

VOLUNTEERING *and* CONTACT ACT

Volunteering and Contact ACT 2019-20 Budget Consultation October 2018

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Volunteering and Contact ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra Region. Volunteering and Contact ACT pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and their vital ongoing contribution to the community.

Volunteering and Contact ACT acknowledges the contribution of the volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations that contribute to the health and happiness of the community. Volunteers include people with all abilities and from all cultures. Their skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering services and programs, and in making Australia a better place to live.

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Volunteering and Contact ACT (VCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the ACT Government's 2019-20 Budget Consultation process.

Funding provided by the ACT Government enables us to provide services and programs to support volunteers and volunteer involving organisations in the Canberra Region, and to ensure the people of the Region have opportunities to connect with one another and be involved in their communities.

We make the following recommendations to support the Government's identification of initiatives, services and programs to prioritise through the 2019-20 budget.

Recommendations

1. That the ACT Government funds the continuation of the Connections Program to provide one-to-one social support and mentoring for people with a mental illness.
2. That the ACT Government invests in a scholarship program to support volunteers to access the training and professional development opportunities needed to upskill and reskill.
3. That the ACT Government investigates internal opportunities to leverage and expand the content and reach of VCA's existing Community Directory and Community Diary.
4. That the ACT Government considers a future 'Volunteer Passport' project to develop systems, tools and resources to streamline recruitment and onboarding processes.

Overview

VCA is the peak body for volunteering and community information in the Canberra Region. We have a vision of an engaged community, enriched by volunteering, participation and knowledge. Through our services and programs, we foster community networks and undertake research, advocacy, projects, training and events.

Through a variety of funding mechanisms, VCA provides training, support and advice for volunteer involving organisations; provides community information services through our Shopfront in the Griffin Centre, via phone and through our ACT Community Directory and Diary; and runs two programs for people who are experiencing barriers to connecting with community.

VCA is a people driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of 174 member organisations and engages with the broader Canberra community. This submission is informed by consultation and engagement with our members and the wider Canberra community during 2018.

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The importance of reliable information and volunteers to an inclusive Canberra community

We know that in developing its 2019-20 budget, the ACT Government is focused on delivering accessible, high-quality health care, great local schools, strong support for families, and effective transport and municipal services across our city and suburbsⁱ. Access to reliable information on the programs and services available across all of these areas is key to building an inclusive community where people are able to connect and live healthy lives.

VCA provides a unique service to the Canberra Region by fostering community engagement through our Shopfront and administration of the ACT Community Directory and My Community Diary. During the 2017-18 year we:

- Made 1,539 referrals to services in the Canberra Region, including 548 referrals to government services, 707 referrals to non-government/community services and 284 referrals to private sector services through our Shopfront, info line and email channels.
- Listed 1,665 organisations who deliver 3,155 services in the ACT Community Directory. The Directory was viewed over 130,000 times during the year, a 60% increase on the previous year.
- Linked the My Community Diary with the Directory, allowing community groups and organisations to publish alongside their service information, upcoming events, regular meetings, and workshops.

Volunteering spans every aspect of the ACT Government's priority areas. Community services, welfare, sport, education and environment are consistently found to be the most popular sectors for volunteersⁱⁱ. In the ACT, 36.8% of adults and 57% of young people volunteer in excess of 10 million hours each year,^{iii, iv} contributing an estimated \$1.5 billion to the ACT economy annually.^v

For every \$1 invested in volunteering there is a \$4.50 return to the community.^{vi} Economically, the return on investment in volunteering is exponential over time and delivers tangible outcomes that government and private sector services would not be able to achieve in isolation. Proper resourcing for volunteer involvement has the potential to deliver outcomes across all areas of strategic priority for the ACT Government. This includes addressing inequality, and contributing to sustainable, long-term economic growth.

In addition to the economic benefits, volunteering also delivers significant social and cultural benefits. Volunteers play a pivotal role in creating connected, diverse, and inclusive communities. With the highest rate of volunteering in the country, the ACT benefits tremendously from the work of volunteers who contribute to the health and happiness of the Canberra community.

We are pleased that the ACT Government's Volunteering Statement Action Plan, released in May 2018, has recognised the significant contribution of Canberra's volunteers.^{vii} The development of the Volunteering Statement Action Plan included community consultations and identified some of the resourcing that would be required to ensure that volunteering is safe, supported and sustainable.

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The ACT Government has committed to work with the community to provide the best possible environment for volunteering and volunteers to flourish and the first Volunteering Statement Action Plan is a great start. However, further resourcing is needed to fully realise the actions and intent of the Action Plan over the next few years.

While volunteers give their time willingly and freely, underlying this contribution are growing operational costs of recruiting, training and supporting volunteers and designing and delivering programs to target specific interventions. With appropriate resourcing and support, volunteers have the potential to contribute more, both economically and socially, as the ACT Government seeks to identify how to deliver services more efficiently and to deliver new services or programs that meet emerging or evolving community needs.

Working as both a peak body and service delivery agency, VCA runs two programs which seek to build an inclusive community by re-connecting people who are isolated through disadvantage, mental illness or disability to their community. By involving volunteers as mentors and buddies, or by supporting people with barriers to find a suitable volunteer position, we know that the outcomes for the individual and the community are invaluable.

Recommendation 1: Continued funding for the Connections Program

Mental health and suicide prevention have been identified as key priorities for the ACT Government, as demonstrated by the launch of the Office of Mental Health and Wellbeing in June 2018.^{viii}

VCA proposes that the ACT Government commits an amount of \$100,000 per annum to allow VCA to continue to run the Connections Program from 1 July 2019.

The Connections Program has a rich 22-year history of delivering outcomes for people on a mental health recovery journey. The Program aims to set up safe and supportive structured friendships enabling people who are isolated to reconnect with their community. Connections is a unique Program delivering sustainable and powerful outcomes for individuals and the broader community.

It is one of only a few programs in the mental health space that focuses on early intervention and prevention and has a strong record of keeping participants out of clinical care settings. Further, the Program epitomises the outcomes that can be achieved through the combination of volunteering and access to information for people in the community.

Prior to the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), VCA delivered the Program for many years under a grant arrangement with ACT Health. However, funding for the Program has now ceased from all levels of Government and there is a lack of other funding models available for us to explore.

The Program is currently only funded until the end of the 2018 calendar year, but this is not sufficient to allow for new participants and volunteers to be engaged and supported. There are currently 30 existing participants on the Program who are supported through the Program, and we continue to receive new referrals each week. Some of these new referrals have been appropriate for other programs and a warm referral has been facilitated.

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However, many are not appropriate, and many service pathways requested do not exist or are at capacity. These prospective participants have little to no formal or informal supports, are socially isolated, and are not accessing services through the NDIS. We are concerned that these participants will fall through further service gaps as we are unable to provide case coordination for new participants within our limited remaining Program funding. This challenge extends to existing participants who we will be unable to continue to support.

Whilst the outcomes of the Program are delivered over the long term, short term funding models make this difficult to measure and do not provide participants with a guarantee of support over the usual lifecycle of the Program. As an indicator of recent success, we know that in just 6 months of delivery participants saw significant improvements in their health and wellbeing. Using the SCORE methodology, there was an increase in Community Participation and Networks from an average of 2.05 (on a scale of 1-5) to an average of 3.38 during this period.

A commitment to continued funding of the Connections Program is essential as it provides a service that is unique in the way it is reconnecting participants with their community here in Canberra. VCA would be pleased to work with ACT Health to provide data and reporting to demonstrate the positive impact of this Program and help inform the provision of mental health services and supports in the Canberra Region.

Recommendation 2: Scholarship program to support training for volunteers

VCA recommends that the ACT Government funds a scholarship program to support access to education and training for volunteers. As noted in ACT Labor's education platform, "building better skills and training means building a better Canberra"^{ix}.

One of the resounding pieces of feedback VCA consistently receives from its members and the broader community is the need for access to robust training to upskill the volunteer workforce. VCA currently provides baseline training for volunteers; however, the cost of accessing further training remains a barrier for many organisations.

There are multiple benefits of investing in training for volunteers, including:

- Reducing the risk for organisations who deploy volunteers in complex roles, including roles where they work with vulnerable people;
- Ensuring that volunteer involving organisations can continue to operate effectively and efficiently;
- Long-term benefits for the whole community, especially where volunteers give their time to multiple organisations.

A scholarship fund of \$20,000 per annum would support volunteers in the community to attend further training and/or professional development to support them in their role. The scholarship fund would allow volunteers to access full or part payment for courses such as *Accidental Counsellor Training, Mental Health First Aid, Supported-Decision Making, and Trauma-Informed Training*.

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In recognition of the immense benefit such a fund could have in the Canberra community, VCA could contribute in-kind support to help design and to administer this scholarship fund. This in-kind support will enable 100 per cent of the scholarship fund to be allocated to professional development for volunteers.

Recommendation 3: Promotion and use of the existing ACT Community Directory and My Community Diary within the ACT Government

VCA recommends that the ACT Government investigates opportunities to leverage and expand the content and reach of the ACT Community Directory and My Community Diary. These platforms underlie VCA's our approach to fostering community engagement, which aligns with the ACT Government's focus on inclusion and on building stronger communities^x.

The ACT Community Directory and the linked My Community Diary provide valuable information to the Canberra community and connect Canberrans to the services they need. They are unique platforms that seamlessly provide information about government, community and private organisations, services and events. However, we find that different agencies within various Directorates and within the sector, create their own information databases, instead of leveraging off the existing platform. This duplication is a concern as it results in considerable and unnecessary cost, but also multiple data sets that all require updating separately. We are able to offer widgets into our data and condensed and tailored data sets relevant for particular functions which would resolve this.

As Canberra continues to grow, there is a great opportunity to further increase awareness of the Directory and the Diary, to reach new audiences and to include additional information. VCA proposes that the ACT Government investigates ways that it can promote the use of these existing platforms within all Directorates and Government agencies. This will complement VCA's ongoing work to seeks ways to increase our Directory and Diary audience.

Collaboratively, we need to ensure not only that services and information are delivered efficiently by both government and community organisations, but also that members of the community are aware of what is available to support them and of opportunities to engage in community activities.

Recommendation 4: Volunteer Passport Project to streamline volunteer recruitment, support and retention

In 2018-19 VCA recommended that the ACT Government fund a Volunteer Passport Project to streamline volunteer recruitment, onboarding, and retention. Further consultations this year have consistently identified that a single portal would help to reduce red tape, make recruiting, onboarding and training volunteers more efficient, and reduce administrative costs and duplication when volunteers move between organisations.

Since August 2018 VCA has been working to deliver a project under the ACT Community Services Industry Strategy Workforce Plan. The project will deliver a framework and tools to support consistent onboarding, supervision, peer support, coaching, and mentoring of employees and volunteers across the Community Services Industry. Consultations

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undertaken as part of this project have reiterated the community's appetite for a more streamlined approach to recruiting, onboarding, supporting, and retaining volunteers.

Some of the benefits that a volunteer passport is expected to provide include:

- Significant savings for the ACT Government and for volunteer involving organisations over the long-term by reducing duplication of effort and double-handling. In the ACT, approximately 40% of volunteers surveyed in 2013 had volunteered for more than one organisation in the past 12 months.^{xi} A centralised system where personal details, qualifications, training, certificates, competencies, and references are kept would aid organisations in their recruitment and retention of volunteers.
- Enhancing the experience of volunteers and creating pathways for volunteers to give their time to multiple organisations. This 'shared economy' of volunteers could address issues with volunteer recruitment and ensure that volunteer effort is channelled in a way that generates maximum impact.

The Volunteer Passport described above is a unique solution to issues facing volunteers and volunteer involving organisations nationally. This is an opportunity to develop an innovative product here in the ACT, and to demonstrate nationally how a coordinated, streamlined approach can be used to improve volunteer involvement now and into the future.

When the Community Services Industry Strategy Project comes to a close in March 2019 VCA will reach out to the ACT Government to further progress the Volunteer Passport Project.

Working together to support volunteering and community connection in the ACT
VCA would like to acknowledge that it receives considerable support, including funding, from the ACT Government. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with the ACT Government, our members, and other partners, to advance volunteering and community information in the Canberra Region.

VCA welcomes the opportunity to provide further information and evidence to support the recommendations in this submission, and to discuss our submission in further detail.

ⁱ <https://www.budgetconsultation.act.gov.au/where-your-money-goes>

ⁱⁱ ABS General Social Survey Table 23, available online at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4159.0>

ⁱⁱⁱ ABS General Social Survey Table 24

^{iv} Mission Australia (2017) Youth Survey Report, available online at <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/research-evaluation/youth-survey>

^v Volunteering ACT Selfless Service: The State of Volunteering in the ACT 2013

^{vi} Volunteering Western Australia (May 2015) The Economic, Social and Cultural Value of Volunteering to Western Australia, available online at https://volunteeringwa.org.au/assets/downloads/vwa_report%20book-web.pdf

^{vii} ACT Volunteering Statement Action Plan, available online at http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1202629/ACT-VOLUNTEERING-STATEMENT.pdf

^{viii} <https://www.health.act.gov.au/about-our-health-system/office-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

^{ix} https://www.actlabor.org.au/media/42966/policy_summary_4_-_wrap_up_and_costing.pdf

^x <https://apps.treasury.act.gov.au/budget/budget-2018-2019/budget-speech>

^{xi} ABS General Social Survey, table 23