Victorian Government
COVID SUBMISSION 2020

TO:	Victoria State Government
FROM:	Volunteering Victoria
DATE:	3 July 2020
STATUS:	Final

Thank you for the opportunity

Volunteering Victoria welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC) on the Victorian Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging time for organisations and communities. This submission provides an opportunity to highlight the valuable work that volunteers undertake and promote lessons learned for government to better support our sector, now, moving forward, and in the case of future pandemics.

This submission seeks to inform PAEC on three matters:

1. The Impact of the Pandemic on Volunteering in Victoria

    i.   The significant slowdown of formal volunteering activities.
    ii.   The surge of interest in formal volunteering opportunities.
    iii.   The rise of "informal" volunteering
    iv.   The suspension of employee volunteering programs.
    v.   The redeployment of volunteers and staff.
    vi.   The transformation and transition to online and remote operations.
    vii.   The challenge of retaining volunteers and reengaging volunteers following the pandemic.

2. The actions taken by the Victorian Government in relation to the volunteering sector

    i.   The provision of DHHS information sessions.
    ii.   The postponement of the Victorian Volunteering Strategy following the pandemic.

3. Recommendations to help future-proof the volunteer sector from pandemics.

    i.   Improve communications, consultation and engagement with the volunteering sector.
    ii.   Establish a short-term taskforce to reinvigorate volunteering, while the broader strategic framework for the sector is implemented.
    iii.   Facilitation with digital transition for small volunteer involving organisations.
    iv.   Develop an emergency volunteer and spontaneous emergency volunteer framework – and resource its implementation.

ABOUT VOLUNTEERING VICTORIA

Volunteering Victoria is the peak body for the volunteering sector in Victoria. We are a growing membership-based organisation, currently representing over 400 members.

Volunteering Victoria works collaboratively with the Victorian Government. The volunteering portfolio responsibility currently lies with the Parliamentary Secretary for Carers and Volunteers, and the Minister for Child Protection, Disability, Ageing and Carers. Our direct partnership and working relationship is with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

We work with other strategic partner organisations in Victoria to promote and build a vibrant, strong volunteering community that is inclusive, respected and sustainable.

We lead research, policy, professional development, hold sector-wide events and undertake innovative initiatives, in conjunction with volunteer peak bodies across Australia, to support the sector. A core part of our work is providing training for leaders of volunteers on the National Standards for Involving Volunteers. Our Continuing Professional Development Program recognises and encourages the professionalism of leaders of volunteers.

We define volunteering as "time willingly given without financial gain and for the common good". This broad definition encompasses diverse of organisational and informal means of civic participation.

Volunteering Victoria works alongside the Victorian Volunteer Support Network (VVSN) to support the volunteering sector. This place-based network of Volunteer Support Organisations (VSOs, otherwise known as Volunteer Resource Centres) facilitates volunteer placements, regional coordination and capacity building for leaders of volunteers.

CONTEXT

About volunteering in Victoria.

Volunteers are an enormous workforce in Victoria and Australia. More than 1.5 million Victorians are volunteers[1]. Volunteer services have many intangible benefits for Victorian communities and also contribute the equivalent of tens of billions of dollars in value to the state (the latest estimation of this contribution was $23 billion[2]).

---

1   Ministerial Council for Volunteer's Volunteers in Victoria: Trends, Challenges and Opportunities Report, 2017. P. 6.
2   Ibid. (Note that this figure will be updated with the forthcoming State of Volunteering Report to be published later in 2020).

Volunteering occurs in almost every sector, including the following:

◊ Advocacy
◊ Aged Care
◊ Animal
◊ Arts and culture
◊ Community services
◊ Disability
◊ Education
◊ Emergency services
◊ Environment

◊ Faith-based
◊ Health
◊ Heritage
◊ Justice
◊ Legal
◊ Local government
◊ Men's sheds
◊ Mental health
◊ Migrant services

◊ Museum
◊ Neighbourhood Houses
◊ Recreation
◊ Seniors
◊ Sport
◊ Tourism

Volunteers deliver services which are essential for the Victorian Government. Volunteers, for example, provide emergency services, parks and environmental management, legal and advocacy services, family safety services and many other human and community services. Put simply, the Victorian Government would likely not be able to adequately deliver for Victorian communities without the participation of volunteers.

The benefits of volunteering do not just flow to Victorian communities, but also to the volunteer. There are well-established mental and physical health benefits of volunteering for volunteers, not to mention increases in social supports and opportunities for skills development and career progression.

It is critical that government understand that an effective volunteering sector does not happen by itself. A thriving volunteering sector requires effective strategy, deep sector consultation, facilitating infrastructure, sound investments, well developed government policy, sensible regulation, inter- and intra-governmental coordination and so on.

1. THE IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON VOLUNTEERING.

As with most other parts of society, the COVID-19 pandemic was the biggest, most disruptive shock to the volunteering sector in living memory.

In Victoria, in addition to health concerns and the spread of the virus among members of the community, the key impacts to volunteering were from the requirements for social distancing of 1.5 metres, restrictions to gatherings and specific activities and the Victorian Government's 'stay at home' messaging.

Although it was not articulated as one of the four reasons Victorians could leave their homes, volunteering was allowed during the pandemic, provided organisations and volunteers adhered to all other government restrictions and safety requirements.

This section outlines six key impacts the COVID-19 pandemic had on the volunteering sector.

1. i. THE SIGNIFICANT SLOWDOWN OF FORMAL VOLUNTEERING ACTIVITIES

The majority of volunteering activities ceased during the pandemic. This was confirmed in early organisational research and publications.

- Volunteering Victoria undertook a survey of its membership in the early weeks of the pandemic. 38% of Volunteering Victoria member organisations surveyed between 2-16 April 2020 had "ceased all volunteering services, activities and programs". Half of those surveyed were still delivering "some" of their volunteering services, activities and programs.[3]

- Research by the Australian National University found that almost two-thirds of Australian volunteers stopped volunteering during the pandemic (Australia-wide).[4]

- The Australian Institute of Community Directors surveyed the community sector on impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] Of the organisations surveyed which rely on volunteers to deliver programs and services, 58% had experienced a drop in volunteer numbers as a result of the pandemic, with 43% reporting a "significant" drop in numbers.[6]

A number of factors contributed to the slowdown of volunteering, including:

- Social distancing requirements. As in the context of employment and other activities, the need to maintain distance and avoid contact meant that volunteering was physically untenable in many working and community environments.

- Health and safety requirements and the duty of care. Even where organisations could potentially meet health and safety requirements for their volunteers, a lack of resources to adapt workplaces and a tendency to err on the side of caution when managing risks, contributed to reduced volunteering activities.

---

3   Response rate of 165 organisations. Some caution should be used with the data from this survey which was conducted in the midst of pandemic. Those who had capacity to respond and some people who were stood down may not have replied.

4   https://csrm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/6/The_experience_of_volunteers_during_the_early_stages_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_0.pdf P. 3.

5   https://communitydirectors.com.au/research/covid19-community-sector-impact-survey -

6   As another example of the importance of volunteers to numerous sectors, three quarters of the respondents to the overall survey in the community sector relied on volunteers to deliver programs or services.

- Fears of being fined. There were widespread concerns that organisations might inadvertently be doing the wrong thing and they or their volunteers would be fined.

- Financial and legal liabilities. Volunteers are generally not covered by Workers Compensation and therefore organisations need specific volunteer insurance to provide cover for volunteers. However, volunteer insurance does not cover volunteers for illness (only injury) and hence these policies do not cover pandemics.

- Adhering to general government regulations. Volunteering is subject to government regulation, such as requirements to obtain Working with Children Checks and Police Checks. While necessary, complying with these obligations created additional barriers for volunteers and organisations as checks are problematic to obtain under pandemic restrictions.

- People in higher risk categories. The profile of the volunteer workforce tends to be older. Health concerns for people in higher risk categories slowed volunteer activities, because the volunteer themselves are older or their family and social networks were generally older.

- Blanket business policies. Some organisations made organisation-wide policy decisions that impacted their entire workforce, including volunteer programs (even in the case that volunteering may have continued safely or be adapted to remote or digital forms of volunteerism).

1. ii. THE SURGE OF INTERESTS IN FORMAL VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES

While volunteering activities slowed down and there were significantly fewer opportunities to formally volunteer, there was also a widespread increase of interest in volunteering opportunities from the public across Victoria (and also in other states and territories).

Some examples of the surge in interest in volunteering include:

- Over 800 people registered to volunteer through an Emergency COVID Volunteering Platform established by Volunteering Victoria[7]. This platform (developed in collaboration with Volunteering Western Australia) was intended to support the sector to manage the surge in interest of volunteering – not to encourage more people to volunteer.

- Volunteer Support Organisations around Victoria reported vastly increased expressions of interest to volunteer. For example, Volunteering Geelong managed an increase of EOIs from the usual 300-350 to 798 in April alone

7   See https://emergency.volunteer.org.au/

- In Queensland, where there are greater resources and programs in place to manage emergency volunteering, there were 28,000 volunteer registrations for the 'Care Army'[8]. An initiative this size to effectively manage the volunteering workforce was possible because of a partnership between Volunteering Queensland and the Queensland Government, with well established, dedicated and ongoing resources for emergency volunteering services which predated the pandemic.

Organisations (including Volunteering Victoria, Volunteering Support Organisations, local councils and others) that set up registers to manage expressions of interest and connect them to volunteer roles, found that due to the cessation of volunteering activities, there was a distinct shortage of supply of volunteer roles to provide to interested people. Note that there were some exceptions and some organisations continued to operate or increased their activities. However, the vast majority of people wanting to volunteer during the pandemic, likely would not have formal volunteering opportunities to do so.

In a positive development for some organisations, there was some anecdotal feedback of interest in volunteer roles from highly skilled people, such as professionals who were out of work and who wanted to contribute skills like graphic design, online skills, mentoring and tutoring. There remains a challenge of converting this volunteer interest from temporary crisis volunteering into formal ongoing roles. However, this overall trend represents a possible opportunity in the case of future pandemics to better harness skills from the paid workforce.

1. iii. THE RISE OF INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

With an abundance of good will in the community and without more formal channels to contribute to others, informal forms of volunteering proliferated. This type of volunteering tended not to be done through incorporated organisations. Many of these informal organisations and networks came about through the power of social media. Via these channels, people were able to directly help others in their community.

An example of informal pandemic volunteering was the #ViralKindness movement and the emergence of "mutual aid" groups. These are place-based and sometimes cohort-focused groups formed to help others during the pandemic. These community care groups focused on supporting neighbours in need or who were isolated.

8   https://volunteeringqld.org.au/volunteers/care-army

1.   iv. THE SUSPENSION OF EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERING PROGRAMS.

Employee volunteer programs provide businesses, governments, and other private entities the ability for employees to give back to communities. During the pandemic these programs stopped operating. Most likely the continuation of employee volunteering programs was a low priority for businesses and volunteer-involving organisations during the pandemic. However, it should be noted that employee volunteer programs provide the employee with physical and mental health benefits, including connection to community which could have increased wellbeing during times of social restrictions.

1.   v. THE REDEPLOYMENT OF VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF.

With some services stopping and other services ramping up, entire workforces were transitioned. Both paid and unpaid staff were affected. Many organisations stood down volunteers and used paid staff to fill those roles and provide those services. In other cases, students were recruited to provide services in place of volunteers.

Volunteer Support Services played a key role in facilitating organisations to transition their workforces.

In limited cases organisations sought to redeploy volunteers between organisations or formed informal coalitions and partnerships to pool resources and volunteer efforts. This process was driven by local needs as they emerged, to respond swiftly to the crisis.

1.   vi. THE TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSITION TO ONLINE AND REMOTE OPERATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for organisations to modernise and streamline their practices. This includes initiatives to train people to operate online, migrating courses to online delivery, inducting volunteers online and connecting to clients and community members through other digital means. Much of this work was innovative and improved efficiencies. This was likely easier for medium to large organisations from more well-resourced or coordinated sectors.

For other, smaller, and more informal organisations with limited resources (with the funds to afford online subscriptions, software, and hardware such as phones, tablets and computers) the transition to digital forms of participation has been a barrier.

In addition to a lack of information technology capacity, volunteers from some sectors have lower levels of digital literacy – and therefore more need for training and support.

1.   vii. THE CHALLENGE OF RETAINING AND REENGAGING VOLUNTEERS FOLLOWING THE PANDEMIC

The biggest concern of the volunteering sector is the retention of the volunteering workforce. The top concern of the Volunteering Victoria membership has been remaining engaged with volunteers, with a fear that many volunteers will not return once the pandemic restrictions are lifted. For many organisations this is no small problem given the large investments that organisations outlay in the recruitment, induction, training, and management of volunteers.

2. KEY ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT

During what was a challenging and fast-evolving timeline, the Victorian Government undertook two key actions which related to the volunteering sector.

2.   i.   THE PROVISION OF DHHS INFORMATION SESSIONS.

Through consultation for this submission and other fora, a strong theme that comes through from the volunteering sector was the need for up-to-date, accurate and clarifying information. In the same way that enormous pressure was put on the paid workforce, volunteer-involving organisations had to make quick decisions on whether to continue delivering services, stand down volunteers or adapt to keep them active and safe. Informed decisions required reliable and timely information.

The information sessions provided by DHHS and other peak body organisations enabled leaders of volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations to understand their operating environment to the greatest extent possible.

Volunteer-involving organisations more likely looked to their relevant peak body associations, such as Volunteering Victoria, as a trusted conduit of communication. Therefore, government working with peak bodies to disseminate information about volunteers and programs is a strong and effective model of communication.

At the same time there remained confusion about restrictions as they applied to volunteering. Volunteering Victoria handled many enquiries about what constituted "essential work", confusion about the status of decisions made about particular forms of volunteering, and the status of government funding for certain volunteer services.

Concerns early in the pandemic both physical (of catching and spreading the virus) and of doing the wrong thing (being fined or putting volunteers at risk) caused a lot of organisations to stop their volunteer programs.

While there was information about volunteering on the DHHS website, in the early months of the pandemic it was limited and difficult to find. This is problematic considering the sheer quantity of volunteers and the broad scope of volunteer activities.

It was encouraging to see improved guidance developed over time, in particular guide sheets translated into other languages. These are not only useful for the volunteering sector, but also for the benefit of all Victorians as the volunteering sector plays an important role in engaging multicultural communities and disseminating information widely.

Some of our member's feedback for this submission sought more careful consideration of the impact of government decisions on the volunteering workforce, and more open channels of communication between the volunteering sector and government – once the crisis phase of the pandemic was over. While other members were content with the extent that the Victorian Government provided feedback and engaged with the sector. These differing views are likely because volunteering was impacted differently from sector to sector. Some sectors, such as the health sector, are more directly impacted by government decisions than other, more independent sectors.

2. ii. THE POSTPONEMENT OF THE VICTORIAN VOLUNTEERING STRATEGY

The pandemic interrupted the development and delivery of the Victorian Volunteer Strategy. This was necessary to comply with pandemic restrictions and avoid in-person and group meetings. However, the delay is a disappointment to Volunteering Victoria and the volunteering sector as the Victorian Government had gained momentum thorough face-to-face consultation in many regions across Victoria. Online engagement remains open while in-person workshops have been postponed.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

As we move beyond the crisis phase of the pandemic and towards managing it into the future, there remain concerns and pressures on volunteer-involving organisations. Coordinators and leaders of volunteers face uncertainly around funding for their volunteer programs, uncertainly around when their volunteer programs can re-commence, the question of whether volunteers will return as restrictions ease, and if not, how do they engage new younger volunteers to participate differently in community life.

The following recommendations will address these concerns and help to smooth the way to a revitalised Victoria as we come out of restrictions and reactivate communities through volunteering.

3. i. IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS, CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT WITH THE VOLUNTEERING SECTOR.

Volunteering Victoria enjoys a close and collaborative relationship with relevant areas of the Victorian Government and the Parliamentary Secretary for Carers and Volunteers. During the fast-paced crisis period early in the pandemic, the Victorian Government performed commendably to provide accurate information as soon as possible, under challenging circumstances.

It is easy to underestimate the complicated operating environments of volunteering organisations, including matters of government policy, regulation, legislation, finance, insurance, which cross state and federal jurisdictions and intersect across a range of other government portfolio sectors. This makes it even more imperative to speak directly to the volunteering sector and address issues in a timely fashion, with clear guidance on the implications of restrictions.

We recommend more prominent and specific guidance about volunteering on Victorian Government websites, including frequently asked questions and clearer articulation of how restrictions apply to volunteers.

Given the efficacy of information sessions provided in collaboration with DHHS, we also recommend further opportunities for consultation and feedback from the sector are provided (more information sessions with opportunities for questions and answers).

3. ii. ESTABLISH A SHORT-TERM TASKFORCE TO REINVIGORATE VOLUNTEERING WHILE THE BROADER STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE SECTOR IS DEVELOPED.

To support the volunteering sector, the Victorian Government needs:

◊ Ongoing communication and advice from the sector – via a Ministerial Taskforce or Ministerial Council

◊ Coordination across Victorian Government portfolios

◊ An articulated strategy, such as the forthcoming Victorian Volunteer Strategy

◊ Funding and resources allocated, in accordance with the Strategy for the most effective investments.

The Victorian Government has made a good start with the foundational strategic document "Priorities for Strengthening Volunteering in Victoria".[9] This establishes the Victorian Government's vision, intended outcomes and priorities for the volunteering sector. But with changing ministerial responsibilities over the past years, the volunteering community now needs the completion and implementation of the broader sector-supporting framework as soon as practicably possible, in the medium term.

In the short term, Volunteering Victoria recommends a temporary taskforce is convened (or a series of meetings are held) to develop immediate next steps for the sector. Such a model could follow in the footsteps of the Australian Government which established a range of commissions during the pandemic to consult with the various sectors and develop tangible plans and policies expeditiously.

This taskforce would have a mandate to develop a Victorian Volunteer Revitalisation Action Plan – which is the key concern of the volunteering sector at this time. The plan would not require additional funding. It could include greater coordination between government and peak bodies, and articulate improved public messaging on the importance of returning to volunteering safely. A recommended action point of the plan would be to assist with coordination with relevant agencies, such as Worksafe Victoria, to produce guidance directly relating to volunteers.

3.   iii. FACILITATION WITH TRANSITION TO DIGITAL AND REMOTE OPERATIONS.

One of the few silver linings of the pandemic for the volunteering sector has been the necessity to transition to more effective digital ways of recruiting, inducting and training volunteers. But for some smaller organisations with limited funds, digital adaption has been a barrier to engaging volunteers.

The Victorian Government should consider small grants (or coordinate with other government portfolios to broaden the criteria for existing grants) to enable organisations that do not have the capacity for this digital transition. Even small grants enable a great amount of volunteering activity as we come out of the pandemic.

We recommend consideration of a small one-off grants round for digital adaptation through the pandemic to cover the costs of:

◊   Digital facilities such as software licensing fees and online teaching platforms

◊   Initiatives that support improved digital literacy – particularly for the older aged and higher risk cohorts

◊   Hardware such as iPads, tablets and mobile phones.

9   https://www.volunteer.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/201810/Priorities-framework-MCV-Poster-FINAL_0.pdf

3. iv. DEVELOP AN EMERGENCY VOLUNTEER AND SPONTANEOUS EMERGENCY VOLUNTEER FRAMEWORK – AND RESOURCE ITS IMPLEMENTATION

The COVID-19 pandemic came on the back of the devastating 2019-2020 Bushfires. These dual disasters again highlight the need for more clearly delineated Victorian Government departmental responsibility for volunteers during emergencies (between DHHS and Emergency Management Victoria), further planning on how to coordinate and support emergency volunteers, ongoing sector capacity building, and regional systems in place to augment the capability of councils and volunteer-involving organisations when localised disasters occur.

Furthermore, there is a need for consistent and sustained funding for volunteering during emergencies, and crucially, resourcing is needed *before* inevitable emergencies happen (such as bushfires, floods, storms and future pandemics).

Volunteering Victoria does provide limited assistance within its capacity, however, if this function is properly resourced it will vastly lessen the impact on councils and volunteer-involving organisations and overall maximise volunteering potential.

Note that the nature of a pandemic is very unlike other forms of emergencies, such as bushfires, but in both cases the crisis is challenging for workforces to manage and dedicated resources to support this work leads to better outcomes, as evidenced by the Care Army in Queensland.

The Volunteering Sector: In Their Own Words.

IMPACT

"We have put our community and citizens science activities on hold. Volunteers are still working behind the scenes to develop the organisation and to keep social media and other communication lines open with our supporters."

"We have ceased or altered all face to face volunteer opportunities. Maintaining friendly visitor program over the phone"

"In some volunteer programs, we receive more inquiries. Some people have lost their jobs as a consequence of COVID-19. They want to spend their time helping others."

"Our Youth mentoring program is continuing to support young people across our region, but has changed from face-to-face delivery to remote contact via phone and video platforms. All mentor training will continue through live video engagement."

"Our volunteers in open space parks, bush reserves etc are having monthly working bees and social distancing. Weekly volunteer activities in these areas and committee/Friends Of meetings have ceased."

"We have little to no income, and reserves built up over years are being quickly depleted."

"We have gone from 300 volunteers to 5. Our volunteer transport is hugely impacted therefore patients are needing to find alternate transport methods."

ADAPTATION

"Services which can be provided virtually are ongoing. All direct client related services are suspended. Volunteer roles at head office have been suspended."

"All group based activities have been temporarily put on hold- so volunteers have been placed on hold in these areas. Also our 100+ volunteers aged 65+ we have also supported to take a break. We are in the process of developing remote volunteering roles to maintain engagement and hep to reduce the social isolation of our ageing clients and those clients living with a disability that are not getting out and about at the moment."

"Some volunteer roles we have had to cease completely. For other roles we have also lost a lot of volunteers as they simply have chosen to not engage at all during this period. For volunteer who want to remain connected to the organisation we are looking at new online ways for them to volunteer."

"Seeking to identify opportunities for online projects to keep connected and utilize skills differently. Planning to engage volunteers in using new online volunteer management platform."

"With the recent stresses within our community- drought, fire, floods and now pandemic- there is an increased level of anxiety within our younger population. As we are now moving to a remote mentoring platform, the GEM Program is exploring the opportunity to bring mentors in from around the state and country to contact and support our young people through this challenging period."

"Doing more online means it is easier for people to attend meetings/interviews/training rather than physically visiting the office"

CHALLENGES

"When we reopen we hope that our volunteers will be able to return. Without our volunteers we cannot offer our public programs to the public."

"Mental Health of some volunteers who would be isolated alone."

"Access to appropriate technology for some with enough data and call capacity to interact with mentees without impacting on their ability to maintain vital contact with their own family and friends."

"With no programs running we are concerned that we will not have the volunteer base to operate effectively once we are again permitted to resume programs"

"Aged volunteers worried about their safety and not getting enough information early to reduce their concerns."

"Social isolation of our volunteers. For many of our volunteers, volunteering is a major part of their life and often the only social activity they participate in."

"Funding shortfalls- as income stream has dropped by suspension of some of our volunteering programs such as corporate volunteering"