



Volunteering Tasmania

Submission to the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volunteering is an essential part of Tasmania's recovery and rebuilding. Through volunteering we build more resilient and connected communities.

The impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on volunteering is significant. Recent research shows that across Australia there has been a 65.9% decline in volunteering between February and April 2020. This reduction in volunteering is estimated to be equivalent to 12.2 million hours per week.

Volunteering in Tasmania was already declining before the COVID-19 outbreak. The State of Volunteering Report 2019 showed an 11% drop in volunteering participation over the past five years, from 80% in 2014 to 69% in 2019. Based on these figures and national research, Tasmania's reduction in volunteer hours is likely to be higher than 70% over the COVID outbreak period.

In a recent Volunteering Tasmania member survey, 90% reported that their volunteer programs have been affected in a significant way. Volunteer organisations stated that their programs have reduced the numbers of volunteers as a result of them being stood down or choosing to step down. Their main concern is that their volunteers will not return once the restrictions are lifted.

It is important that we act now on volunteering:

- To restore the hours of volunteer work lost and protect programs and services;
- To safeguard the mental health and wellbeing of volunteers, and beneficiaries of volunteering; and
- To build social connection and community resilience for the long term.

Key opportunities

We can secure our volunteer programs and services by providing:

- Advice and support to Tasmania's volunteering organisations so they can make sure volunteers can transition back into a COVID-safe environment.
- Funding for small volunteer organisations that is tailored to their individual needs so they can promote volunteering opportunities, and recruit and manage their volunteer workforce.
- A Tasmanian Volunteer Strategy with actions that will meet the needs of Government, volunteers, organisations and local communities into the future, and a Minister for Volunteering.

RESPONSE

"My great concern is my organisation being over cautious about the return of volunteers. As the community returns to some kind of normal, my organisation is still holding the volunteers at arms length, citing safety as their major concern. This is the danger period for us. While it was too unsafe for them to return, they understood. Now society has deemed it much safer and we hold them back - this is when they're going to lose patience and find alternate opportunities."

1. What are the current impacts of COVID-19 on your sector, organisation and/or service users?

Volunteers stood down and programs suspended, and new modes of engagement.

When the COVID pandemic first impacted on Tasmania in mid-late March 2020 Volunteering Tasmania ran a member survey that revealed that 90% of the volunteering sector had been impacted by the pandemic. Approximately 70% of volunteering programs had been suspended. Conversely, about 20% of volunteering programs had experienced a spike in demand. These were community service organisations offering services in food and financial emergency relief, meal and grocery deliveries, community transport and wellbeing checks.

Although initially many programs suspended activities there were some that were able to respond proactively to the pandemic and engage their volunteers in new and safe ways to continue their core service delivery and others developed innovative new models of service delivery. For example, some organisations have moved from physical to a virtual volunteering forum using telephones, internet (Zoom, Teams) or old fashioned letter writing.

¹ Volunteering Australia, Research Briefing on the experience of volunteers during COVID-19
<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/research-briefing-the-experience-of-volunteers-during-covid-19/#/>

Fewer volunteer hours and volunteers faring better under stress.

Research conducted by ANU for Volunteering Australia found that volunteering hours between February and April 2020 reduced by the equivalent of 12.2 million hours per week nationally. Given that Tasmania represents 2% of the population this is a reduction of at least 240,000 hours every week in volunteering hours in Tasmania.

The ANU research also showed that volunteers had a higher level of life satisfaction prior to COVID-19 than non-volunteers. The impact of COVID19 on life satisfaction and psychological distress varied by volunteering behaviour over the period, with those who managed to continue volunteering during COVID-19 faring much better. Indicating that volunteering has a strong protective factor in life satisfaction and against psychological stress.

“I really hope all Volunteers return following the pandemic. We rely heavily on our Volunteers on a daily basis, 7 days a week.”

Small organisations stepping up and confused messaging for community services.

The organisations on the front-line during the COVID response in Tasmania are different to those that are generally called upon in an emergency situation. Although the emergency trained and prepared community organisations such as Red Cross Salvation Army and St Vincent DePaul and Council of Churches have been paramount in responding to COVID there have also been smaller and less experienced organisations that have had to step up to respond.

These include a number of Commonwealth and Home Support (CHSP) Organisations and Home and Community Care (HACC) organisations such as Meals on Wheels, Mersey Community Care, and Community Transport Services Tasmania. Some of these organisations were able to quickly adapt to the COVID response and put best practice management in place efficiently. There were other organisations that have struggled due to poor infrastructure and less evolved internal systems that hampered their preparedness.

Government messaging focussed very strongly on clinical preparedness (including residential aged care) and response to COVID and was not as comprehensive or informative about in its messaging about the role of community services. This led to considerable confusion in the sector about the appropriate practices to implement. Both federal and state departments of health did work hard once they were aware of the situation to provide the information and resources required by the sector.

2. What are the current impacts of COVID-19 on your sector, organisation and/or service users

Since restrictions have eased there has been an increase in people interested in returning to their standard volunteering and pursuing volunteering opportunities more broadly.

It is important for the socio-economic and culture future of Tasmania, as well as the mental health and wellbeing of the volunteers for volunteering programs to be resumed as soon as it is practical and safe. However, there are still a range of factors preventing many organisations resuming their usual activities.

Insurance and compliance

There have been a number of queries from organisations about whether and how their volunteers are covered under their insurance. Simply, volunteer insurance policies do not cover sickness. The only recourse for a volunteer that catches COVID while volunteering would be through public liability insurance (any many now also have exclusion clauses for pandemics). This is leading to some very risk-adverse decisions by organisations.

There is still some concern, particularly by smaller grassroots and volunteer-run volunteer organisations about what they are required to do to ensure they are able to restart their programs. Many organisations are worried about meeting compliance requirements.

“It is hard to attract volunteers, particularly committee volunteers such presidents, secretaries, treasurers who are able to communicate with the Government demands. It is difficult for smaller organisations to find or replace the ones who have left, either because of old age, or the inability to continue taking part because of the demanding work requested by the Government. Hours and hours are spent answering Government letters and requests. This problem is worse for small organisations with little or no knowledge and who rely on volunteers as they may not have the resources to pay professional people to do the requested work.”

Older volunteers

There is considerable concern around the over 70's and volunteering. Volunteers themselves are unsure when and if they can return to their volunteering. Organisations are concerned about insurance, risk, requirements for medical clearance of over 70's, the need for flu injections, and liability for age-discrimination.

“There is a risk to our aged volunteers. Many may retire after this, or our programs may not exist given that our volunteer base is aged.”

Fundraising activities

A number of small volunteer-run organisations fund their activities through fundraising, such as gate sales for sports, canteens and sausage sizzles. With so many activities suspended and many still limited, the ability for these organisations to raise funds has been substantially curtailed. Many small volunteering organisations do not have the funds to re-start their activities.

3. Factors that will influence the impacts over the next few months

Clear messaging

It is very important for volunteering organisations that the information and messaging from government is clear. Messaging needs to include:

- The term 'volunteering' when referring the range of activities/ work that is possible and available for Tasmanians as restrictions are eased.
- Specific advice to older and more vulnerable cohorts.
- Advice to small voluntary organisations about the safety precautions they need to have in place to resume their activities.

Recognising the importance of volunteering

Government and other bodies need to recognise the importance of volunteering (and giving back to our communities) for the mental health and wellbeing of Tasmanians. Volunteering needs to be included in any comprehensive community-based mental health programs.

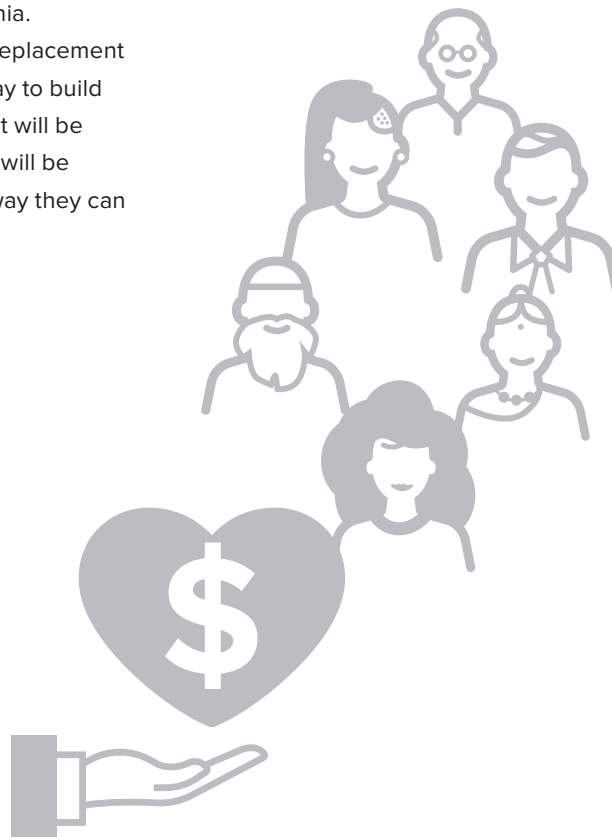
There also needs to be a recognition of the importance of volunteering to the economic recovery of Tasmania. Volunteering contributes \$3 billion a year in wage-replacement costs to the Tasmanian economy. It is a powerful way to build connections, networks, skills and gain experience. It will be essential to support the 25000-30000 people that will be unemployed in Tasmania, and volunteering is one way they can keep connected and learn skills.

Funding and contracts

There is a need for financial support for small volunteer-run organisations whose incomes streams are now unavailable because they are unable to do fundraising.

There are a range of community service providers (many of which involve volunteers) that are reticent to open as they don't have the resources. The per-unit cost to run their activities is now much higher, and not sustainable because of the restrictive measures in place, for example, aged community day centres.

Consumer-directed care is a core part of community services, however many recipients feel that this is not possible in the current circumstances as organisations have very restrictive delivery frames. Some recipients feel this places organisational compliance needs ahead of client needs, and this is causing tension between providers and recipients. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Advocacy Tas is being activated more. More support and information would be valuable for recipients and providers.



4. What data or information can you share to demonstrate this impact?

The impact is demonstrated through three pieces of research:

- Survey of Tasmanian membership (June)
- Survey of Tasmanian membership and HACC/CHSP (April)
- ANU research commissioned by Volunteering Australia_ (<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/research-briefing-the-experience-of-volunteers-during-covid-19/#/>).

5. What has been put in place so far to address these impacts?

VT resources

A range of resources has been released by Volunteering Tasmania to support the needs of volunteers and volunteer organisations in relation to the response to COVID. Resources are also being prepared for release to support the recovery (<https://www.volunteeringtas.org.au/covid-19-information-and-resources/>).

Government funding

The Tasmanian Government has provided additional funding to VT in three areas:

- Supporting the increased capacity of EVCREW during the pandemic. This allows Tasmanians to register their interest in supporting the community through volunteering. There are currently 2300 people registered. VT has matched volunteers with volunteer organisations that have required volunteers; there have been 65 volunteers deployed to three organisations to date. Many organisations have been reluctant to bring on new volunteers due to difficulties in induction and training, leading to a reliance on existing volunteers. However, as the need for volunteers continues over the coming months, the risk of volunteer 'burn out' may need to be addressed.
- The Safeguarding Volunteering in Tasmania project where VT is working with three local councils (Clarence City, Huon Valley and Devonport Councils) to build community-based volunteering strategies and safeguard the number of volunteers they will need into the future. This additional funding has been specifically directed to support Councils and provide the resources and information they need to support the volunteers and volunteer organisations in their communities to recover.
- For VT to draft a strategy around supporting the online and neighbourhood groups that have arisen due to COVID (informal volunteering). VT is giving information and advice to support safe activity in these groups, also exploring ways to convert these volunteers to a more formal volunteer-base if needed. The strategy also considers ways to promote community connection and resilience that will be needed as we move into recovery and rebuilding.

“My concern is overworking those volunteers who are happy to continue serving, expecting too much out of a desire to continue what we do in the community.”

Forums, meetings, communication

Volunteering Tasmania provides sector support and development for HACC and CHSP providers, many of which have been on the frontline in the pandemic. VT has provided regular forums for organisations and government to share ideas and resources, as well as shared practice sessions around particular topics, such as shared resourcing and opening of daycentres. The forums have been invaluable for providers to seek clarification from both state and federal government health departments. One such issue was the appropriate use and training in PPE for community service providers.

The Volunteering Tasmania CEO has engaged in communication across radio, newspaper and TV to encourage safe volunteering and discuss the needs of volunteers and volunteer organisations in the pandemic. This included a focus in the recent National Volunteer Week celebrations on the recognition that volunteers have provided the surge capacity required by organisations to deliver to our communities.

VT has engaged with its national network to share different approaches, resources and identify emerging issues. This has led to the development of shared resources across the states and territories as well as national position papers

https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19-POSITION-PAPER-2_Safeguarding-Volunteers-and-Volunteer-Involving-Organisations_VERSION_3.pdf.

At a national level through the national network and Volunteering Australia, VT has been in consultation with the Minister for Social Services, and departmental staff to provide support and resources to support volunteering through the crisis and into recovery.

VT has participated in TasCOSS-hosted weekly sessions with government that allow government to hear directly from the sector about the emerging needs and to respond. The fortnightly meetings of the Tasmanian Community Sector peak bodies have been valuable for sharing ideas, resource and practices.

6. What isn't being addressed?

Views of volunteers

There is still a need to canvas volunteers directly for their views as we go into the recovery and rebuild phase. There has been the ANU research at a national level and there is the potential through UTas research to incorporate volunteer views. VT is working with local councils to hear directly from volunteers and we need to work with volunteer organisations to seek the views and needs of their volunteers.

Engaging with small organisations

It is a challenge to connect with the range of very small community groups that will struggle to re-start their programs and re-engage their volunteers. Recent research from the VT (State of Volunteering Report 2019) indicates that about 10% of Tasmania's volunteers are engaged with organisations that have no paid staff and a further 40% are engaged with organisation that have less than 5 paid staff. These groups would have a much lower resource-base and infrastructure than many other volunteer organisations including not being connected with their peak body or other support networks. VT is working hard to find adequate engagement strategies to support these groups.

Re-engaging with volunteers

There are a range of organisations that are struggling to re-engage their volunteers who have stepped back from participating during the outbreak. Organisations need advice and support on how they can safely become operational, how to re-engage their volunteers, and how they can operate in more innovative ways in the future.

There are a number of organisations that have experienced high demand for service delivery during the COVID response that may have used a diminished volunteer-base. There will be a need to replenish this volunteer-base and recognise that some volunteers may need a rest. EVCREW can provide the volunteers, but volunteer organisations need to be willing and able to induct and train new volunteers. This is a particular challenge when staff are already stretched.

"I am concerned about the lack of social connection for our clients who are socially isolated and rely on the interaction with our volunteers to be connected. There is also the risk of volunteers not returning to the program when the situation changes back to the new normal."

7. Within your sector and more broadly, what do you see as priorities for a response? What needs to stop, continue or commence?

Continue

The Tasmanian community has come together with a great sense of unity around the COVID crisis. This has been exemplified in volunteering. Many people have stepped in to volunteer, and informal community groups, both virtual and physical, have been set up to support one another. We need to celebrate and continue these connections, and embed them into the new Tasmania as part of the recovery and rebuild.

It is necessary for government to continue its clear messaging to ensure volunteers and organisations are aware of when they can re-engage with their volunteering.

The EVCREW model has shown that it works as a shared volunteer model, as a one-entry point for emergency volunteering. There are over 2000 volunteers on this system, and this model could be continued to support the recruitment, basic induction and training of volunteers for ongoing volunteering.

Commence

Small volunteer organisations need financial and practical support to enable them to return to their activities safely.

Volunteering will look different into the future and organisations have been forced to innovate. We need them to hold onto these new ways of doing things and to create new operating models to lift their ability to attract more volunteers into their future.

8 . What can be done to build business/consumer/community confidence?

Volunteers are essential to our economic and social recovery, and long term wellbeing. There needs to be an ongoing recognition by government of the importance of a strong, vibrant and well-resourced base of volunteers in Tasmania. The volunteering sector has been impacted severely by COVID, with currently around 240,000 lost hours of volunteering per week, and it will need support to re-build; this will not happen by itself.

There needs to be much broader recognition of the mental health and wellbeing impacts of volunteering on individuals. People need to be re-engaged with the activities they love and enabled to contribute to rebuilding Tasmania.

The greater work flexibility that has occurred during COVID is a great opportunity for younger people and for those that otherwise have not had the time to volunteer to take up volunteering.

9. What would help your sector or organisation to re-employ people?

Volunteering is a very powerful way people to learn new skills, make new connections and networks and also to share their own skills and experience. Volunteering is also a known and effective pathway back to employment for many people.

With high unemployment rates likely due to COVID there will be greater opportunity, and probably federal government requirement, for people to volunteer. For many volunteer organisations this could potentially revitalise their programs and be of great benefit.

Care needs to be taken in using volunteering as a pathway to employment. If there are significant barriers to employment then those barriers will also be manifest in volunteering. Support must be given to volunteering organisations that are supporting the growth, development, and in some cases re-training, of people who are unemployed.

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