A Brief Submission to
The Inquiry into the Opportunities for Participation of Victorian Seniors

Senior Victorians, as other seniors, make a significant contribution to Australian society and economy. Whilst much attention has focused on their economic contribution in terms of involvement in the paid labour market and ways of retaining them as paid workers, less attention has perhaps been paid to their social role and how they contribute to their families, their communities and society more broadly. These contributions are often unrecognised and unrecorded although they are very important both to local communities and for healthy ageing. As such, the Committee is to be commended for its attention to these issues.

Whilst the contributions made by seniors to society are often under-estimated, a focus on healthy ageing or productive ageing has led to a renewed focus on the positive contributions made by older adults. There is a growing body of research evidence in this field, which provides an excellent starting point for this Inquiry.

Research has explored the social contributions of seniors, including the challenges that they face. Over the past decade or so, there have been a number of research studies which have attempted to place an economic value on these contributions. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimated the economic worth of volunteering to be between $24 and $31 billion. Furthermore, there have been attempts to place an economic value on the contributions made by older people to society outside the paid workforce. One research study estimated the economic worth of the unpaid caring and volunteer work undertaken by those aged over 55 years to be worth almost $74.5 billion per year.

However, there is much more to the contribution of seniors to society than its economic value. The social value is highly important – for older people, their families and communities, as well as society generally. These contributions can be described as “value adding” activities.

Understanding the contribution that seniors make to society is very important for a number of reasons. Firstly, at the individual level, involvement with families and neighbourhoods helps seniors combat loneliness and social isolation, contributes to positive psychological health and generally assists many older people to remain living at home. Secondly, the contributions made by many older people to their local communities underpin the social cohesion that occurs within these communities. Older people add value to society. Thirdly, the involvement of seniors in their families, communities and broader society, helps challenge contemporary negative discourses around ageing and stresses the positive gains associated with an ageing population, rather than emphasising the costs. This value needs to be recognised, acknowledged and supported in the way we interact with seniors.
Research in this field suggests that to age well there need to be opportunities for seniors to participate in their communities. This is essential if we are to build age friendly communities across Victoria\textsuperscript{vii}.

Much research, both from the USA and from Australia, has focused on volunteering as one important dimension of active, successful, positive and productive ageing\textsuperscript{viii}. Volunteering provides a good exemplar of social participation because it is easier to measure than other more informal community involvement. Thus, for example, there are some large, longitudinal American studies that demonstrate the health benefits for seniors who give their time as volunteers\textsuperscript{ix}. This all suggests that social participation is important for older people, and that any barriers to involvement need addressing.

Australian research exploring some of the incentives and barriers to volunteering suggests that communities and governments all have a role in building social participation among seniors\textsuperscript{x}. In terms of incentives, seniors are looking for more flexible, diverse options, more training, and more opportunities for intergenerational participation. Potential barriers include the growing number of rules and regulations, and fear that, as older people, they will encounter ageism and be viewed negatively. This research demonstrates that it is important to look at what enables participation as much as what prevents active participation.

Overall, it is important that we accept that seniors are highly diverse – they differ by age cohort (the lucky generation or babyboomers); socio-economic factors; cultural background; location (urban, rural and remote); and many other factors. They are not a coherent group. This needs to be recognised in any strategy or planning process. What works to promote and support seniors’ participation in cities may be quite different in the rural context\textsuperscript{xii}. Transport, always an important concern to seniors, is particularly difficult to organise in rural areas. Similarly, it needs to be recognised that those from different cultural backgrounds, both migrants and Indigenous Victorians, actively contribute to civil society\textsuperscript{xii}. However, their needs, the barriers and challenges they face, vary as do their opportunities for participation. One of the overwhelming issues facing Victoria today is how we integrate such a diverse group of seniors.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further with the Committee.

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Summarised in Warburton (2006), see Endnote iv.

