



# Submission: The Disability Employment Centre of Excellence

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# About VolunteeringACT

Volunteering and Contact ACT Ltd (trading as VolunteeringACT) is the peak body for volunteering and provides community information services in the Canberra region. We also deliver 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 values collaboration, diversity, equity, innovation, integrity, and participation. 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. Through our activities, we improve inclusivity, enable sustainable volunteering, and create a more resilient Canberra community.

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

VolunteeringACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra region and recognises any other peoples or families with connection to this Country. VolunteeringACT is committed to reconciliation and will continue to walk alongside First Nations Peoples and embrace the traditions, stories and wisdoms of the oldest continuing cultures in the world.

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 (VIOs) that contribute to the health and happiness of our community.

This submission has been made as part of our commitment to ensuring the perspectives and expertise of volunteers, VIOs and volunteer leaders informs development of public policy and contributes to achievement of positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes. The content has been informed by the experiences of organisations in our membership and networks, and our experiences of engaging with and delivering services to people living with mental ill health, people with multiple/complex, and people with disability, including psychosocial conditions.

## Introduction

VolunteeringACT supports the establishment of a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence (COE) and welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Social Services' Options Paper.

Currently the Options Paper does not make any reference to volunteering, and this is a significant gap and potential missed opportunity, if not addressed. Ensuring that volunteering is recognised, promoted, and supported as an important pathway to employment for people with disability should be a core function of the Centre of Excellence. The Centre should also actively promote best practice models and approaches, including the highly successful Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment (IVP) Program.

VolunteeringACT has previously consulted with the ACT community on issues related to disability employment and provided the following submissions that are relevant to this consultation:

- [Future of Supported Employment - Sep 2023](#)
- [NDIS Review submission - August 2023](#)
- [Disability Employment Strategy Model - 2022](#)

Our key recommendations are provided below, with additional detail provided on the following pages.

## Recommendations

- 1. Lived experience should be at the centre of shaping the establishment and function of the Centre of Excellence and people with disability, as well as other key stakeholders, should be actively engaged in co-design processes.**
- 2. Adequate timeframes and funding (including funding for paid participation) should be allocated to the Centre of Excellence design and development process to enable respectful and genuine co-design processes to occur.**
- 3. The Centre of Excellence should actively promote and support volunteering as a pathway to employment for people with disability.**
- 4. The Volunteering Ecosystem should be engaged in the establishment and function of the Centre of Excellence and volunteer-involving organisations should be included as key stakeholders.**
- 5. The Centre of Excellence should avoid duplication and act as an accessible hub to bring together existing high-quality training, information and best practice related to disability employment.**

- 6. The Centre of Excellence should support organisations, including volunteer-involving organisations, to become more inclusive and accessible by promoting Programs such as the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program and supporting other relevant training, resources, and research.**
- 7. The Centre of Excellence should support more data collection and measurement approaches that capture longitudinal outcomes and emphasise quality and added value above output focused measures.**
- 8. The Centre of Excellence final model should be determined through genuine co-design processes.**

## Why We Need a Centre of Excellence

There is a well-established need to increase rates of employment amongst people with disability in Australia. In the ACT we have heard that long term unemployment is a major concern for people with disability, as additional barriers they face can make it harder to find suitable and sustainable opportunities, and for younger people with disability, this can be further compounded by their lack of work-related experience. Being disconnected from the workforce can have a considerable knock-on effect, and often limits the future life chances and trajectory of people with disability to participate in society and maintain their independence.

There are multiple barriers to disability employment, and although some are actual (e.g. physically inaccessible workplaces), many are perceived barriers (e.g. an employer's misconceptions about the capacity of a person with disability, often resulting in a view of disability simply as non-ability). Ultimately, the majority of barriers can be overcome through education, capability building and dedicated resourcing.

While research, training and programs related to disability employment already exist, a Centre of Excellence could provide an easy-to-access, centralised hub of information for a range of stakeholders, actively promote and foster best-practice approaches, and build organisational capability.

## Valuing Lived Experience

People with disability are the experts of their own bodies, experiences, capabilities, and support needs. The Centre of Excellence presents an opportunity for people with disability to engage in co-design activities and be at the centre of its design, delivery, and evaluation. This will also help ensure the diversity of lived experience is reflected in the remit and function of the Centre of Excellence.

There are many existing groups that could potentially be engaged in this process, including the Disability Participant Advisory Group at VolunteeringACT. Other stakeholders, including volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs), employers and Employment Service Providers, should also be engaged in co-design activities.

Research demonstrates that genuine and effective co-design or co-production requires authentic and equitable collaboration and should be underpinned by respect and sharing of

decision-making power.<sup>1,2</sup> Further, meaningful and genuine co-design requires a respectful allocation of appropriate time and resources to enable it to occur.<sup>3</sup>

**Recommendation 1: Lived experience should be at the centre of shaping the establishment and function of the Centre of Excellence and people with disability, as well as other key stakeholders, should be actively engaged in co-design processes.**

**Recommendation 2: Adequate timeframes and funding (including funding for paid participation) should be allocated to the Centre of Excellence design and development process to enable respectful and genuine co-design processes to occur.**

## Core Functions of the Centre

### Volunteering as a pathway to employment

The Centre of Excellence should promote and support all of the different pathways to employment for people with disability, including volunteering.

Participation in volunteering provides vital workplace experience and enables volunteers to become job ready, increasing their chances of obtaining meaningful, long-term employment. Research demonstrates that participation in volunteering can improve an individual's chances of gaining employment by 27 per cent.<sup>4</sup> For people with disability, their disability can be perceived as 'non-ability' when it comes to being in control of their own lives, decisions, and employment prospects. Volunteering is an important option for people who are commonly excluded from workplaces to gain transferable skills that will aid them to achieve employment outcomes. Research demonstrates that volunteering can help people with disability build personal skills, access networking opportunities, and find paid roles.<sup>5</sup> Volunteering also provides a vital 'bridging' activity for young people with disability to aid their transition from education to the workplace and enable them to try out different work settings/roles and acquire new skills in preparation for paid employment.

By actively promoting volunteering as a pathway to employment, engaging with the volunteering sector and including VIOs as key stakeholders, the Centre of Excellence can

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<sup>1</sup> Butler T et al (2022) A Comprehensive Review of Optimal Approaches to Co-Design in Health with First Nations Australians, *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, 19(23):16166, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9735487/>

<sup>2</sup> Agency for Clinical Innovation (2019) *A Guide to Build Co-design Capability*, [https://aci.health.nsw.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0013/502240/Guide-Build-Codesign-Capability.pdf](https://aci.health.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0013/502240/Guide-Build-Codesign-Capability.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum (2021) *Co-design and Co-production*, <https://nmhccf.org.au/our-work/advocacy-briefs/co-design-and-co-production>

<sup>4</sup> Spera C, Ghertner R, Nerino A and DiTommaso A (2013) *Volunteering as a pathway to employment: Does volunteering increase odds of finding a job for the out of work?* Office of Research & Evaluation, Corporation for National and Community Service.

<sup>5</sup> Yanay-Ventura, G (2018) "Nothing About Us Without Us" in Volunteerism Too: Volunteering Among People with Disabilities, *Voluntas*, 30(1): 147,163, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-0026-7>

contribute to the National Strategy for Volunteering Strategic Objective 2.2 – Recognise the inherent value of volunteering (including as a pathway to employment).<sup>6</sup>

**Recommendation 3: The Centre of Excellence should actively promote and support volunteering as a pathway to employment for people with disability.**

**Recommendation 4: The Volunteering Ecosystem should be engaged in the establishment and function of the Centre of Excellence and volunteer-involving organisations should be included as key stakeholders.**

### **Collate, Promote, and Strengthen - not Duplicate**

Importantly, the proposed Centre of Excellence should avoid duplicating existing research, programs, resources, and training related to disability employment and instead provide an accessible hub or ‘one stop shop’ through which existing high quality resources that are already respected and proven to be effective, are promoted and strengthened.

For example, we note that the recently established National Disability Research Partnership has included ‘employment of people with disability’ as a priority within their research agenda.<sup>7</sup> Rather than duplicating this research, the Centre of Excellence could instead play a role in disseminating findings and translating research into practice.

The Centre should have a key quality control function and an understanding of what good practice looks like in disability employment (informed by lived experience perspectives), to ensure it is promoting and fostering best-practice approaches, endorsed by the people the Centre is aimed at assisting.

**Recommendation 5: The Centre of Excellence should avoid duplication and act as an accessible hub to bring together existing high-quality training, information and best practice related to disability employment.**

### **Foster Organisational Awareness and Inclusivity**

The Centre of Excellence should support the provision of education and training on the benefits and added value of employing people with disability, including overturning negative perceptions of employers about the level of support they would need to provide, and levels of risk involved in employing a person with disability. In our experience at VolunteeringACT, many employers recognise the importance of ensuring their workplace is inclusive and accessible, however they

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<sup>6</sup> *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033*, available: <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/the-strategy/>

<sup>7</sup> *National Disability Research Partnership (2023) Research Agenda*, available; <https://www.ndrp.org.au/researchagenda>

lack the resources or knowledge to implement change. This is where a Centre of Excellence could play an important role in connecting organisations to training, information and programs that will support them to make positive changes and implement best-practice approaches.

For volunteering to be an effective pathway to employment, support must be provided to volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) to reduce barriers to volunteering for people with disability. During relevant consultations with organisations in our networks, the issue of risk and risk management was raised several times, indicating that greater education is needed for employers around what supporting a person with disability in a volunteering role requires in practice. Providing VIOs with education on inclusive practice, person-centred approaches and accessibility is an essential element of facilitating meaningful volunteering placements that act as an effective pathway to employment and a Centre of Excellence could support this.

### **A Best Practice Approach: the IVP Program**

VolunteeringACT currently leads the **Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment (IVP) Program** operating across Tasmania, NSW, and the ACT in partnership with the Centre for Volunteering (NSW) and Volunteering Tasmania. Currently funded by the Department of Social Services (via an Information, Linkages and Capacity Building grant), the IVP Program facilitates meaningful volunteering opportunities for people with disability that help them build the skills, experience, and confidence they need to work towards employment goals. This Program has a highly effective working relationship with Disability Employment Service Providers and an extensive proven track record of delivering positive and sustainable volunteering and employment outcomes for people with disability. The IVP Program is provided free of charge to participants and staff work closely with each individual to understand their unique employment goals, match them with a suitable placement that will build relevant skills, overcome barriers, and provide ongoing person-centred support to ensure a volunteering journey that is both rewarding and enjoyable. The IVP Program also provides training and works with organisations to help them to become more inclusive employers as they involve people with all abilities and from all backgrounds in their workplace.

The current iteration of the IVP Program began in April 2020 and has engaged over **700 organisations across three jurisdictions**. Recent surveys have revealed that, due to their involvement in the program, 76% of surveyed organisations have been able to improve their knowledge and awareness of the barriers to inclusion within their own organisation, 71% have been able to reduce the stigma towards disability and mental health in their organisation and

86% have been able to increase the motivation of staff to identify and reduce organisational barriers.<sup>8</sup>

The IVP Program is currently assisting over 160 participants across the three jurisdictions. Surveys reveal that participants rate the program very highly with an average rating of 4.4 out of 5 and 67% of respondents rating the Program 5 out of 5.<sup>9</sup> The IVP Program clearly demonstrates real outcomes for real people. Participants frequently report back to VolunteeringACT that their involvement in the program has made a significant difference to their social connectivity and their employment prospects. A recent participant shared their personal experience of how the IVP Program had helped them grow in confidence and ultimately secure employment:

*“I had zero confidence in myself to be a part of the community and I was really isolated. Now I can be in an environment where I can be a part of the team and be supported. It’s really common for people with mental health struggles to feel like you can’t contribute, like you’re useless. This program helped me with that. I have now found paid employment through this pathway.”*  
- IVP Program Participant

The proposed Centre of Excellence should promote and support Programs such as the IVP Program that have proven successful and sustainable outcomes for people with disability and already offer tailored, supported, person-centred pathways to employment. By doing so, the Centre will contribute to the National Strategy of Volunteering Strategic Objective 1.2 – Make volunteering inclusive and accessible.<sup>10</sup>

**Recommendation 6: The Centre of Excellence should support organisations, including volunteer-involving organisations, to become more inclusive and accessible by promoting Programs such as the Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Program and supporting other relevant training, resources, and research.**

### Monitoring and Data Collection

As outlined above, the Centre could act as a hub for collation and sharing of best practice, including data collection and monitoring and evaluation. The Centre of Excellence should support approaches that:

- Place a greater emphasis on the quality of the volunteering/employment opportunities people with disability are connected to and how well-matched these are to an

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<sup>8</sup> Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Project Evaluation data, 2023

<sup>9</sup> Inclusive Volunteering Pathways to Employment Project Evaluation data, 2023

<sup>10</sup> National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033, available: <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/the-strategy/>

individual's needs and employment aspirations. This should include measures related to skills gained and job-readiness.

- Collect specific data related to the added value people with disability bring to the workforce and the impact they have on improving understanding of disability and accessibility in the workplace.
- Place a greater emphasis on longitudinal data to measure success over time as this is a more effective method of capturing true sustainability of outcomes of employment initiatives aimed at people with disability. It would also be useful to expand measures to capture the experiences of family members and other persons of significance involved in the lives of people with disability, to show the wider impacts of high quality and sustainable volunteering and employment opportunities.

**Recommendation 7: The Centre of Excellence should support more data collection and measurement approaches that capture longitudinal outcomes and emphasise quality and added value above output focused measures.**

## The Centre of Excellence Model

As per the above recommendation, the Centre should be co-designed with people with disability and relevant stakeholder organisations, and this process should ultimately determine the final Centre of Excellence model.

VolunteeringACT suggests a 'Training hub' model that focuses on building capability, disseminating knowledge, undertaking promotional activity, and conducting training based on best practice research and evidence would be the most effective approach. We would also support and emphasise the importance of engaging at a local level with employers and service providers, as well as tapping into existing high-quality training offered through established programs such as the IVP Program.

With respect to where the Centre should be situated, we recommend a stand-alone entity, as some organisations or individuals may be uncomfortable engaging with a body that is tied to government or a university. However, funding and contracting to support this type of entity may need to be more flexible than traditional arrangements.

**Recommendation 8: The Centre of Excellence final model should be determined through genuine co-design processes.**

## Authorisation

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

Jean Giese  
Chief Executive Officer