



# Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability

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*VolunteeringACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra region. VolunteeringACT pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their vital ongoing contribution to our lands.*

*VolunteeringACT acknowledges volunteers of all genders and sexualities, with all abilities and from all cultures. Their skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering services and programs, and in making Canberra a better place to live. We also acknowledge the contribution of the volunteer involving organisations that contribute to the health and happiness of our community.*

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## Overview

- People with disability are less likely to volunteer than people without disability.
- Initiatives to improve inclusivity in volunteering have strong benefits for volunteers, both with and without disability.
- Volunteers with disability face significant barriers to participation, including challenges securing appropriate and meaningful roles, and facing discriminatory attitudes from organisations and broader society.
- Volunteer involving organisations require resourcing to facilitate engagement with volunteers with disability and to provide training and support to volunteers who work with people with disability.

## Recommendations

VolunteeringACT makes the following recommendations to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability:

1. Design and circulate a public awareness campaign aimed at reducing stigma around disability, with a focus on the importance of community engagement and the value people with disability can bring to paid or voluntary roles.
2. Allocate additional funding to ensure accessibility of programs that connect prospective volunteers with disability to volunteer involving organisations.
3. Promote volunteering in government programs, including the NDIS, with an aim to recognise volunteering as a valuable pathway to community participation and social inclusion.

## Social inclusion and people with disability

Volunteering spans every aspect of Australian life, with 5.8 million Australians, or 31 per cent of the population, engaged in formal volunteering.<sup>1</sup> These volunteers make an annual social and economic contribution of \$290 billion.<sup>2</sup> In the ACT nearly one in three people volunteers, contributing an estimated \$1.5 billion to the ACT economy each year.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the economic benefits generated through volunteering, it also delivers significant social and cultural benefits. Volunteers play a pivotal role in creating connected, diverse, and inclusive communities.

According to the ABS General Social Survey, people with disability are much less likely to be involved in social or community groups, to volunteer, or to undertake paid work or study than people without disability.<sup>4</sup> They are also much more likely to experience discrimination, and report less trust in public institutions such as the health and justice systems.<sup>5</sup> Concurrently, research shows that volunteering drastically improves health and wellbeing outcomes associated with community engagement, including satisfaction with life, reduced feelings of social isolation,<sup>6</sup> sense of self-worth, and the feeling of doing something useful.<sup>7</sup> Given these benefits, volunteering is a highly effective avenue for improved social inclusion.

# Inclusive volunteering and its benefits for community engagement

Volunteering facilitates social inclusion by providing community services which connect people to social, cultural, and work opportunities, and by empowering people to provide these services to others. Inclusive volunteering means that opportunities for people with diverse needs, backgrounds, and abilities are explicitly provided within volunteer involving organisations. Improving inclusivity in volunteering has profound benefits across the volunteering landscape.

**Benefits to volunteers.** Diversity in volunteer groups increases social interaction, promotes positive attitudes, and improves professional development. In comparative studies, volunteering has been found to equally benefit people with and without disability.<sup>8</sup> Volunteers with disability report that volunteering improved their connections to others and the community, fostered a sense of belonging, social acceptance, and empowerment, improved confidence, and developed practical and managerial work skills which lead to employment.<sup>9</sup> The following testimonial from the *Inclusive Volunteering Program* illustrates this:

*"I was shy. I was focused on finding employment and I couldn't find a job. Volunteering at Questacon changed my life. Before volunteering at Questacon I had limited interaction with others. Now I am able to interact with people, people from Australia and people visiting Australia. I'm learning about science; it is an interesting place to volunteer. Working at Questacon is my dream. I feel like an important person. I translate for Arabic visitors; I am part of a team. I feel like I have found my place. I feel Australian."*

Volunteers for programs that facilitate social connections for people with disability also report significant personal benefits. In prior research, volunteers reported that inclusive programs widened their social circles, improved teamwork skills, and increased their confidence in working with people with disability.<sup>10</sup> Thus, inclusive programs enhance the benefits of volunteering for people with and without disability. According to a volunteer in the *Connections Program*,

*"The Connections Program has literally been a lifesaver for me. Having a social connection; someone to sit down for a coffee and chat about things, means not only to have that social connection but also gave me something to look forward to every few weeks. I always enjoyed catching up with my volunteer and have been able to attain some of my original goals during my time with the program. Ultimately for me, the Connections Program is about having that social time with someone and each volunteer has been well matched to me, so we always have lots in common to chat about."*

*With my new volunteer, we were able to meet up just a few times before COVID hit. When face-to-face meetings were cancelled, it was devastating to lose that only social connection I had and be restricted almost entirely to the house with a difficult teenage son. I am really looking forward to meeting up with my volunteer once again. So many people take their social connections for granted but when you are alone, the Connections Program offers a unique and extremely valuable experience."*

**Benefits to the communities served.** Volunteer involving organisations that embrace and promote inclusivity also provide better services. Research has demonstrated that engaging diverse volunteers improves outcomes across a number of service areas, from learning outcomes and education

inequalities,<sup>11</sup> to assistance for people with disability,<sup>12</sup> to coordinated and effective disaster relief efforts.<sup>13</sup> To highlight one example, engaging diverse volunteers was found to reduce inequalities and improve overall learning outcomes for students in ‘Interactive Groups’ trialled in schools in the European Union.<sup>14</sup> In programs that specifically aim to serve people with disability, engaging people with disability as service providers has been found to improve the perceived effectiveness of services among recipients. As one researcher explains, “volunteers with disabilities can often empathise with beneficiaries and profoundly understand the experience of living with disability. Their disability is a source of intimacy, and it therefore helps lower [defences] among those receiving help, fosters, openness and drives change.”<sup>15</sup>

**Benefits outside of volunteering.** Exposure to diverse people instils qualities in volunteers that they bring to their work in Australian schools, hospitals, public agencies, and businesses. For example, volunteer experience with people with disability greatly improves attitudes towards and confidence working with people with disability.<sup>16</sup> Further, because volunteering often involves working directly with the people served, volunteering is likely to be more influential in breaking down prejudice than other activities, such as professional interning or work placement.<sup>17</sup>

## Barriers to inclusion

Volunteering is especially beneficial for people with disability; however, unique challenges mean that people with disability are underrepresented among Australians who volunteer. Research on the experiences of volunteers with disability reveals that the practices of volunteer involving organisations, government policy, and broader society create and sustain significant barriers to inclusion. VolunteeringACT emphasises that these barriers are caused by institutions—not by people with disability—and they can and must be overcome through changes to policy and practice.

**Finding opportunities is difficult.** Volunteering is a great way to engage people with disability who disproportionately struggle to find paid work. However, people with disability are faced with similar barriers when searching for volunteering roles. Controlling for sociodemographic factors, adults with disability are no less likely than those without disability to volunteer—or to volunteer for fewer overall hours.<sup>18</sup> However, those with physical disabilities are less likely to engage in formal volunteering and are less likely to be connected to opportunities that encourage them to apply.

**This is especially pronounced for certain demographics.** Programs that support people with disability are most commonly designed to serve young people and reach out to prospective volunteers through existing institutions like schools and youth centres.<sup>19</sup> This can make it difficult for older Australians or for those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to find volunteering opportunities.

**The biggest barriers are socioeconomic.** When we account for demographic differences, the difference in volunteer involvement between people with and without disability disappears. Household income, employment status, and age are the most significant predictors of a person’s involvement in volunteering.<sup>20</sup> These factors also correlate significantly with disability, and often prevent people with disability from participating as volunteers, even when they have the necessary motivation and skills.

**But discrimination is still prevalent.** Based on interview data, low expectations from society and from organisations often prevents people with disability from engaging in meaningful volunteering roles.<sup>21</sup> Volunteers with disability are often underestimated by agencies and are assigned jobs well below their capability.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, volunteers with disability may find their roles unfulfilling, and may miss out on the personal and social benefits of community engagement. Similarly, young people with disability are less

likely to be encouraged to volunteer by their school, as expectations of their abilities, or their commitment, are often lower than the expectations of their non-disabled peers.<sup>23</sup>

Even when people with disability find appropriate volunteering roles, organisations often struggle to remove barriers to participation for people with disability. Three significant challenges have been identified by organisations:

1. **Inaccessible workspaces.** Even when organisations want to engage volunteers with disability, aspects of their physical workspace can make this impossible.
2. **Lack of access to training and support.** When asked about the possibility of engaging volunteers with disability, many organisations claim that they felt inadequately trained to support volunteers with diverse needs, particularly those with mental health issues or behavioural disabilities.<sup>24</sup>
3. **'Creating' accessible roles.** Many organisations find it difficult to assess the capabilities of people with disability, and subsequently place them in appropriate roles.<sup>25</sup>

**Recommendation 1: Design a public awareness campaign aimed at reducing stigma around disability.**

Although availability of resources is a major impediment to reducing barriers, many organisations feel that they lack important information about engaging volunteers with diverse needs. Almost half of the volunteer involving organisations surveyed in the *State of Volunteering 2016* report claimed they did not provide opportunities for “volunteers with barriers.”<sup>26</sup> While most organisations cited a lack of resources as a key challenge, many also claimed that they were “unsure of the appropriate supports” or simply “[do] not know where to start.”<sup>27</sup> A public awareness campaign would increase visibility and understanding of disability, and improve the baseline position from which people with disability begin their search for a volunteering role. Improved awareness would encourage schools, community centres, and volunteer involving organisations to acknowledge the value of people with disability as volunteers and workers, and thus connect more people with disability to meaningful, ongoing roles. The importance of community engagement and the value that people with disability can bring to paid or voluntary work would be an ideal area of focus in a public awareness campaign.

## Promoting inclusion: practical steps for non-government institutions

Engaging diverse volunteers.

**A person-led approach.** Research shows that people with disability, from disadvantaged social backgrounds, or of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, face barriers to participating as volunteers. However, these barriers can be removed by organisations that adapt their outreach and training strategies to include diverse volunteers. This means creating and promoting programs that specifically reach people with disability, encouraging them to apply for voluntary roles, and facilitating appropriate and meaningful placements that benefit both the volunteer and the organisation.

**Target outreach and engagement that encourages people with disability.** People with disability (particularly sensory or physical) are much more likely to become involved in volunteering because they were asked by an organisation, rather than by approaching an organisation themselves.<sup>28</sup> This indicates that volunteer involving organisations themselves can improve the involvement of people

with disability by reaching out directly to other organisations and social institutions that support or engage people with disability.

**Network.** When considering the needs of underrepresented groups, particularly people with disability who are older, or culturally and linguistically diverse, engaging with other organisations is crucial. Building connections promotes ongoing engagement between organisations, volunteer placement programs, trainers and coaches, and the volunteers themselves. It also creates opportunities to critically reflect, and to keep volunteers with disability in an ongoing conversation with their organisations. This kind of creativity is central to reaching prospective volunteers with disability, as well as finding suitable placements and making appropriate adjustments.

**Case study – Inclusive Volunteering Program.** Having access to appropriate support can remove a substantial barrier between volunteer involving organisations that are enthusiastic about improving inclusiveness and prospective volunteers with disability. The *Inclusive Volunteering Program* offered by VolunteeringACT, Volunteering Tasmania and the Centre for Volunteering NSW is one way that agencies can bridge this gap, as the following case study exemplifies:

*The participant began volunteering with the volunteer involving organisation as a receptionist and helping out in other roles that were made available. They learnt new skills and identified the limitations associated with their injury. The volunteer involving organisation found the participant was highly competent with fantastic interpersonal skills and within two months, the participant was offered a paid role with the organisation as a personal assistant.*

*The volunteer involving organisation was open to improving their inclusive practices and worked closely with the Inclusive Volunteering Program to tailor the role for the participant. This allowed the participant to have confidence and know the role they were required to perform. Once the organisation understood the ability of the participant, they were offered other opportunities to further their skills, in line with both their strengths as well as their limitations due to their injury. This experience allowed the organisation to embed inclusive practices into its onboarding process incorporate inclusive practices across all aspects of the organisation. The organisation has learnt that being inclusive is effective when adopted at all levels of the organisation and that while they can make broader organisational processes for being inclusive, it also takes an individualised approach.*

## Providing services for people with diverse needs and abilities.

**Case study – Connections Program.** A major challenge for volunteering programs that provide services to people with diverse needs, including people with disability, is providing volunteers with the necessary training and support to undertake their role. The *Connections Program* provides one-to-one social support for people experiencing isolation and provides training and ongoing support to volunteer mentors. Based on case studies from this program, access to support has been extremely positive for the experiences of volunteer mentors and improved their confidence in providing mentoring services. According to one *Connections* volunteer:

*“...This particular program is very well designed and delivered. Overall, all of [the] directives of the program are beneficial when it comes to effective and safe community engagements. Directives are simple but very effective, for example we meet only in public places and we do not drive each other in our vehicles or pay for each other’s coffee or lunch.*

*We are provided with an alternative option and a phone call to the Program Coordinator if there is an issue that needs resolving. These are just some of the highly effective boundaries that are needed in order to make the program safe and possible. Program Coordinators are*

*very involved, they welcome communication when needed, and they demonstrate encouragement and show guidance in leadership that is engaging and positive.”*

Another volunteer said of their experience:

*“...It is a great privilege to be a part of the Connections Program. I am providing support to a community member with some social isolation issues. The Connections team have guided me and trained me in such a friendly way to be a part of the community and support those who need it the most. This program is the best support one can wish for as a volunteer.”*

### **Recommendation 2: Fund volunteer involving organisations to manage volunteers and improve accessibility.**

Many volunteer involving organisations lack the resources to design inclusive programs and make the adjustments needed to remove barriers. However, keeping volunteering inaccessible inhibits healthy community engagement for people with disability, and wastes the valuable skills of people with disability who would otherwise volunteer. Realising inclusivity in volunteering therefore requires additional resourcing for organisations, which could be achieved through three initiatives:

1. Paid volunteer management and coordination roles should be funded in volunteer involving organisations. This would ensure that volunteers have access to ongoing support from within the organisation.
2. Training programs for both paid staff and volunteers working with people with disability should be allocated additional funding. As the above case studies illustrate, access to appropriate training and mentoring greatly improves the confidence and satisfaction of both organisations and volunteers who work with people with disability. This increases the number of roles available for people with disability and ensures that volunteers working with people with disability feel capable, safe, and committed in their roles.
3. One-off grants should be made available for volunteer involving organisations to improve accessibility, including physically and digitally.

## **Policy to promote inclusive volunteering and community engagement for people with disability**

*Although volunteer involving organisations can take steps to improve accessibility and inclusion, the most significant barriers to inclusion for people with disability require a comprehensive policy response to overcome.*

**Promoting volunteering.** As discussed throughout this submission, volunteering is an important form of community engagement, and is greatly beneficial to the health and wellbeing of people with and without disability. Despite these benefits, volunteering is rarely promoted as an effective avenue to social inclusion.

**Encouraging and supporting access to volunteering through government programs.** Among the most significant barriers to inclusion in volunteering are barriers of omission. Numerous studies have found that both the needs and abilities of people with disability are either not recognised or ignored.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, many people with disability claim they do not volunteer because they were never

asked, or because they lack the means to access voluntary work, with transportation being the most commonly identified barrier.<sup>30</sup> Appreciating the skills and experience of people with disability and actively promoting opportunities to volunteer, including facilitating volunteer involvement, would greatly improve the accessibility of volunteering in general.

**Targeting socioeconomic inequalities.** In Australia, people with disability are less likely to have the means to be involved in community and social groups. According to the most recent General Social Survey, 32.6 percent of people with disability are engaged in employment or study, compared to 61.8 percent of people without disability.<sup>31</sup> Further, 51.8 percent of people with disability earn a weekly household income in the lowest or second-lowest quintiles, compared to 27 percent of people without disability.<sup>32</sup> Research suggests that these kinds of demographic factors play a significant role in preventing people with disability from volunteering.<sup>33</sup>

**Recommendation 3: Promote volunteering as a valuable path to community inclusion and invest in programs which support people with disability in accessing meaningful volunteer roles.**

While steps must be taken to make volunteer involving organisations more accommodating, major barriers to engaging in voluntary work are imposed on people with disability by broader socioeconomic factors. To address these, volunteering must be recognised as a valuable path to community inclusion. Volunteering opportunities should be promoted directly to people with disability by support workers, health professionals, and personal networks. Given the benefits, gaining a meaningful volunteering role should also be emphasised as a significant short- or medium-term goal in NDIS plans, both as a pathway to employment and as an avenue for social inclusion, connection, and participation. Finally, programs that help volunteer involving organisations to engage volunteers with disability by matching volunteers to appropriate roles and providing training and support should be publicly promoted and allocated funding.

## Conclusion

Initiatives to improve inclusivity in volunteering have strong benefits for volunteers, both with and without disability. However, volunteers with disability face significant barriers to participation, including finding opportunities, securing appropriate and meaningful roles, and discriminatory attitudes from organisations and broader society. To improve inclusivity, particularly for people with disability, three key barriers need to be addressed. Firstly, attitudes towards people with disability must change to acknowledge their needs and abilities. In this area, a public awareness campaign would increase visibility and understanding of disability and improve the baseline position from which people with disability begin their search for a volunteering role. Secondly, appropriate and well-supported roles must be created within volunteering organisations. To realise this, organisations require resourcing to facilitate engaging and meaningful roles for volunteers with disability and to provide training and support to volunteers who work with people with disability. Finally, people with disability require the means to access and participate in volunteering roles. To achieve this, people with disability must be viewed as capable and valuable contributors to both paid and voluntary work and must have access to appropriate resources.

The imperative of ‘promoting inclusion’ acknowledges that Australia’s institutions and policies often impose barriers on certain members of the community. In accordance with this aim, and with VolunteeringACT’s commitment to an inclusive Canberra, removing barriers to social inclusion facing people with disability is an urgent priority.



## About VolunteeringACT

VolunteeringACT is the peak body for volunteering and community information in the Canberra region, as well as being a service provider of programs for people experiencing disadvantage and isolation, people with disability, and people needing support for mental wellness.

VolunteeringACT has a vision of an inclusive Canberra, and a mission to foster inclusion by enabling participation and connection.

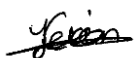
VolunteeringACT connects people to volunteering opportunities; supports volunteer involving organisations with training, advice, and volunteer recruitment; makes sure information on services and supports is easily accessible to everyone through our Community Information services; supports people experiencing disadvantage; and provides programs to help people reconnect with their community and access supported volunteering roles.

VolunteeringACT is a people driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of 189 members, advocates for and supports volunteers, and engages with the broader Canberra community. This submission is informed by ongoing consultations with these stakeholders.

VolunteeringACT is part of the National Network of Volunteering Peak Bodies in Australia.

## Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of VolunteeringACT.



Ms Jean Giese  
Chief Executive Officer

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This submission endorses and complements the submission by Volunteering Australia.

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