Perth
- Population: approximately 4500
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population decreased by 0.8% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15 years): 22.7%
 - working age adults (15-65 years): 64.4%
 - seniors (65+): 13.9% ²

Town of Northam

- Location: 96 km east of Perth
- Population: approximately 10 300
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population increased by 0.2% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15 years): 22.3%
 - working age adults (15-65 years): 63.2%
 - seniors (65+): 14.5% ²

Shire of Nungarin

- Location: 269 km from Perth
- Population: 260
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population decreased by 1.1% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15 years): 27%
 - working age adults (15-65 years): 62.4%
 - seniors (65+): 10.6% ²

Shire of Pingelly

- Location: 158 km south east of Perth
- Population: approximately 1260
 - Between 2002-2006 the total population increased by 0.8% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15 years): 21.1%
 - working age adults (15-65 years): 61.9%
 - seniors (65+): 17% ²

Shire of Toodyay

- Location: 85 km east of Perth
- Population: approximately 4400
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population increased by 1.3% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15 years): 20.9%
 - working age adults (15-65 years): 66.6%
 - seniors (65+): 12.5% ²

Of those living in Toodyay in 2006 ABS figures show that one in three had lived in a different local government area five years previously, of which 60 percent had relocated from Perth¹. Improvements in infrastructure resulted in easier access to Perth and as such Toodyay, and the wider Avon region, gained a reputation as a 'tree change' destination. The median age of Toodyay residents stands at 41 years, above the state average of 36 years¹. In 2006 34 percent of households in the Avon region, inclusive of the shires of Beverley, Chittering, Northam, Toodyay and York, were couples only households, an increase of 16 percent from 2001.

The Avon region has seen a surge in land and house sales since 2003 as the area offered an affordable lifestyle opportunity in relative close proximity to Perth³. One phenomenon that has occurred due to this lifestyle opportunity is the influx to the region of fly in fly out mining workers establishing their homes in the area. The most common industry of employment in Toodyay is Metal Ore Mining at 4.8 percent, in comparison to the nationwide figure of 0.4 percent⁴.

Shire of Wyalkatchem

- Location: 194 km east of Perth
- Population: approximately 580
 - Between 2002-2007 the total population decreased by 3.2% ³²
- Age demographics:
 - children (under the age of 15 years): 22.5%
 - working age adults (15 - 65 years): 59.2%
 - seniors (65+): 18.3% ²

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