



# Volunteering

in

# Australia

## *How We Can Help*

*Prepared by  
Guy Barnett  
Liberal Senator for Tasmania*

*With the support and assistance of  
Volunteering Australia and  
Volunteering Tasmania*

*May 2006*



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## **Introduction and Overview**

The effort of Volunteers in Australia provide the moral spinal cord of our economic and social fabric. It is the volunteer character of this activity that creates, nurtures and replenishes the relationship of trust in our country, and provides us with one of our greatest human and moral assets as a nation especially in times of need and crisis.

The Macquarie Dictionary defines a volunteer as “*one who enters into any service of his own free will, or who offers himself for any service or undertaking*”. The International Year of Volunteers in 2001 was successful because it built on this foundation.

Volunteering in Australia is a phenomenon, which, at the grass roots level, deserves the recognition, moral and financial support of all levels of government. We can do more.

The achievement of this end would have a profoundly positive impact on the future of volunteering in this country, while not unduly straining government finances. It would undergird the social and moral backbone of our community, particularly in regional Australia. Volunteerism is an important indicator of our social, moral and spiritual health and well being as a nation.

It is a vital contributor to our social capital. According to a research paper "*Giving Australia – Research on Philanthropy in Australia*" funded by the Department of Family and Community Services in 2005, there are 6.3 million volunteers in Australia, or more than 41 percent of the adult population aged 18 and over. This figure has almost doubled since 1995 when the number was 3.2 million. Today, each volunteer donates on average 132 hours of their time.

The most comprehensive research available from Duncan Ironmonger in 2000 estimated the value of Volunteering in Australia to range from \$24 billion a year (\$66 million a day), to \$42 billion a year. Based on today's dollar terms the value of volunteering ranges from \$30 billion a year (or \$82 million a day), to a massive \$53 billion in today's dollar terms, or almost 5.7% percent of Australia's GDP - donated free of charge. Either way the value to Australia of volunteering is immense. (Australian Council of Social Service (2005) *Giving Australia: Research on Philanthropy in Australia*)

In 2003 in the United States 27.6% had volunteered and research suggests the number in Canada was 27% in the year 2000. (Australian Council of Social Service (2005) *Giving Australia : Research on Philanthropy in Australia*)

The time during a week spent on volunteering in Australia had grown from half an hour in 1987 to 45 minutes in 1997. In 1997 Australians had donated 510 million hours to community organisations. By 2000 this had risen to 704 million and as at 2005 it stood at 836 million hours.

While not exclusively an Australian practice, volunteering is an integral part of our Australian culture. Culturally and spiritually it ranges from "*Thank God for the Salvos*" to Meals on Wheels, from the local ambulance, fire service to the church fair or country 'appeal', to support for the Melbourne Commonwealth Games and Sydney Olympics to the 14 day rescue effort at the Beaconsfield Mine in Tasmania, to the provision of care and counselling for those affected by the Bali bombings, to hands-on administration and management support for disability, community, service, charity or other local groups. Only this week I was able to jointly host with the Prince Albert Inn in Launceston, all those involved in the Beaconsfield mine rescue, and their spouses and partners. Two evenings

were required for the 'Thankyou' drinks and nibbles to enable all those involved with an opportunity to attend. The rescue team, emergency services including police, ambulance, fire and State Emergency Services, volunteers who manned the recovery centre 24 hours a day, not to mention the churches, retailers, suppliers and a range of community services, were all represented. Todd and Carolyn Russell and Brant and Rachel Webb, the Mayor Barry Easter and Jacquie Knight were all there to help say thankyou. The list of community groups and volunteer effort goes on and on and on. Volunteerism was recognised in the Biblical story about the Good Samaritan, often taught in Sunday school or primary school and the Bible message – *"Love thy Neighbour as thyself"* - helping a mate (male or female) when they're down, irrespective of whether the volunteer knows them personally or not. The ANZAC spirit of mateship, sacrifice and bravery impregnate the service ethic of volunteers. Our servicemen and women epitomise the gift of sacrifice that is so dominant amongst Australian volunteers. Churches, charities, and a multitude of service and community groups all contribute. More often than not this contribution is unseen. The contribution is made by the quiet but persistent achiever. These people give of themselves, expecting little or nothing in return but the pleasure of knowing they have contributed to a better community – a better Australia.

In every phone book in Australia there are hundreds of listings of incorporated and unincorporated organisations whose objective is to give – without seeking a reward. Their objectives are purely non-financial – to offer generosity and to lend a hand. Service organisations and their many members expend time and resources to assist these organizations and meritorious causes.

Both fire and ambulance services throughout Australia, particularly in rural and regional centres, rely on volunteers. In Tasmania alone we have some 5,000 fire service volunteers, primarily in rural, regional and outlying areas. The training undertaken by these volunteers is often regular and nearly always selfless requiring not only the cost of time, but financial sacrifices in terms of travel and transport costs, ie petrol, phone and postage. The cost of on-the-job volunteerism is incalculable in terms of the psychological effects. Most volunteers of course would say the latter would be a positive effect. In one instance I had a complaint from a volunteer in Hobart who could not afford to pay the \$100 per week for petrol to provide his volunteer service.

The cost of volunteering has become prohibitive. I enclose an extract from a most recent letter by a volunteer ambulance officer on Tasmania's East Coast:

*"Around Tasmania, volunteers provide a significant proportion of the State's emergency services. All Swansea's emergency services (Ambulance, Coastguard, Fire Service, and State Emergency Service) are staffed entirely by volunteers.*

*'These volunteers donate many hours each month to the community, through time spent in training, in maintaining vehicles and equipment and in responding to emergencies. In addition to giving their time, volunteers also support Tasmania's state emergency services from their own pockets, in paying for expenses such as fuel and telephone use incurred in the course of their duties.*

*'Many volunteers are on low incomes, some on pensions. Many live out of town and bear a significant cost in getting to town for training and meeting their commitments as volunteers. The cost of fuel is significant for these people. With the continuing rise in the cost of fuel, it will become a proportionately larger cost for volunteers.*

*'I would like to see all costs incurred by volunteers in the course of their volunteering (such as fuel and phone expenses), be tax deductible for those who are able to claim tax deductions, and recompensed for those receiving pensions or benefit payments.'*

*Already the number of volunteers in all emergency services in Swansea has fallen in recent years. I believe this situation is widespread, and it results in a heavy load falling on a few people, and in some situations threatens the viability of the emergency service in a community. With escalating fuel costs it is likely we will have another reason for the loss of our volunteers.'*

We recognise volunteers in an ad hoc fashion for various awards, but rarely as a national recognition of their volunteering efforts. Volunteering is part of the Australian furniture - we know it's there and that pleases us, but we expect it to always be there, and it is often out of mind because it doesn't need a payment. Taking volunteerism and volunteers for granted is dangerous and wrong.

Volunteers are a silent army, plugging the gaps in a western world, often full of corporate greed and selfishness, where less fortunate Australians are in danger so often of slipping through the safety net in a welfare system, although strong is certainly not foolproof. In times of drought, the community has responded to appeals for financial assistance – and given, in many cases, sacrificially. The corporate sector has given financially to this and other needs and have backed the objectives of many other church, charity or community groups both directly and through the contribution of staff time. The Australian Government's response to the Asian tsunami was a proud moment in my Senate career.

Likewise the response from the community and business sector was tremendous. The Australian Government is doubling its foreign aid budget to \$4.5 billion by 2010 which is a significant boost. In 2006-07 it will reach \$2.95 billion, or 66% of the 2010 target.

Yet, in Australia there remain many needs and we can do more. We all have a responsibility to review the contribution we make to the lives of others in terms of the financial, time and other resources made.

It is time for each of us to pause and think – what gift can I make – a sacrificial gift, a love gift, a tithe from our income.

Volunteers want to serve. They want to help, and many want the personal satisfaction of giving back a small amount of what benefits they derive from Australia's economy and this great nation.

A vast majority wouldn't dream of seeking publicity, or some form of compensation/reimbursement/thankyou for what they do, because they want to remain anonymous and simply experience the joy of giving. They know that the saying "it is better to give than to receive", is true.

However, this is no reason for the rest of the community to blithely accept such charity, and not offer some form of tangible recognition through their elected representatives.

The contribution of volunteers was emphasised earlier this decade during the public liability insurance crisis faced by so many community and not-for-profit groups. The spiralling costs of insurance premiums and in some cases the inability to obtain insurance placed community groups and their events in jeopardy. Changes by federal and state and territory governments to the law of negligence, and specifically around volunteer liability, have done much to relieve the difficulties of accessing insurance. However, the threat of losing organisations and activities because of the insurance crisis brought into focus the important contribution these volunteers and organisation make, and, forced us to consider what our communities would be like without them.

The volunteer industry which, through its own selfless efforts, enables governments and bureaucracies to make claims about balanced budgets and prudent financial management, when actually the real cost of the public services being offered is hidden, along with the silent, hidden army of volunteers.

This submission is not about undermining or ruining the concept of volunteering - by suggesting that we pay people to volunteer - because that would be absolutely counter-productive, a contradiction in terms, and I believe a majority of Australians would reject such a move as unnecessary and unwelcome.

This submission is, however, about Australians acknowledging the contribution made and saying thankyou, not only for the human value placed on volunteering, but also for the staggering financial value they are worth to their country. It is about the Australian community collectively doing their bit for volunteering in a systematic and reasonable way.

The recognition, acknowledgement and encouragement of volunteers could be in many forms, and a few will be mentioned at the outset to illustrate how a proper recognition of our silent volunteer army across Australia need not be an expensive venture for governments.

Let me also say, that any form of recognition and compensation by the community, through governments, should not be restricted to the Federal Government. This is a whole of community responsibility and obligation, and clearly the other two tiers of government have a role to play and a fair share of the cost to bear. Contributions are already being made by all three levels of government but more can be done. Contributions are being made by individuals, organisations, business, unions, and others – but more, much more, can be done.

As a rule, volunteers who incur expenses in the course of their duties are not able to claim income tax deductions in their personal income tax returns. The Australian Taxation Office has a determination which regards volunteer expenses as not incurred in earning assessable income, and therefore not subject to deductions.



Financial donations to a non-profit organisation assist in the payments of expenses like salaries and equipment. The donations are tax deductible. Why should not the valuable contribution of a volunteer also be tax-deductible, or at least the cost incurred by that volunteer in the act of volunteering?

The Government needs to incorporate our army of volunteers into our social system in terms of the tax laws, and by doing so, honouring and encouraging them, rather than appearing to routinely accept their generosity and doggedly expecting their contribution. This sadly has the effect of sapping the volunteering spirit.

### **Australian Government assistance to volunteering – what we currently offer:**

The Australian Taxation Office's guide, *Volunteers and Tax*, explains the tax treatment of transactions that commonly occur between non-profit organisations and volunteers.

The Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs has a number of programs related to the work of volunteers:

*Volunteer Small Equipment Grants (VSEG)*: The VSEG provide grants up to \$3000 to help community organisations purchase equipment that directly supports volunteers whose work contributes to benefiting families and communities.

The *National Volunteer Skills Centre* project, supports not for profit organisations in their efforts to build their knowledge of volunteering and implement best practice training and skills development for their volunteer programs.

It does this in two key ways:

- By supporting organisations and volunteers to build their skills and knowledge, whilst reducing the costs associated with this, and the duplication of resources;
- By strengthening networks, encouraging collaboration and the sharing of information.

Some of the products and services delivered under the NVSC project include:

- Development of accredited training for volunteers in the form of Certificates I, II and III in Active Volunteering;
- Development of 30 self-paced Learning Guides for all of the core competencies in the Certificates; and many of the electives;
- Free inquiries and advice service for the sector, via phone and website;
- Development of best practice resources and toolkits to support all aspects of volunteer involvement;
- Development of an on-line library catalogue that external users can access via the website;
- The networking of the Volunteering Australia library and five State Centre libraries, resulting in more than 6000 catalogued resources now accessible within the volunteering network, and to the general public via a variety of mechanisms ;
- Development of Training and Events Calendar to help the sector promote training workshops and opportunities and make these easier for clients to access;
- Development of a Find a Trainer database to make it easier for volunteer-involving organisations to find trainers in their local area.
- The Volunteer Management Program (VMP) funds 26 Volunteer Resource Centres to provide volunteer matching and referral services throughout Australia. VMP centres also provide advice about volunteering.
- The Voluntary Work Initiative (VWI) supports Centrelink customers who wish to take up volunteering. This has recently moved to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

- The 2006–07 Budget is providing additional funding of \$1.5 million over three years for Non-profit Australia, whose mission is ‘to improve the viability of non-profit organisations for the benefit of Australian society’.
- The Prime Minister’s Community Business Partnership is a group of prominent Australians from the community and business sectors, appointed by the Prime Minister to advise and assist the Government on issues concerning community business collaboration. The Partnership’s goals include identifying and addressing incentives and impediments to corporate social responsibility and encouraging a culture of giving in Australia. Its role includes advocacy, facilitation and recognition of corporate social responsibility and partnerships between business and community organisations in Australia. Funding to Volunteering Australia from the Partnership has supported ENGAGE Week in 2003 and again in 2005 – which promotes to companies the benefits of corporate volunteering. Funding has also been provided to support a partnership between Melbourne Cares and Volunteering Australia to support the volunteer sector to respond to the needs of employee volunteers.
- As part of the 2004 Federal Election Tasmania Package the Government provided \$100,000 to Volunteering Tasmania Inc over two years to develop a resource kit to assist community groups in finding volunteers.

If governments balk at any overt reform of its laws with measures which would assist individual volunteers, then another way of achieving this end is to reward organisations which use or depend on volunteers. These concepts for support are discussed further in the proposals. This submission to Government is based in large part on an earlier submission prepared in 2002.

Many of these proposals that I detail in the following section were outlined in *A National Agenda on Volunteering: Beyond the International Year of Volunteers 2001*. This document was the result of an extensive national consultation – in both metropolitan and regional areas - conducted by Volunteering Australia and Australian Volunteers International during the International Year of Volunteers with volunteers, volunteer involving organisations, government, business and academia.

The *National Agenda* provides a framework for supporting and sustaining volunteering in Australia and calls on the community, government, business and the media to work together to achieve the stated outcomes sought. The *National Agenda* was first presented to the then Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator The Hon. Amanda Vanstone on International Volunteer Day (5 December) 2001.

A subsequent report *Snapshot 2004: Volunteering in Australia* produced by Volunteering Australia highlights some of the gains that have been made in achieving some of the outcomes stated in the *National Agenda*. My proposals seek to further this work, with a view to seeing volunteering in Australia valued and flourishing.

## Background

The most up to date research provides the number of volunteers in Australia aged 18 years and over exceeded 6.3 million or 41 per cent of the population, having grown from 3.2 million or 24 per cent recorded in 1995. (Australian Council of Social Service (2005) *Giving Australia : Research on Philanthropy in Australia*).

There has been a phenomenal growth rate in recent years. According to the Giving Australia Research on Philanthropy in Australia (2005) adult Australians had volunteered 836 million hours, or an average 132 hours each. For those aged over 55 the average was 178 hours and the most active aged group of volunteers ranged in the 35-44 aged group (47%). Prior to this the growth rate between 1995 and 2000 was particularly high among the 18-24 age group (17 to 27 per cent) and in the 55-64 age group (24 to 33 per cent). This is a fascinating trend, given the rapid rate of our ageing population in Australia and the dilemma facing many retirees in terms of their finances and superannuation. This is good news for our country and local communities. The large increase in the number of young Australians attending Anzac Day services I believe is part of this “community” renewal and demonstrated commitment and love for Australia.

Retirees are highly skilled and experienced; many are often struggling to cope with a diminished (retirement) income. Volunteering is an excellent way of society further tapping into their skills and providing them with an opportunity to use these skills and make a contribution. No Australia should be given a “use-by” date. All of us have the potential to make a contribution.

Australians are living longer with a life expectancy of 78 years for men and 82 years for women. With a shorter working life and longer in retirement we should as a nation think creatively about how we can harness the untapped potential and experience of our seniors. They should be encouraged to volunteer.

Today around 13% of our population are over 65 years. By the year 2020 18% will be over 65 years. In Tasmania 17.6% of the population are already over 65 years.

Older Australians can not only be esteemed and honoured by encouraging volunteerism in this stage of life, but they can make a profoundly silent but substantial financial contribution to our economy through their volunteerism, as long as they can afford to be a volunteer. That is where governments can help, in a small way.

The number of hours in volunteer work nationally increased from 512 million hours in 1995 to 704 million hours in 2000 and now 836 million hours in 2005. (Australian Council of Social Service (2005) *Giving Australia: Research on Philanthropy in Australia*)

The 2000 ABS Voluntary Work study showed that volunteering thrived in regional Australia, in non-metropolitan centres, as against the major centres. The rate in regional areas was 38 per cent, to 28 per cent in capital cities. The lowest rate was 25 per cent in Sydney while the highest rate was 45 per cent in regional Western Australia. Only in Queensland is the rate similar for capital cities and in the regions. This trend suggests that volunteering is a key social ingredient of regional Australian culture.

The 2000 ABS Survey showed slightly more women than men put their hand up for volunteer work (33 per cent to 31 per cent), while in older age groups men were more likely to volunteer than women.

People aged 35-44 had the highest rate (40%) of volunteering, and they were more often married with children. Female partners with dependent children (45%) had a higher rate than female partners without dependent children (31%).

People born in Australia were more likely to engage in volunteer work (35%) than those born outside Australia (25%).

Those in paid employment were more likely to volunteer than those unemployed, although this varied among some groups. For instance, among males the largest contribution

(58%) came from those employed full time, while among females the largest contribution (44%) came from those not in the labour force.

The major reasons given for engaging in volunteer work involved the selfless variety such as “doing something worthwhile” and “helping others and the community”. Only a small percentage listed reasons such as gaining new skills and work experience. (Table 12 ABS Voluntary Work Study).

The main types of expenses involved in volunteering given were phone calls, travel costs and postage. Minor costs were associated with uniforms, meals and training.

Among those employed, all professional groups had the highest participation rate (46%), followed by clerks (45%), managers and administrators (42%) and transport workers (22%).

Most volunteers worked for one organisation (65%) while 31 per cent worked for two or more volunteer organisations.

Two types of organisations claimed almost half of all volunteer hours – community welfare (26%) and sport/recreation (21%), religious (17%) and education and training and youth development (14%). Women favoured community welfare while men favoured sport/recreation.

Among the different types of volunteering tasks most frequently reported by volunteers, the most popular was fundraising, followed by management, teaching, administration, preparing and serving of food, transport, repairs and maintenance, counselling, coaching/refereeing, personal care/assistance, and performing/media production.

The patterns emerging from these statistical studies suggest that volunteering is on the rise in Australia, perhaps commensurate with the steady growth in our country's wealth and economy, in both a corporate and individual sense.

The studies also suggest that volunteerism, while not exclusive to Australia, is a peculiarly Australian custom and fits well with our culture of unassuming and genuine mateship. This spirit of volunteering is more evident throughout regional Australia, and therefore provides an added impetus for government attention.



## ***Proposals***

### ***1. Increased funding for equipment grants for volunteering organisations***

This recommendation is designed to benefit volunteer organisations rather than volunteers directly.

The expansion of small equipment grants is recommended. 2,835 voluntary organisations received \$7 million as part of the International Year of Volunteers in 2001. In 2005 2100 organisations received funding of up to \$3000 per grant, costing the Government \$3 million. Since 2001 the Government has provided more than \$29 million to 14,000 community organisations. Given that volunteering contributes \$30 billion a year or \$82 million a day, an expansion of programmes such as the national small equipment grants would be an important acknowledgement of the contribution made and would be an appropriate encouragement and incentive for organisations supported by volunteers.

Caution would need to be exercised with equipment grants, to ensure that any funds for grants did not in effect divert funding from any traditional infrastructure and recurrent funding support given to non-profit organisations.

An expansion of the program should be consistent with the original intention of the program – that of making the work of volunteers easier, safer and more enjoyable.

### ***2. Changes to the taxation system to provide equitable relief***

This recommendation is designed to defray the cost to the individual of volunteering. The costs include any legitimate costs incurred in the course of volunteering whether it be for training purposes or in the conduct of the volunteer work, eg for petrol, travel, phone, fax, postage, protective clothing and footwear, gloves, etc. A recent survey by Volunteering Australia (*Impact of Petrol Prices on Volunteering, October 2005*) highlights that levels of volunteering is impacted by the costs associated with volunteering.

According to Volunteering Australia as a general rule volunteers are not able to claim items such as these in their personal income tax returns as they are not expenses incurred in earning assessable income.

There are some situations in which volunteer fire-fighters, for example, may be entitled to claim income tax deductions if, during the financial year, they made arrangements with their brigade to make a donation to their organisation and obtain uniforms and/or equipment. However this situation is complex and does not apply to all volunteers.

A more consistent and equitable approach that formally acknowledges how volunteers incur expenses in carrying out their activities is recommended.

A successful outcome would be to allow tax deductibility of legitimate volunteer expenses by a broader group of volunteers. In addition, an equitable means of 'compensating' those volunteers who fall outside the tax system for their legitimate volunteer expenses would also need to be found, for example, for those volunteers who receive income support payments, for example, unemployed, students and age pensioners. This is especially important given that 25% (1.15 million people) of the population who volunteer are not in the labour force (Voluntary Work Survey 2000, ABS, 2001).

Changes to the taxation system can be complex and difficult to achieve. An important first step would be to establish an expert group to develop and evaluate options for improved tax deductibility status for volunteer expenses. The expert group could consist of taxation experts (both government and private) and key community and volunteer group representatives.

The expert group would consult more broadly to identify possible options, including determining what could be considered 'legitimate volunteer expenses'. The expert group would assess the implications for volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations, the taxation system and the effect on the revenue base and make recommendations about appropriate legislative change.

The issue of tax deductibility is one which has been brought up on numerous occasions – more often than not in the context of emergency service volunteers. Such a change to the taxation system should be considered for all volunteers.

This recommendation would need to be considered in tandem with recommendation 3 below - contribution to out-of-pocket expenses – to ensure that the two are complementary and there is clarity about which volunteer out-of-pocket expenses should be dealt with directly by the volunteer involving organisation and which would more effectively and efficiently be dealt with through the taxation system.

### **3. *Contribution to out of pocket expenses***

Volunteering Australia promotes that one of the rights of volunteers is to be reimbursed for any out-of-pocket expenses incurred on behalf of the organisation – this encompasses things such as training and uniforms that are considered essential in order to undertake the work involved. Unfortunately, some volunteers are currently expending their own savings in order to have the opportunity to volunteer. Volunteers can spend sometimes in excess of \$100 per week in petrol costs, let alone transport, travel, postage and phone costs in order to volunteer or even attend training programmes as part of their work as a volunteer, eg fire and ambulance services require regular training. Other out of pocket expenses, some direct and some indirect, include childcare and the cost of uniforms, clothes (eg boots, hats, gloves) and miscellaneous equipment used in the volunteer task. These costs are often borne by the volunteer.

Volunteering Australia's *National Standards for Involving Volunteers* support the notion that volunteer organisations should reimburse the direct out-of-pocket costs associated with volunteering. In order for this for this to occur however organisations need to be adequately funded for their volunteer programs, with governments of all jurisdictions recognising that volunteering is not 'cost-free'. It is recommended the government develop a system to reimburse some of these expenses or make a contribution to defray them. This can be done by direct payment to volunteers or via a payment to the volunteer organisation. This initiative is designed to help the volunteer to actually volunteer. The volunteer should not be thwarted in their task by the high cost of volunteering.

As discussed above, this recommendation should be considered in tandem with recommendation #2 above to ensure that a simple and effective system is developed to ensure that volunteers do not have to meet the costs of out-of-pocket expenses associated with volunteering.

#### **4. *Encourage or provide incentives for corporate volunteering.***

Recent surveys, including one conducted by Volunteering Australia, show that employee or corporate volunteering continues to be a growing trend in Australia, with many companies dedicating internal resources to support the development and growth of employee volunteering programs that provide opportunities for their staff to volunteer. Corporate Australia can do more, Charities and not-for-profit organisations often struggle to identify skilled and unskilled volunteers. Competition for volunteer's time and the ageing population can sometimes thin the pool of available volunteers. All businesses but especially big business can donate an employee's time – that is, one day per month - for a worthwhile charity. If this could be made part of the work practice of business it can be most effective. It is already happening in many businesses. A company might decide to match an employee's time in out-of-hours volunteering work with time during work. There are many possibilities.

Government should reward business with acknowledgement and recognition, and other incentives could be considered. Government should continue to support in some way, work happening at various levels to assist not for profit organisations to better respond to the offers of assistance coming from the corporate sector.

#### **5. *Support for the upgrading and maintenance of a volunteer register.***

The federal government should support the upgrading and maintenance of a volunteer register currently operated by Volunteering Australia in each state and territory.

Under a former Minister, Senator Vanstone, the (then) Department of Family and Community Services funded a scoping study to determine the viability of such a project and consider stakeholder buy-in. The report of that study showed that there was a high level of buy-in from stakeholders, including volunteer centres, volunteer-involving organisations, other volunteer brokers, and state and local governments. Stakeholders could see the merit in a single 'back-end' data base system, with multiple front end access points, to reduce the level of fatigue and confusion in the sector about the growing number of online recruitment sites for volunteers.

The register is designed to assist community groups and volunteer organisations match their own needs to the volunteers on the register and to assess a possible match. It also enables an accreditation process to ensure bona fides. The maintenance of this register is not only beneficial to both the organisations and volunteers but is costly.

Support and financial assistance for the maintenance and upgrade of this register is recommended.

**6. *A permanent inclusion of a volunteer question in the Census of the Australian Population and regular ABS updates on volunteering. The economic value of volunteering quantified and included in the national accounts published quarterly by the ABS.***

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) conducts a 5-yearly census of the Australian population. Previous censuses have not contained questions about voluntary work.

It is a credit to the Australian Government and the Australian Bureau of Statistics that for the first time a step has been taken to include a question on unpaid work and volunteering in the 2006 Census.

As the Census is the only survey that obtains information from the entire population it is an important vehicle for determining the true level of volunteering undertaken in Australia and quantifying the value of that volunteerism.

The level, and nature, of volunteering involvement is increasingly being seen as an important indicator of social health. The ABS has undertaken a range of work looking at the measurement of social capital of which volunteering forms an integral part.

Information obtained from the collection of census data about volunteering will complement the more detailed information on the level and nature of volunteering collected through the *Voluntary Work Survey* conducted by the ABS.

Five years on from the International Year of Volunteers, the inclusion of questions on volunteering in the 2006 Census will be an important legacy of the international year. More significantly it will be a demonstration of the importance that volunteering has too many aspects of Australian life.

It is important that following its inaugural inclusion in 2006, that the question on volunteering not be subsequently removed, in order that we can develop appropriate comparisons over time.

The ABS has conducted two national surveys of voluntary work undertaken in Australia. The first survey was conducted in June 1995, while the second was conducted over four quarters in 2000.

The aims of the survey was to collect data on:

- Rates of participation in voluntary work;
- Characteristics of people who volunteer;
- The types of organisations they work for; and
- The activities they undertake.

The resulting *Voluntary Work Survey(s)* have provided valuable data about the level and nature of volunteering in Australia. It provides a basis from which to identify trends in the development of volunteering in Australia. The data helps to inform government and the

volunteering sector about motivations for volunteering and the impact of various policy and demographic changes on the level and nature of volunteering.

The first survey undertaken in 1995 provided an important benchmark, while the second survey demonstrated a substantial increase in the level of volunteering in the intervening five years.

The ABS will be conducting a third survey in 2005/06. The ABS should be resourced to undertake more regular surveys between census years and commit to conducting the *Voluntary Work Survey* at regular intervals on an ongoing basis.

## **7. Agree on a method to value volunteering in economic terms**

At present there is currently no single accepted method for measuring the economic value of volunteering in Australia. The figures currently available are those determined by Duncan Ironmonger (*Volunteers and Volunteering: Measuring Volunteering in Economic Terms*, Warburton & Oppenheimer, Federation Press 2000). The estimates arrived at by Duncan Ironmonger are based on ABS Time Use Data. Professor Ironmonger estimates that volunteers contribute 2,200 million hours a year of voluntary labour and that this is worth \$42 billion a year to the Australian economy.

The regular national accounts produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics make no reference to the unpaid economic activity of volunteering. This omission is problematic for two key reasons. Firstly there is no formal, nationally accepted and consistent means of measuring the role that volunteer work plays in the Australian economy and society. Secondly, there is not an economic basis from which to assess government policy related to volunteering or the provision of the full range of social services (including those delivered by volunteers).

Through the inclusion of volunteering in the national accounts the two problems identified could begin to be overcome. In addition, there is an important symbolic recognition in the inclusion of volunteering in the national accounts. Volunteers do not receive payment for the work they do, nor do they wish to. Volunteers regard their voluntary work as an

important contribution they make as citizens. However it is easy for the general community, and volunteers themselves, to undervalue the contribution volunteers make. By arriving at an economic value of volunteering the wider community and government would begin to gain a fuller appreciation of the importance of unpaid work to Australia's economic well-being.

The Australian Government could appoint an expert advisory group to consider this issue and make recommendations for further consideration.

### **8. *A specific Volunteer Medal in the Order of Australia awards.***

The Australian Honours Awards consists of several award categories, the most well known of which are the four levels in the Order of Australia. The Order of Australia recognises citizens for their service to Australia or to humanity – irrespective of whether this service is provided in a paid or unpaid capacity.

While many volunteers proudly receive Order of Australia awards, the work of volunteers would be even more highly valued by the community if it was easier to distinguish between the Awards that are given for contributions to Australia that are given in an entirely voluntary capacity, as distinct from those made primarily through the significant achievements individuals make in their professional lives.

A specific 'Volunteer Medal' in the Australian Honours Awards – either as a category within the Order of Australia or as a category on its own – would serve to highlight the role that volunteers play in Australian society. A 'Volunteer Medal' would provide increased recognition in the community that many of the recipients of Australian Honours are volunteers and that the services they provide are done of their own free will for no financial reward. This would be an important tribute to the volunteering ethos that is so strong in Australian society.

It is recommended the Government commit to identifying suitable options for the creation of a 'Volunteer Medal' within the Australian Honours System. Alternatively the Government could nominate a special day to grant volunteer medals. A small expert group



should consider key issues such as the appropriate definition of 'volunteer' for the purposes of the Awards and the type and nature of activity that is suitable for recognition under the Awards. Further consultation could be undertaken with volunteer-involving organisations, volunteers and the wider community to determine what services, activities and contributions they would like to see recognised with a 'Volunteer Medal'.

### **9. Funding for research into issues that affect volunteers and volunteering.**

Volunteering is a broad area with links to many disciplines. Volunteering plays an important role in Australian society with over 6 million Australians volunteering their time with community organisations. A range of flow-on effects, for both individuals and communities, arise from this. It is important that research be undertaken to properly identify and analyse these in respect of all stakeholders – volunteers, communities and governments.

While there is a steadily growing body of literature and research in Australian on volunteering-related issues and a growing acceptance of volunteering as a valid area for mainstream research, this is largely the result of academics and practitioners pursuing individual interests in this area. Apart from that commissioned during, or immediately prior to, the International Year of Volunteers, there is only limited government-funded research into specific volunteering issues. The findings of the *Giving Australia* research that was commissioned by the Australian Government highlight the importance of the philanthropic and volunteering sectors.

A commitment by Government to include volunteering among Government research priorities by adopting aspects of the *Volunteering Research Framework* that was developed in consultation with practitioners and academics in this area. and provide a dedicated funding allocation for this purpose is integral to fostering and promoting academic interest in this expanding field.

It is anticipated that the findings of the first-ever Social Capital Survey to be undertaken by the ABS in 2006 will highlight the importance of volunteering and associated activities to

the creation of healthy and resilient communities, providing further evidence of the need for more research in these areas.

#### **10. Remove red tape adversely affecting or impeding volunteering**

***An intergovernmental working group should be established, in consultation with Volunteering Australia that identifies all of the relevant existing legislation regulation and red tape across all jurisdictions adversely affecting or impeding volunteering. Where possible that legislation or policy will be modified or not implemented if it has the potential to weaken the community activity of volunteering***

There is a view that new legislation often had unintended consequences in terms of complexity or its applicability and that this resulted in barriers to people volunteering. It was thought that it was often the interaction between various pieces of legislation that contributed to this complexity and sometimes, confusion.

In many instances, it is state-based legislation that impacts on volunteering, however there is an opportunity for the Australian Government to take a leadership role in first reviewing Commonwealth legislation for any inconsistencies or unintended impediments to volunteering, and then initiating work between jurisdictions to explore these issues further. There should be a formal intergovernmental working group that would review existing legislation across jurisdictions that has significant impacts on volunteer-involving organisations and/or volunteers and affects either the ability of organisations to involve volunteers or the willingness of individuals to undertake volunteering.

The intergovernmental group would likely need to consult widely with the volunteering sector and its peak bodies in order to identify the areas where legislation is having the most significant impact. Once key legislative impacts have been identified the intergovernmental working group would investigate strategies for making relevant legislative amendments.

In addition, a commitment by Government across all jurisdictions that where possible future legislation or policy will be modified or not implemented if it has the potential to weaken the community activity of volunteering. The commitment could be provided by a formal agreement with the Volunteering Sector about what both Government and the Sector will undertake to do. Overseas models such as “The Compact” in the UK and the “Volunteering Round Table” in Canada could be investigated and developed in partnership with the volunteering sector to suit Australian circumstances.

### ***11. Governments and policy makers both commit and subscribe to the Principles of Volunteering.***

The Definition and Principles of Volunteering were developed by Volunteering Australia through consultation with the volunteer sector, the unions and government. Both the Definition and the Principles serve to ensure that volunteering remains an important way in which individuals can choose to exercise their citizenship and participate in their communities.

A formal commitment to, the Principles of Volunteering by Government would be important recognition by Government of the importance of volunteering and help maintain the integrity of volunteering as distinct from other forms of unpaid work, for example, compulsory community service.

Again, there is an opportunity for the Australian Government to take a leadership role in this area.

### ***12. Government when funding service providers that happen to rely on volunteers, explicitly require, and provide for, an adequate budget allocation for volunteer involvement, management, recognition and reimbursement, but not through the individual volunteer***

Governments may hesitate or balk at assistance for individual volunteers because it could be seen to compromise the principle of volunteering or be open to various forms of rorting and corruption.

Another way of tackling this would be to enable organisations to seek government assistance, depending on the extent of volunteering in their activity.

For example, a person commutes several times a week over some considerable distance to do some volunteer work, and runs up a fuel bill of say \$30 a week. The organisation could have this time accredited, seeking public funding, and if successful they could obviously help the volunteer with their future motor vehicle costs.

Under this system, non-profit and charitable organisations could use their submission for funding assistance on the quantifiable extent of volunteering in their activity.

This could off-set the need to establish a clear set of guidelines for volunteers and tax deductibility, while at the same time ensuring volunteers are helped in some small way indirectly. This recommendation would complement work undertaken to implement recommendations #2 & #3 discussed previously.

### **13. *Monitor public liability insurance reforms.***

The unaffordable and in some cases unavailable public liability insurance is a crisis directly impacting the community and volunteer organisations and these respective activities and events. This has been the case for some years.

The reforms initiated in most states are welcomed but other states dithered. The leadership of the Australian Government primarily through the work of Senator the Hon Helen Coonan is well recognised.

Major insurance companies have offered special discounts for certain public liability insurance products in states that lead the reforms. A special fund has now been

established in most states to assist the community and volunteer organisations who through no fault of their own cannot obtain reasonable public liability insurance cover. A taskforce should be established in every state if not already, to oversee and assist community and volunteer organisations to review the reforms and advise on what else can be done to assist.

## **Conclusion**

The proposals contained in this submission are by no means exhaustive. They are intended only as a start to an ongoing debate concerning the relationship between the Australian Government and our volunteers, and how that relationship extends to the other two tiers of government, and indeed the community as a whole. They are intended to encourage greater support and recognition for volunteers and provide the Australian Government with an opportunity to demonstrate and extend its leadership in this area.

I believe volunteering is a largely untapped and huge opportunity for government to engage the community, especially regional Australia.

If volunteering returns billions of dollars each year in value to Australia's economy, then the financial capital invested by government, in a recognition of volunteering is a small price to pay, and yet one which I believe all volunteers and the community at large would applaud. It is clearly an investment in the social capital of our nation.

Any policy developments and decisions in this field by the Australian Government would be welcomed, and in fact saluted by most Australians as an historic and entirely appropriate gesture.



Senator Guy Barnett with members of the Avoca Volunteer Ambulance Service in Tasmania

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