



**Submission to the Department of Communities
on the development of the WA Seniors Strategy**

1 June 2022

OVERVIEW

Volunteering WA notes that the Department of Communities (Communities) is developing the first WA Seniors Strategy (Strategy). We have been publicising opportunities for Seniors to become involved, through the survey or attendance at workshops.

This submission provides a brief background on Volunteering WA including our role in the voluntary sector as the peak body in WA, the current state of volunteering in Western Australia and the volunteering contribution made by seniors.

In summary Volunteering WA recommends:

- increased opportunities for organisations that deliver services with, to or for Seniors in WA to provide input into the Strategy;
- that the Strategy acknowledges the significant role of Seniors who volunteer in the economic, social and cultural fabric of WA and in delivering WA State Government outcomes (including some essential services); and
- specific consultation with Seniors on tangible programs that would support their participation in volunteering in WA.

1 About Volunteering WA

Established in 1988, Volunteering WA (VWA) is the peak body for volunteering in Western Australia. With a membership of over 750 volunteer-involving organisations we work in partnership with community, corporate, educational and government organisations to provide leadership, advancement and promotion of volunteering to achieve the greatest impact for Western Australia.

VWA has a 34-year proven track record of providing and sharing effective, efficient and innovative volunteer support services to meet the ever-increasing demand in our state for general and emergency volunteering. Our purpose is to empower people and communities to enrich WA, and our vision is for a society in which everyone is inspired to make a difference.

Volunteering WA:

- represents volunteering across the State, including all volunteer involving organisations and their 523,000 volunteers;
- supports over 750 member organisations to attract and manage volunteers and increase their capability and capacity;
- works closely with the Minister for Volunteering and the State Government to collaborate on the implementation of the State Volunteering Strategy 2018; and
- leads and hosts several events that celebrate and recognise the contributions of our volunteers, including the annual WA Volunteer of the Year Awards.

2 Current state of volunteering in Western Australia

Volunteering helps to build strong and resilient communities, encourages economic participation, promotes psychological wellbeing, and increases social inclusion and cohesion.

In 2020, 523,600 or 26% of all Western Australians volunteered through an organisation or group. There has been a significant reduction in formal volunteer participation in WA over the past six years, with over 151,000 fewer volunteers - a 22% reduction. This continues the trend first observed in 2019 (pre-COVID) and is consistent with national experience.

In 2019, 91,400 Western Australians over age 65 volunteered formally¹. This represents about 24% of all Seniors and is a significant fall from 2014 when an estimated 34.6% of people aged 65 -74 years and 28.6% of people aged over 75 years in WA, volunteered².

The loss of volunteer capacity is due to a number of reasons, including people become more time poor, fatigue due to the intense and prolonged nature of many emergencies (such as bushfires and COVID-19) and increasing requirements for training, administration and compliance. For example, almost half of the national aged care volunteer workforce was lost in the year to August 2021.

Volunteering Australia's 'Re-engaging Volunteers and COVID-19'³ survey, received nearly 600 responses over December 2020 and January 2021, highlighting some worrying statistics.

Although COVID restrictions have eased considerably across most of Australia, over half of the 600 respondents surveyed (56%), said their organisations needed more volunteers, with four out of ten (41%) finding it difficult to re-engage or recruit volunteers. A similar number of respondents (43%) have seen an increase in demand for the services their organisations offer.

Overall, 42% of respondents are not confident that they will achieve pre-COVID levels of volunteering activity in the next six months.

Two key strategies highlighted in the WA Volunteering Strategy⁴ released by the Minister for Volunteering in 2018 were to: "*Minimise the financial and administrative barriers to volunteering*" and "*Raise awareness and understanding of volunteering and its benefits*".

We believe that this is critical to recover the loss of volunteers in WA, to improve mental health and quality of life⁵ and to continue to grow the sector and its essential contribution to Western Australia.

¹ ABS General Social Survey 2020

² ABS General Social Survey 2014

³ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021.02.08-Re-engaging-Volunteers-and-COVID-19-Report.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2021-06/WA-Volunteering-Strategy.PDF>

⁵ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Evidence-Insights-Volunteering-and-mental-health-Final.pdf>

3 Seniors' volunteering and WA's social, cultural and economic fabric

The WA State Budget 2022-23 outlined the role of the WA Seniors Strategy⁶ as being:

“...a whole-of-government 10-year strategy, led by the Department, to support older Western Australians of all backgrounds throughout the State to live their best life as they age, and support Western Australia’s ageing population...The Strategy is expected to be released in 2023 and will be supported by two-year Action Plans. It is anticipated the Strategy will support older people to be at the centre of decision-making for matters critical to themselves, such as where they live and how they choose to contribute to society.

This will ensure that older people continue to take part in their local community through volunteering, recreational and economic activities, thus reducing loneliness and decreasing the demand for health, mental health and aged care services”.

While there are substantial personal benefits from volunteering, we would hope that the Strategy can also highlight the crucial role that Senior volunteers play in the community and economic fabric of WA.

Senior volunteers make a significant contribution in a number of sectors, including the delivery of essential government and community services to the following sectors:

- arts and cultural industries;
- local community services
- emergency services and crisis response;
- health services, including patient and community transport;
- aged care;
- disability services;
- animal welfare; and
- environment and land care.

The shrinking proportion of all Western Australians volunteering, including Seniors, will place a much greater burden on all governments for the delivery of essential services.

Seniors should not be seen as a burden on society. It is hoped that the Strategy has a higher ambition than promoting volunteering to Seniors simply as a means of decreasing the demand for health and aged care services, as referenced in the WA State Budget 2022-23.

⁶ WA State Budget Papers 2022-23, vol 2, page 534

4 Tangible support for Seniors who volunteer

The WA State Government undertakes a number of activities to thank volunteers for their contributions. These activities, while important, typically target a relatively small number of volunteers recognised for long or outstanding service.

Senior volunteers also require tangible support to promote their participation. This would benefit from specific engagement, but ideas could include:

- increased programs to promote digital literacy of Seniors (volunteer roles increasingly require digital access for communication, induction, training, engagement and to undertake specific roles);
- funding to increase the reimbursement of volunteer costs for Seniors (currently only about 10% of volunteer costs are reimbursed, and these costs are increasing due to cost of living, energy and transport pressures);
- removal of fees for Senior volunteers to undertake mandatory screening including Working with Children, NDIS and National Volunteer Police Checks; and
- an awareness campaign targeting seniors and promoting the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering

In closing

Volunteering WA very much appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission for consideration.



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Chief Executive Officer

Volunteering WA