



Information brief on the impact of Job Services Australia on volunteering, December 2009

The new system for job seekers

The commencement of the Job Services Australia (JSA) program on July 1, 2009 is the Rudd government's \$4.9 billion response to the challenge of providing sustainable solutions to unemployment. The principal program innovation is the streaming (according to level of support need) of job seekers.

But for the volunteering community the key issue is the requirement, usually after 12 months in a JSA service, for job seekers aged 18 to 49 to be in a Work Experience Activity. There are nine major activity types, including "*Voluntary Work in the community and not for profit sector*".

"Work for the dole" schemes, a primary vehicle under the previous system, will not be run in the same way because providers no longer receive specific funding for the work associated with it. Work for the dole may now be in effect just another Work Experience Activity.

Note that volunteering can be an option at any time for job seekers. Stakeholders have reported a range of issues, for instance, volunteers in the 'intensive activity' phase which can require opportunities for long hours over a short period. There are relatively few of these opportunities.

JSA providers can use Employment Pathway Funds to access volunteering. This is paid to providers per job seeker at a rate that varies according to the circumstances of that job seeker. While this expenditure is flexible, i.e. is not a fixed amount for any one job seeker, it is not clear if and how this money would be applied to volunteering places.

What does all this mean for the volunteering sector?

The danger is that volunteering may be regarded as the easy alternative to work for the dole and other schemes, to meet the "Work Experience Activity".

A potential clash with the principles of volunteering?

A basic principle of volunteering is that it is of that person's own free will.

The volunteer sector has long expressed concern over arrangements under mutual obligation which require an activity test where that test is met by volunteering. But the potential under JSA is a basic clash of principles between volunteering as a community-based commitment of free will, versus volunteering as a means for those volunteers to comply with income support requirements.

The practical problems

Volunteering Victoria has been made aware of a number of examples where JSA providers have, in effect, required volunteer organisations to act like an employer or employer's agent by -

- Requiring organisations to notify of non-attendance by volunteer
- Fill in and send timesheets for the volunteer
- Entering into what is in effect a "contract" with the JSA providers and requiring "risk assessment", even if the organization has appropriate policies and coverage

All these suggest a model representing a basic change in the culture of volunteering. It is also unworkable for many small volunteer organisations. Even large organisations are challenged by a range of compliance requirements that raise a range of legal and governance issues, and which may in the end create a disincentive to creating volunteering opportunities.

But it is the sheer volume of job seekers and scale of compliance requirements that is the biggest challenge for the volunteer community, given its minimal infrastructure. This can be captured by a

single question: how can thousands of new volunteer opportunities be created, supported and managed, by a poorly resourced volunteer community?

The future

The potential is for a significant distortion of volunteering, since Centrelink obligated volunteers will, and already are, flooding volunteering opportunities. This is not the primary purpose of volunteering.

The potential is that the focus of volunteering will shift to the challenge of helping job seekers meet Centrelink requirements, rather than the actual purpose of volunteering which is to promote participation in the community, with volunteers doing so of their own free will, in order to build community connection and strength.

This potential distortion of volunteering does not reflect the aspirations of most volunteer organisations. It therefore carries the risk of undermining volunteer relationships and the perception of volunteering and its value to one's community.

Volunteering Victoria has undertaken to consult with volunteer organisations about their experiences under the new "work experience activity" regime. Early indications are alarming, with reports of high levels of job seekers, very significant paperwork to be completed being required and substantial variation in these requirements even within the same region.

The grass roots impact on the volunteer community is demonstrated by the many frustrated job seeker community members, some of whom report little support from JSA providers, showing up often with a bundle of paperwork requirements that few volunteer organisations could meet.

We are currently opening discussion with DEEWR about how this program can work. We need to make our voice heard in the implementation of this program. We need to engage critically, but be solution focused. Volunteering Victoria has already received a lot of detailed information from volunteer organisations as well as feedback on priorities and actions that should be considered. We will set up a more formal process in the New Year.

Volunteering Victoria's Recommendations for Actions

In a recent letter to DEEWR we make a number of recommendations. The key ones are that they -

1. Meet with volunteering stakeholders immediately
2. Assess the current program and contract arrangements to determine their adequacy, and look to move towards a practice-based partnership between JSA providers and volunteer organisations, where volunteer organisations are heard as key stakeholders. This should include new referral guidelines, realistic requirements on volunteer organisations and ongoing monitoring and evaluation by DEEWR
3. The requirements under 2. should become a formal program requirement, applied in a consistent manner across Victoria (and potentially nationally)
4. Make it a requirement that agreement be reached between JSA providers and volunteer organisations as to the required resources and resource allocation necessary to make the volunteer-related component of the program work for job seekers. This is based on the clear rationale that provision of volunteering opportunities is a program input, and like all inputs should be paid for or at least recognised and understood.

For more information, or to share your experience on this issue, contact James Wilson, Policy and Advocacy Officer, by [e-mail](#) or at 03 8327 8501. You can also elect to subscribe to our eBulletin to receive updates on ongoing actions about JSA and other topics.

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