

Discussion Paper - Considerations for the future of the Volunteer Management Activity Program

SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES FROM
THE STATE AND TERRITORY VOLUNTEERING PEAK BODIES

3 APRIL 2020



This submission is provided in response to the Discussion Paper “Considerations for the future of the Volunteer Management Activity” released by the Department of Social Services (DSS) on 13 February 2020.

Introduction

It is a collaborative response from the following State and Territory Volunteering peak bodies:

- The Centre for Volunteering (NSW)
- VolunteeringACT
- Volunteering Queensland
- Volunteering SA / NT
- Volunteering Tasmania
- Volunteering Victoria
- Volunteering WA

Collectively, the network provides volunteering services to and across all States and Territories in Australia to Volunteer Involving Organisations, Volunteer Resource Centres, Volunteering Support Services, Local Government, businesses, research organisations and academia and 5.8 million volunteers¹.

We welcome the opportunity to make a formal submission to the Discussion Paper and appreciate the engagement from DSS on this matter. This submission provides our input into the aim, key principles and questions posed in the Discussion Paper.

Redesigning the Volunteer Management Activity

Proposed Aim

Since 2014, the focus of the Australian Government Volunteer Management Activity (VMA) program has been “*on matching individuals experiencing disadvantage to volunteer opportunities*”². This aim recognised volunteering as a pathway to civic participation, social cohesion, mental health and employment particularly for those experiencing disadvantage.

We note the proposed revised aim of the program to “*...encourage and support Volunteer Involving Organisations to support volunteers to participate in volunteering opportunities. Volunteer Management involves the delivery of volunteering support services to people who lead and manage volunteers, such as improving access to volunteering information, training, resources and building effective volunteering practices*”.

We believe this significant shift in focus should increase the leverage of the program and strengthen volunteering in Australia as a result. The sector would welcome stable, long-term program aim(s) to support efficiency and the ongoing maturity of service delivery.

¹ ABS 4159.0 General Social Survey, ABS, 2014

² Report on the Review of the Volunteer Management Activity, mpconsulting, August 2018

Key Principles

Constitutional validity

We recognise the requirement for a clear head of power in the Australian constitution to underpin the Australian Government's involvement and funding of a range of activities. While this issue was underscored by legal matters over the past decade, this issue is not new and much broader than consideration of volunteering activities.

For example, the state and territory governments have primary responsibility for the delivery of many health services (public hospitals, mental health, dental care, ambulance services etc.) while the Australian Government maintains much of the required financial capacity needed to deliver these services. Mechanisms typically employed include, but are not limited to, tied grants and intergovernmental agreements.

The ABS³ reported that 5.8 million people, or 31% of all Australians, formally volunteered in 2014 contributing 743 million hours in 2014. This work covers a wide range of portfolios including health, community services, education, sport, culture and services to Indigenous people, youth, migrants, refugees and seniors.

The linkages between the Australian Government's continued support for and investment in volunteer management should remain cognisant of and support outcomes across the range of services delivered by federal, state and local governments.

We appreciate the work that DSS has undertaken to resolve the issue of constitutional validity in the short-term. In the long-term, we are concerned that tying linkages to a narrow area risks underinvestment, loss of capacity, skewed investment and adverse community and individual outcomes.

Efficiency in service delivery and effective use of resources

The Discussion Paper notes that there are inconsistencies in resource utilisation, inefficiencies in service delivery and duplication of effort across a number of service providers under current VMA funding arrangements.

The relatively small amount of funding for service delivery (\$5.7 million pa⁴) needs to be considered in the context of activity across Australia and interactions across three levels of government, the not-for-profit and corporate sectors.

Future funding models can help to address the above issues by:

- providing adequate funding
- clarifying and standardising services to be delivered and
- focusing on "a small number of simple, well-targeted and defined performance measures⁵".

³ ABS 4159.0 General Social Survey, ABS, 2014 table 22.1

⁴ Report on the Review of the Volunteer Management Activity, mpconsulting, August 2018

Reduced duplication of cross jurisdictional efforts and funding and

Best value for funding available

Since 2014, the Australian Government has largely funded place-based volunteering services in larger metropolitan centres.

An inconsistent patchwork of State and Local Government services provide volunteer services in some metropolitan councils, regional centres and towns. The status of these arrangements continues to be in flux. For example, Western Australia is currently reviewing funding for Volunteer Resource Centres which may result in reduced funding to service delivery in Perth and increased funding in regional areas.

Clarifying the nature of services to be delivered by different levels of Government is needed to mature the volunteering sector in Australia.

As identified above we recommend that the Australian Government provide leadership through the provision of services that enable volunteering to happen at a national level. This includes a commitment to investing in infrastructure that underpins volunteer recruitment and management, VIKTOR/VIRA⁵, which is key to the success of Volunteer Involving Organisations across the country. In addition there should be investment in capacity and capability development of staff and volunteers, resource and training materials and the promotion and implementation of the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.

The overall funding for the VMA program needs to be preserved at a minimum. The proposed consolidation of contract numbers should provide significant administrative cost saving to the Australian Government. Any cost savings should be added to the available investment pool to fund services.

Recommendations from the Report on the Review of the Volunteer Management Activity

Below are our responses to the recommendations and discussion questions in the Discussion Paper.

Recommendation 1

The Review recommends that the Australian Government continue to invest in volunteer management, but clarify its interest in volunteer management including the focus and objective of its investment.

Discussion Questions

Within the current funding envelope (approximately \$18.8 million, excluding GST, over three and a half years), what do you think should be the Australian Government's focus in volunteer management?

The report commissioned by DSS acknowledged that the current funding envelope is “not adequate to deliver, to a professional standard, the full set of services described in the grant agreements⁶”.

⁵ At a later date, the sector would welcome the opportunity to discuss support from the Australian Government for the ongoing development of technology (not included in the scope of this submission).

⁶ *Report on the Review of the Volunteer Management Activity*, mpconsulting, August 2018

We acknowledge the limited VMA funding envelope, and given current government constraints, we understand that funding will not likely be increased in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, increased VMA funding would help address the observed decline in volunteering and support the ongoing sustainability and maturity of the sector.

We believe that, at least for the next VMA funding period, that there should be dual aims:

- improving support to VIOs and volunteer management
- continuing to support volunteers seeking opportunities in the sector.

In addition, we support:

- a national approach to the introduction of Volunteer Recognition legislation (similar to Carers Recognition Acts at national, State and Territory levels) and
- the development of a National Volunteer Strategy / Statement (including an implementation plan) co-developed with Volunteering Australia and the Volunteering Peaks across Australia.

Is this focus different to state and territory governments?

Yes, the focus is different, as there is no other funding at federal / state / territory or local government level across Australia that specifically funds volunteer management.

In practice, the sector seeks to leverage funding from national, state / territory, local governments and other sources to optimise the development of resources and services in their communities.

However, more work could be undertaken to identify respective roles for all levels of government, including local governments, to support volunteering in Australia.

How could the Australian Government work across all levels of government to align efforts, ensure consistency, and minimise the risk of duplication in effort and funding to better support volunteer management in Australia?

Emergency or spontaneous volunteering represent a critical subset of all volunteer services and benefits. A consistent overall framework and a related national technological approach is the best way to advance these interests and ensure the sustainability of the sector over time. This will require substantial investment and systems integrations across Australia.

As noted above, we support the introduction of Volunteer Recognition legislation across Australia and the development of a National Volunteer Strategy / Statement.

Australian Government leadership of and funding for specific types of volunteer management (such as aged care, disability sector and emergency management) is essential for the professionalisation and sustainability of volunteering and volunteer management. Initiatives to include professional career pathways, accredited higher education and training, recognition of work roles and through the modern award structure, industry standards for safe workplace volunteering practice.

Recommendation 2

The Review recommends that the Australian Government work with stakeholders over the coming 12 months to co-design a new program (including the performance framework) that focuses the Australian Government's investment on building the capacity of Volunteer Involving Organisations to effectively recruit and manage volunteers.

Discussion Questions

On what basis could the Australian Government select a limited number of providers?

A new model needs to be based on high quality performance and efficiencies.

We support the funding of fewer service providers by the Australian Government to coordinate the overall delivery of service approaches.

The state and territory peak bodies have sufficient scale, capacity, stakeholder relationships, governance and ongoing fiscal sustainability to undertake this work, working in partnership with other local service providers. There is an existing, effective federated model of volunteering bodies in Australia with state, territory and national levels which supports a coordinated and national approach.

The Australian Government is moving its focus to capacity building of VIOs to effectively recruit and manage volunteers. Key enabling services for this outcome include the development of online volunteer recruitment and management platforms, capacity development (volunteer management accreditation and training), training materials and the promotion of National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.

There is a need to specifically fund and promote the ongoing development and operation of key technology platforms such as VIKTOR and VIRA.

If there is a continued focus on promoting diversity and inclusion of volunteers, investment needs to be coordinated with State and Local Governments to improve equity of access.

How could selected providers ensure national coverage and leverage the capability of the sector, including Volunteer Involving Organisations?

Peak bodies could commit to sharing relevant resources (training materials etc.) and summary information to promote collaboration, adoption of best practice and a culture of continuous improvement.

Any cost savings from consolidating VMA providers, or to the Australian Government through reduced administration costs, should be kept in the VMA funding pool to allow for increased service delivery.

How could the Australian Government ensure the accessibility of volunteering support services, for example, for people with disability or culturally and linguistically diverse Australians, through an online approach?

Investment in on line services improves the prospect of universal access to services to Australians.

There is a need to continue to focus on diversity and inclusion of volunteers into the sector, to overcome barriers created by language, age (younger and older volunteers), culture, disability, disadvantage and inconsistent broadband services in regional and remote areas.

The needs and requirements of communities across Australia are not being taken into account if we centralise all operations to capital cities and only work remotely. The model should allow for VMA funded organisations' staff to work in and support regional areas on a 'needs basis' as required.

We support improved resources and national approaches to supporting VIOs, combined with place-based service delivery for volunteer access.

Coordination across levels of Government is required to optimise the model.

How could an online volunteer management service delivery model operate?

There are currently a range of online platforms that support volunteer management service delivery, including VIKTOR/VIRA, online training delivery platforms and the BNG portal which hosts an assessment tool for the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.

Investment in these existing services could make online service delivery more accessible, especially to regional and remote VIOs. A key benefit of investing in such services would be a coordinated national approach to volunteer management, based on principles of best practice embodied in the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.

Given that VIKTOR is used widely across the sector, how could VIKTOR (or an alternative database) be adapted to reflect the changing needs of the sector? Is VIKTOR an appropriate option to support an online approach? What would be the role of VIRA?

VIKTOR is the platform for volunteer advertising and matching in Australia, currently servicing over 10,000 VIOs and Volunteer Support Services / Volunteer Resource Hubs. While it is already used by a significant number of organisations, not all organisations are aware of the platform. Promotion and training would help to address this.

VIKTOR requires investment in reporting and other functionality, together with ongoing maintenance and support, to meet growing demands. Additionally, portable universal volunteer records would be useful for volunteers, VIOs and VSS.

VIRA is the sister database of VIKTOR and supports volunteer managers by providing a database for a range of activities (including recording volunteer information, shifts, communications and emails, certificates and training, recognition etc.). It requires further investment to upgrade its functionality to user/sector needs and potentially integrate volunteer recruitment and management activities.

How could the Australian Government better measure the outcomes and successes of a future VMA program?

The level of oversight and reporting should be commensurate with the level of investment.

An outcomes-based evaluation framework is required. This is not currently being met by the DEX platform, nor the VIKTOR/VIRA platforms. Data collection and reporting must match the funding KPIs, i.e. volunteer management performance, not just data on volunteer role advertising and expressions of interest.

While the historical focus of the program has been on helping people experiencing disadvantage to volunteer, a revised program should focus on the benefits to all Australians from a strong and highly engaged volunteer sector. Outcomes achieved by volunteers, both in terms of service delivery as well as greater community cohesion, improved mental health and physical health gained through volunteering, should all be recognised.

Using one central point for recruiting and managing volunteers provides the sector with rich essential data that highlights the trends and shortfalls within the sector. This data would be available to support sector and government funding and policy decision making.

Care should be taken that program overheads do not further detract from what is already acknowledged to be inadequate funding.

What could be the key short-term (up to 12 months), medium-term (12 months to 5 years) and long-term (over 5 years) indicators of success?

Measures of success will be informed by the redesign of the VMA program and should be co-designed with funding recipients.

Options include measuring the delivery of resources to support capacity building, increasing adoption and adherence to best practice (National Standards for Volunteer Involvement) and related quality measurement frameworks, provision of training as requested by sector, professional development of volunteer managers to including career pathways, accredited higher education and training, recognition of work roles through the Modern Award structure, industry standards for safe workplace volunteering practice.

Outcome measures should be supported by national (such as ABS) reporting at appropriate intervals and measurement of statistics at regional and community levels. ABS reporting should carry a high level of validity and can inform the next stage of the Australian Government’s VMA program.

In closing

The aims and priorities for the VMA program have been the subject of consultation led by DSS since 2017 and the current Discussion Paper is still relatively high level. The State and Territory peak bodies for volunteering would appreciate co-designing with Government the VMA funding model going forward.

Endorsement

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



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