

VOLUNTEERING *and* CONTACT ACT

Overview

Volunteering and Contact ACT (VCA) appreciates the opportunity to respond to the ACT Government's 2017-18 Budget Consultation.

Volunteering and Contact ACT (VCA) has a vision of an engaged community, enriched by volunteering, participation and knowledge. Through our services and programs, we foster community networks and undertake research, advocacy, project, public education, and events.

VCA is a people driven, service-focused organisations that represents the interests of over 200 members and the wider public.

This submission identifies two key recommendations for ACT Government investment: better resourcing for volunteer involvement and prioritising digital access to information.

Background Information

Volunteering spans every aspect of Australian life, with an estimated 43.7 per cent of adult Australians volunteering each year.¹ These volunteers gave a total of 932 million hours in 2015-16, at an economic worth of over \$31 billion.² In the ACT nearly four in ten people volunteer, contributing an estimated \$1.5 billion to the ACT economy each year.³ Further, for every \$1 invested in volunteering there is a \$4.50 return to the community.⁴

In addition to the economic benefits generated by volunteerism there are also significant social and cultural benefits. Volunteers play a pivotal role in creating connected, diverse, and inclusive communities. With the highest rate of volunteering in the country, the ACT benefits tremendously from the work of volunteers who contribute to the health and happiness of the Canberra community.

1. Volunteer Involvement

Despite the irrefutable economic, social, and cultural benefits of volunteering, there is significant need for increased resources to support volunteer involvement. Nationally, 94 per cent of non-profit organisations involve volunteers⁵, and 57 per cent of staff in volunteer involving organisations are unpaid.⁶ The *Giving Australia 2016* report identified that a dedicated volunteer manager was found to be the most useful resource for volunteer

¹ The Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Non-profit Studies (ACNPS), Centre for Social Impact (CSI) Swinburne and the Centre for Corporate Public Affairs (December 2016) *Giving Australia 2016*, available online at <http://www.communitybusinesspartnership.gov.au/about/research-projects/>

² Volunteering Western Australia (May 2015) *The Economic, Social, and Cultural Value of Volunteering to Western Australia*, available online at

https://volunteeringwa.org.au/assets/downloads/vwa_report%20book_web.pdf

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015) *General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014*, available online at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4159.0>.

⁴ Volunteering Western Australia (May 2015) *The Economic, Social, and Cultural Value of Volunteering to Western Australia*, available online at

https://volunteeringwa.org.au/assets/downloads/vwa_report%20book_web.pdf

⁵ The Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Non-profit Studies (ACNPS), Centre for Social Impact (CSI) Swinburne and the Centre for Corporate Public Affairs (December 2016) *Giving Australia 2016*, available online at <http://www.communitybusinesspartnership.gov.au/about/research-projects/>

⁶ Volunteering Australia and PWC (April 2016) *State of Volunteering in Australia*, available online at <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/State-of-Volunteering-in-Australia-full-report.pdf>.

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recruitment. Yet, the State of the Community Service Sector in the ACT 2016 report, commissioned by ACTCOSS, found that only one in three organisations had a dedicated volunteer manager. Further, almost half of respondents agreed that it is becoming harder to recruit volunteers.

Significant investment in volunteer involvement will yield exponential benefits over time by ensuring that the Canberra Region is able to flourish. Volunteers are integral to the functioning of the Territory, working in areas such as emergency services, the environment, education, arts and culture, and sport and recreation. In order to ensure that volunteer involving organisations remain sustainable into the future there needs to be a strong commitment to supporting volunteer involvement, and recognising volunteer management as a profession.

Key to this recommendation is further support for the ACT Volunteering Statement, developed by VCA and the Community Services Directorate in 2016. This Statement, due to be launched in 2017, sets the vision for a whole of government and whole of community approach to strengthen the future quality and experience of volunteering in the ACT. The Statement aims to support and improve volunteer engagement and management through a series of actions in key priority areas.

Examples of volunteering programs and their contribution to the ACT economy and community:

Australian War Memorial

The Australian War Memorial is the number one rated tourist attraction on TripAdvisor in Australia. The Memorial engages over 300 volunteers and their guides deliver over 8,000 free tours every year. The Voluntary Guides are integral to enhancing the visitor experience of people attending the Memorial and enable access to the Memorial to remain free. Attractions such as the War Memorial position as a destination of choice for travellers, and volunteers are essential to their ongoing viability and success.

Lifeline Canberra

Every day, Lifeline Canberra Telephone Crisis Support Volunteers speak with almost 100 callers in the Canberra Region who are in crisis or experiencing thoughts of suicide. Every ten days a Canberran is lost to suicide. With one in five Australians suffering from mental illness in any given year, it is imperative that we invest in early intervention and prevention to reduce overall rates of suicide, self-harm, and mental health crises. Volunteers, including those with lived experience, are integral to the work that Lifeline performs in working towards a suicide-free Australia and caring for the mental health and wellbeing of Canberra citizens.

Supporting Volunteer Involvement

It is vital that volunteer involving organisation can access knowledge, resources and programs that enable their volunteers to be adequately trained, resourced and supported to deliver quality work to the community. Engaging volunteers has a cost. As well as providing the obvious (e.g. protective equipment and uniforms) volunteer involving organisations need volunteer insurance, to develop business policies and procedures, and seek best practise when recruiting, engaging and supporting their volunteer workforce. It is vital for volunteers, and volunteer involving organisations, to have a knowledgeable, accessible Territory-based and focused resource centre.

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2. Digital Access

Digital access remains another area where community organisations and the Territory's most vulnerable people have been left behind. As we move into a new digital age it is imperative that access to information is at the forefront of our aspirations for Canberra as a smart city. Community organisations are often under resourced and do not have the budget nor the expertise to ensure that they remain up-to-date on digital transformation. As a result, core services are impacted by low or poor digital presence and lack of accessibility for people with barriers.

ACT Government investment in this area should prioritise consolidation and co-design, ensuring that key digital platforms are invested in, and work well together. VCA's ACT Community Directory is a key source of information on services, community organisations, and support groups in the Canberra Region. Underpinned by the ACT Government's own open data set, the Directory is an essential gateway to participation, and finding help and services.

The information contained within the Directory is the most comprehensive in the Canberra Region, and can be manipulated to inform other platforms. For example, the information in the Directory underpins the My Canberra Portal that sits within the Better Services portfolio of ACT Government. The opportunities to make use of the data within the Directory are vast, including the ability to create custom directories for multicultural communities, youth, and disability service providers.

Another key issue for community organisations is equipping themselves to tackle complex ICT issues such as cyber security. In order for Canberra to ensure it continues to have a connected community, further investment needs to be made to ensure that digital transformation goals and their associated actions take into account the unique and diverse needs of the community sector, and its clients and volunteers.

Core to the vision of the ACT Government, and underpinning budgets past, present, and future, is the ideal that the Canberra Region is a welcoming and inclusive community. Imperative to achieving this vision is allocating greater resources to volunteer involvement and ensuring that Canberrans from all walks of life are able to participate in their community in a way that makes sense to them. Further investment in capacity building for community organisations with respect to ICT is key to securing a better future for our city.