

## **ROADMAP TO RECOVERY – VOLUNTEERING IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

The Western Australian Government has led the state through the challenges of the early response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Through swift, decisive and targeted action, WA is now in a position of no community transmission for a number of months. This has resulted in significantly lower loss of life, illness and heartbreak than would have otherwise been experienced by our community.

We commend the State Government for its management of this significant public health challenge.

The WA State Government has again led the nation by developing the \$5.5 billion *WA Recovery Plan*<sup>1</sup>, informed by background documents and insights from key stakeholders, from over 600 participants in a series of roundtables.

The volunteering sector was represented in the Sports and Recreation roundtable convened by the Minister on 8 June 2020. Volunteering is a very important element in the Sport and Recreation portfolio (accounting for 33% of all formal volunteers in Western Australia) and discussion and notes from the roundtable were in the context of this sector.

There is also considerable reliance and participation in volunteering in a number of other areas including community services, health, disability, emergency services, Aboriginal Services, education, arts and culture, religious organisations etc.

This paper summarises the broader impact on the volunteering sector during COVID-19 and proposes specific actions that would support the reinvigoration of the sector.

### **BACKGROUND**

Prior to COVID-19 an estimated four out of five Western Australians reported volunteering, with 34% formally volunteering for an organisation that provides services to our community.

A report<sup>2</sup> into the economic, social and cultural value of volunteering previously found that it was Western Australia's largest industry on a labour replacement cost model, further highlighting the irreplaceable and significant value volunteers have within our communities.

We understand that the sector has been significantly impacted and from a recent membership survey (August 2020) estimate that over 25% of volunteers will not return to their roles following COVID-19.

### **EARLY RESPONSE**

Volunteer organisations were stretched by the speed, intensity and widespread nature of the COVID-19 response.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/wa-recovery>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.volunteeringwa.org.au/assets/downloads/vwa-report-book\\_web.pdf](https://www.volunteeringwa.org.au/assets/downloads/vwa-report-book_web.pdf)

Australian National University<sup>3</sup> research found that an estimated 64.2% of Western Australian volunteers were stood down during this time as part of the cessation of non-essential services and to protect both volunteers and the community. This report also found that younger, female and older volunteers were disproportionately impacted.

Many organisations modified their programs to support remote or virtual volunteering. A number of emergency relief organisations were stretched to respond during this time.

Volunteering WA has, and continues to provide, a range of supports including:

- Creation of an emergency volunteering website that registered over 4,000 individuals and helped to match a number of roles urgently needed to be filled by volunteer organisations
- Regular website and email updates for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations to reinforce and translate Government messaging to assist in flattening the curve and protecting the health and safety of volunteers
- Hosting of round tables and webinars with volunteer involving organisations to understand their challenges and provide support and advice
- Participation on taskforces and working groups convened by the Department of Communities to help to manage the impacts on vulnerable cohorts in our state
- Participation in WACOSS Peak Forums to coordinate and align community services response
- Creation and publication of a number of new resources including
  - Guidance for informal volunteer groups
  - Tips to optimise virtual volunteering
  - A step by step guide to return volunteer programs and volunteers during COVID-19
  - Responding to a Pandemic in WA Guide
- Hosting a State-wide 'Redesigning Volunteering' Forum to share best practice/response from volunteering involving organisations and the latest recovery, recruitment and management strategies from volunteering in WA (November 2020).

The Public Sector Commission's ithink process, generated a large range of ideas to assist in the early phases of COVID-19 response. Volunteering was one of three main themes to emerge in terms of assisting vulnerable members of our community.

Many of the ideas shared by the Public Sector Commission were to leverage volunteers as part of our early COVID-19 response. Volunteers were actively engaged and mobilised for a range of initiatives during this time and provided invaluable community support.

It was heartening to see the community value and belief in volunteering as a key to protecting and supporting the most vulnerable in our community.

## **RELATIONSHIPS WITH STATE GOVERNMENT AND VOLUNTEERING PEAKS**

There are a number of areas across Australia where the Federal and State/Territory Governments have developed a close partnership with the volunteering sector during this pandemic. For example:

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<sup>3</sup>[https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/6/The\\_experience\\_of\\_volunteers\\_during\\_the\\_early\\_stages\\_of\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic\\_0.pdf](https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/6/The_experience_of_volunteers_during_the_early_stages_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_0.pdf)

- Nationally, Volunteering Australia engaged with the Not-for-Profit working group of the Prime Minister’s National Coordination Commission to discuss issues and impacts on the volunteering sector, with a focus on the absence of insurance protection
- In New South Wales the State Government partnered with the Centre for Volunteering to develop and launch the COVID-19 emergency support volunteering website (hosted by Volunteering WA’s platform)<sup>4</sup>
- In Western Australia Volunteering WA has been involved with the Department of Communities Senior’s Taskforce to collaborate on supporting this high risk group, with a large number of volunteers and people in receipt of volunteer services
- In Queensland the State Government partnered with Volunteering Queensland to develop resources to guide volunteer and volunteer organisations response during the pandemic
- In Tasmania Volunteering Tasmania has been invited to participate in the Premier’s Economic and Social Recovery Council, through discussions and formal submission
- In Victoria a \$1,500 worker support payment has been extended to volunteers to compensate them for lost income as a result of self-isolation or quarantine<sup>5</sup>.
- In ACT the government released ‘Covid-19 Rapid Response Grants’ to provide urgent support to initiatives supporting the pandemic recovery.

## **WESTERN AUSTRALIA’S VOLUNTEER SECTOR ROAD AHEAD**

The State Government’s *Setting the Scene* document of 28 May 2020 noted that “effective social recovery is the foundation for enabling recovery in all aspects of the community and is essential for future community sustainability”<sup>6</sup>. One of three objectives for WA in the Roadmap is to “regroup our community at a personal, family and social level so people feel healthy and have the confidence to lead active lives”<sup>7</sup>. Volunteering is a critical enabler to regrouping our community.

As we turn our attention to the socio-economic recovery challenge, there are a number of areas where we need to work in partnership with the Government and the community.

Significant challenges include the reinvigoration of the volunteering sector and the remobilisation of volunteers. Safety issues are also paramount given the additional costs and administration to manage the health and safety of volunteers who are not covered by workers compensation and or volunteer insurance policies<sup>8</sup> during pandemics. These issues are compounded in regional areas due to higher unemployment and social isolation.

ANU research indicated that while life satisfaction of all Australians fell between January and April 2020, those that continued to volunteer experienced a significantly and substantially smaller decline. In addition, volunteers ‘were less likely to have a probable serious mental illness and had a far lower level of psychological distress’.

Volunteering is a key preventative measure to support mental health and well-being and essential to the social recovery of all aspects of our Western Australian community.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nsw.gov.au/news/new-volunteering-platform-to-support-vulnerable-amid-covid-19>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nfplaw.org.au/volunteer-access-covid-19-support-payments-victoria>

<sup>6</sup> Page 6

<sup>7</sup> Page 12

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.volunteeringwa.org.au/assets/factsheets/responding-to-a-pandemic-in-wa-guide.pdf> Page 11

## GETTING BACK ON OUR FEET

Specific actions that could be taken over the next six to 12 months include:

Getting back on our feet
Explicit consideration and inclusion of volunteer organisations and volunteers in recovery plans, decisions and communications from the State Government during the recovery process
Inclusion of Volunteering WA on the State Welfare Emergency Committee to support emergency and spontaneous volunteering
Development of resources, endorsed by the State Government, to provide confidence for organisations recommencing volunteer programs
Development of a co-designed program to support the safe remobilisation of older volunteers into volunteering roles (including remote and virtual roles)
Free police checks for volunteers during the COVID recovery phase

## FACING THE BIG ISSUES

The not for profit and volunteering sectors are significant participants in delivering essential services and primary instruments of social cohesion in Western Australia.

The long-term outlook for the volunteering sector in Western Australia will be impacted by a number of factors such as employment, impacts on population and distribution, and the possible contraction in the number, capacity and / or scale of the not for profit sector. The full impact of the loss of fundraising and other capacity of the sector is yet to be fully understood.

The fate of the pandemic itself in Western Australia will also play a significant role.

It has been a significant task for volunteer involving organisations to stand down, redesign, recruit and remobilise roles during the uncertainty of the past six months. The challenges will be even greater if WA is to experience future 'waves' of community transmission.

The following initiatives are proposed to assist in the rebuilding and sustaining of the sector in the longer term:

Facing the big issues
State-wide public awareness campaign to recruit new volunteers and establish the identity of volunteers (e.g. vital, caring, vibrant, innovative, diverse)
Support for a Volunteering as a Pathway to Youth Employment program currently in development by Volunteering WA for consideration by the Department
Digital management - training and facilitation with digital transition for small volunteer involving organisations (online volunteer recruitment, management and resources)
Investment in training for volunteer managers to effectively and safely manage volunteers in the post-COVID environment.

## **WORKING TOGETHER**

The volunteering sector in WA acknowledges and thanks the WA State Government for its leadership and inclusion during this challenge. We look forward to working in partnership to aid in the State's recovery going forward.

**Volunteer Community Reference Group**

**August 2020**