



Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

Hearing Date: 12 October 2023

Question[s] taken on notice

Directed to: Volunteering Victoria, Thu-Trang Tran

Received Date: 13 November 2023

1. Wendy LOVELL, page 85

Question Asked:

[...] Do you find that there is still more volunteerism in the regional areas of the state than in the metropolitan areas, and is that just because we have more structure around the CFA, SES, CWA and those sorts of things?

Thu-Trang TRAN: I have to say the data for me – off the top of my head, I do not know enough, because I am actually participating in a regional volunteering study by Griffith University just to understand the lay of the land and the demographics. There is data coming, so I can take that on notice, Senator.

Response:

In a 2022 national survey, [Griffith University Study: Developing a national rural volunteering roadmap](#)¹ it was found that the rates of volunteering in regional areas is (a little) higher than in metropolitan areas – “People living outside of a capital city had a higher volunteering rate (29.0 per cent) than people living in a capital city (24.0 per cent).” But further data on this would be useful.

As to the reason for this higher involvement, we believe this would partly be due to higher involvement generally by regional people in their local communities. This would also apply to sporting and RSL clubs etc – but again further data is much needed.

Volunteering Victoria’s [2020 State of Volunteering Report](#)² found that volunteering in rural and regional Victoria is not only a way of life but essential to maintaining a variety of services. Issues for volunteering in rural towns and regional cities differ from issues in the Greater Metropolitan Melbourne area. Some of the known issues for volunteerism – more so in rural areas - include ageing and declining populations, the higher cost of transport, lower levels of service provision and the tyranny

¹ <https://www.griffith.edu.au/institute-tourism/our-research/developing-a-national-rural-volunteering-roadmap>

² <https://stateofvolunteering.org.au/>

of distance. Further research is needed to better understand how volunteering has been affected in regional and rural communities in recent years, the consequences of declining volunteerism and what the obstacles are to rebuilding or reshaping volunteering.

A recent report, [Volunteering in Australia 2022 The Volunteer Perspective](https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf)³ found that people living outside of a capital city had a higher volunteering rate (29.0 per cent) than people living in a capital city (24.0 per cent). This is to be contextualised against general findings:

- In April 2022 about a quarter (26.7 per cent) of Australians had done formal volunteering in the previous 12 months and just under half (46.5 per cent) had undertaken informal volunteering in the previous four weeks. (Unless specified otherwise, data presented here refers to formal volunteering).
- Women are slightly more likely to volunteer than men. In April 2022, 28.6 per cent of women had done volunteer work in the previous 12 months compared to 24.7 per cent of men.
- The volunteering rate is a little higher amongst older Australians (55 years and older) than amongst those aged under 55 years. There is very little difference in volunteering rates by age for those under 55 years of age.
- Those born overseas in a non-English speaking country were less likely to volunteer than those born in Australia or born in another English-speaking country.
- People with a higher level of education were more likely to volunteer than those with a lower level of education. Amongst those who had not completed Year 12 and had no post-school qualification, 22.0 per cent had volunteered compared to 30.3 per cent of those with a postgraduate degree.
- Being in paid employment was associated with a greater likelihood to volunteer than being unemployed. However, as the number of hours of paid employment increases, the likelihood of volunteering decreases.

³ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

2. **Melina BATH, page 88**

Question Asked:

And you might just want to – comment, or on notice, weVolunteer, how has that impacted you, the loss of that funding, the cancellation of weVolunteer?

Response:

With the discontinuation of weVolunteer, the community recovery volunteering program funded initially through pandemic rapid response funding, there is currently no alternative to support spontaneous volunteer coordination.

Volunteering Victoria requires funding for Volunteering Victoria to engage in the work and responsibilities associated with being a recovery support agency as part of the SEMP.

As the state peak body for the volunteering sector, Volunteering Victoria is always inundated during emergencies, being a first port of call from people (many, many people) wanting to help and organisations seeking help. Our small team fields these calls and attempts to direct, guide and support people and organisations - but without appropriate funding the organisation cannot do this in an adequate way. We have had 2 emergency volunteering platforms established over a period of 10 years, and both we de-funded after a couple of years, not giving the platforms the longer-term investment to gain traction and sufficient community awareness and usage. [weVolunteer](#) was defunded just before the 2019-2020 Victoria floods leaving the state with no means of effectively coordinating volunteer efforts.

“Despite firmly advocating for its continued need in supporting community recovery, extended funding was not secured in the State Budget released earlier this year.” [Final weVolunteer Evaluation Report \(2022\)](#)⁴

Emergencies will continue to eventuate. An established spontaneous volunteering platform where people can register their interest (plus any other useful information such as skills, screening checks, training). Holding these registered volunteers allows for quick engagement and deployment, that can be scaled up and down as required to supplement the

⁴ https://www.wevolunteer.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/22-08_weVolunteer-Final-Evaluation-Report.pdf

institutionally-trained⁵ emergency responders, is therefore very a useful surge and resilience strategy. Organisations requiring the support of volunteers during these periods also register but unless there is ongoing funding and maintenance of the platform, organisations will be wary to do so in the future. Wrap around support and relationship maintenance (personal and organisational) is also required for preparedness. This cannot be managed just digitally through a platform – it requires people, resourcing, planning and effort.

Moreover, systemic underfunding and short spurts of investment leaves a sector weary and burnt out from learning new systems that don't 'stick', taxing stretched community organisations. It makes it incredibly challenging for Volunteering Victoria to gain buy-in when rolling out a state-wide system such as weVolunteer.

- weVolunteer evaluation: The lack of secure funding was identified as a constant and consistent barrier, and one that is not unique to weVolunteer. Like so many other projects, insecure funding was a significant barrier to securing stakeholder engagement throughout the project: including registering through the weVolunteer portal, participating in training, and volunteer managers learning how to use a new platform. Volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) were particularly hesitant to engage given the potential limited timeframe of the program's operation. The weVolunteer team recounted conversations they had with prospective VIOs and local government areas (LGAs) where there had been interest in registering, but the time needed for registration and ongoing participation outweighed the potential or perceived benefits. This lack of clarity on future funding was an ongoing cause of uncertainty for both the program team and prospective VIOs.
- Impact on local councils: Local councils are not necessarily appropriately supported for volunteers, most have little capacity to manage spontaneous volunteers during emergencies. The role to support local councils with their volunteering needs may sit naturally with the peak body (as in other states) but Volunteering Victoria (currently) lacks the resources to provide this support to local councils, local volunteer support services and volunteer resource centers, and other community organisations with volunteer workforces at these times.
- Underfunded platforms and programs that provide a social good (and where 'the market' does not fill the gap): where digital platforms are commissioned, they are not designed for viable deployment. The services they provided cannot be provided on a cost recovery basis –

⁵ SES, CFA

they are social goods. Thus once government funding ceases, there is not enough capacity in community to pay for these services to continue.

Volunteers can contribute significantly to the preparation for, during and after crises, but one needs to be cognisant of the level of planning required to ensure the safety of volunteers, the public they seek to assist and the emergency management workforce. This concern was reinforced in the Inspector-General for Emergency Management's [Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian fire season: Phase 2 \(2021\)](#) which found that there is "no system in place or defined lead agency to plan for and coordinate spontaneous volunteers"⁶.

Without coordination and resourcing for spontaneous volunteering, community responses to natural disasters will be hindered, place increased pressure on paid staff, and reduce capacity for the delivery of essential community recovery programs

[Volunteering Victoria's Submission to the Victorian State Budget 2023-2024](#)⁷ called for a well-resourced spontaneous volunteer strategy and coordinated response and concerted efforts to strengthen community-led volunteer responses in times of social crises. Further, our budget recommends that:

- there is immediate development of a Community Resilience Volunteering Strategy involving Volunteering Victoria, working with DFFH, EMV, BRV, and DPJR, covering all volunteering roles except for first responder volunteers, ie. preparedness, relief and recovery volunteering.
- the Victorian Government identifies a lead agency with which Volunteering Victoria can engage on preparedness, relief and recovery volunteering.
- the Victorian Government includes Volunteering Victoria on government decision-making and advisory panels involved in community relief and recovery.

⁶ p98, <https://files.igem.vic.gov.au/2021-10/Inquiry%20into%20the%202019-20%20Victorian%20Fire%20Season%20-%20Phase%202%20report%20%28low%20resolution%29.pdf>

⁷ https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/VV_Budget-2023-2024-Submission_FINAL-1.pdf

3. **Gaelle BROAD, page 88-89**

Question Asked:

So it begs the question of what the protections for spontaneous volunteers are and what the system settings like insurance are that we need to make available rapidly and assure people.

Gaelle BROAD: Are there any examples of ones that are set up that you have seen? What is Victoria's situation at the minute, because it is sort of sign at your own risk, help out at your own risk. Are there any models that you could point us to that would be good to follow?

Response:

Promoting the safety of volunteers aligns with the priority outcome of the Victorian Government's [Victorian Volunteer Strategy](#)⁸ that 'volunteers have safe, effective, and rewarding experiences. Their rights and responsibilities are understood and protected.' It is also a tangible way for government to acknowledge the value of volunteering and invest in the capabilities and capacity of organisations to re-engage, recruit and train volunteers.

Volunteers require and have a right to protection while out supporting their communities during emergencies. This includes proper training, supervision, onboarding, assessment of the risks involved in the tasks they are given and insurance cover in case they are injured, or they injure/harm someone else. Currently spontaneous volunteers are not covered if they are injured while volunteering – unless they are engaged by an organisation such as Red Cross, SES, CFA, or local council which has volunteer personal injury cover.

During COVID, Volunteering Victoria worked closely with Volunteering Australia and Justice Connect on this issue releasing a [Volunteer Protection Joint Statement](#) in 2020.⁹

Insurance of volunteers, particularly spontaneous volunteers but also those engaged by small community organisations without the resources to pay for such cover, is a real issue for the community and volunteering sector and a measure we have long advocated for to uplift volunteering participation rates, supported by the evidence. Initial data from the [State of Volunteering in Victoria 2020 report](#) indicates that risk and insurance was a barrier for 12.9% of organisations surveyed, rising to 18.3% in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is supported by Justice Connect

⁸ <https://www.volunteer.vic.gov.au/victorian-volunteer-strategy>

⁹ https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19_Volunteer_Protection_Joint_Policy_Statement__final_19Aug2020.pdf

and Volunteering Australia who identified the inadequacies of current volunteer insurance policies during the pandemic and the need for a long-term solution to ensure volunteers are appropriately covered during times of illness and crisis.¹⁰

It is important to note that the existing data is not a representative sample¹¹ of the volunteer sector and does not reflect the full extent of the insurance issue faced by the sizeable segment of organisations that are small. The [Australian Charities Report 2022](#)¹² provides some indication of the likely extent of the issue:

- 31% of all charities are considered ‘extra small’ with less than \$50,000 annual revenue;
- 21% of all charities are considered ‘small’ with between \$50,000 - \$250,000 annual revenue;
- 51% of charities operate without any paid staff;
- extra small, small, and medium charities account for one third of all volunteers in charities.

Current evidence, data, and anecdotal responses also do not account for the large number of unregistered and unincorporated community organisations and groups that are more likely to operate without insurance. Further research is required to understand the impact of insurance barriers this large segment of the community sector, who may have few channels and resources to escalate their needs.

The contribution of volunteering to the collective wellbeing of the state calls for an equitable reinvestment to protect those serving their community. The Universal Declaration on Volunteering by the International Association for Volunteer Efforts (IAVE) also outline the role and responsibility of governments in providing appropriate protections against risks to volunteers and those they serve.¹³

Lowering the risk of helping out

¹⁰ https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-admin/admin-ajax.php?juwppfisadmin=false&action=wpfd&task=file.download&wpfd_category_id=142&wpfd_file_id=22710&token=&preview=1

¹¹ Organisations surveyed in the State of Volunteering report were those in existing volunteering support networks and therefore more likely to have access to information and funding.

¹² <https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/reports/australian-charities-report-8th-edition>

¹³ <https://www.iave.org/iavewp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/universal-delcaration-on-volunteering.pdf>

The government currently subsidises volunteer insurance through VMIA for government-funded community organisations. However, most small community organisations and groups are community-led, operate without government funding, are not members of peak agencies and industry networks, and are therefore ineligible for the VMIA scheme. The [VMIA outlines](#) that “in certain circumstances, the government may ask VMIA to provide insurance to non-government organisations where it is in the public interest and commercial insurance isn’t available on reasonable terms.” Spontaneous volunteering cohorts clearly meet these criteria.

There is an urgent need – and ethical obligation – to extend volunteer insurance under a VMIA-scheme or a Transport Accident Commission scheme to lower the risk borne by volunteers given their enormous contribution during crisis times. Risk offsetting and risk management measures include:

- The provision of accessible and affordable volunteer insurance extended to spontaneous or small organisations called upon to respond to a crisis.
 - A government-funded scheme go cover the cost of membership fees (eg to Volunteering Victoria, other peak agencies or local networks such as Neighbourhood Houses, Volunteer Resource/Support Centres) can be subsidised or paid to bring those spontaneous or small organisations (called upon to respond to a crisis) under the VMIA scheme.
 - Extend work cover, where volunteers can be covered under local council insurance scheme.

In Queensland, the state government may “activate” extension of work cover to volunteers in emergencies – but this is not automatic. Volunteering must be “formalised” by registering through the platform EV Crew (coordinated by Volunteering Queensland). EV Crew does the matching (volunteer to organisation) and ensures necessary insurance cover is in place. Organisations are required to have appropriate volunteer insurance cover. Activation usually happens when councils say they need help with the spontaneous volunteers in an emergency.
 - Government emergency fund which can be limited to a set amount (eg during COVID) to cover spontaneous volunteers and small community groups deployed and called upon to join the response and rebuilding phase.
 - Short-term cover under local government insurance for the crisis period.

- The provision and expansion of free training on volunteer safety, risk and insurance, such as that currently offered by [Justice Connect](#) in the lead up to predictable periods of crisis and emergencies, such as the summer.