

Advocacy for and by the sector

VOLUNTEERING VICTORIA ADVOCACY FRAMEWORK

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1. INTRODUCTION

With an estimated 2.3 million volunteers, volunteering is both ubiquitous and impactful across Victoria. Volunteering is the lifeblood of our communities. Indeed, without volunteering there would be no 'community'. Volunteering is essential for the delivery of the missions of numerous organisations, and also for supporting the delivery of services provided by state and local governments.

Volunteering is not "free" and does not "just happen". Effective and meaningful volunteering comes with resourcing needs, meaningful leadership of volunteers, clear and coherent policy, regulations and legislation that both protect volunteers while maintaining realistic compliance on volunteer-involving organisations.

Maintaining a strong volunteering sector in Victoria is a broad remit and responsibility. Volunteering Victoria has finite resources to react and act proactively to ensure there is a thriving volunteering workforce. This framework outlines the approach Volunteering Victoria uses to undertake our advocacy role.

2. ABOUT ADVOCACY

Volunteering Victoria is a peak body that *advocates* for the *volunteering sector*. What does that all mean?

2.1 What is advocacy?

The word “advocacy” comes from the Latin ‘advocare’ and literally means ‘to call out for support’. The origins of advocacy date back to ancient Rome and Greece when well-established orators would perform as advocates or write orations specifically for pleading someone’s cause.

Other definitions include:

- » “putting a problem on the agenda, providing a solution to that problem and building support for acting on both the problem and the solution”.
- » “advocacy is a social change process affecting attitudes, social relationships and power relations, which strengthens civil society and opens up democratic spaces”. To fulfill its aspirations advocacy requires efforts coordination, strategic thinking, information, communication, outreach and mobilization.¹

2.2 What is a peak body?

Peak bodies play a unique role in our governance and society. As with definitions of advocacy, there are various definitions and views about what a peak body is and does.

A basic definition of a peak body is “an organisation which represents an entire sector of industry or the community to the government, often incorporating other organisations in that area.”²

Whereas the power of some peak bodies is derived from legislation, the power, status and function of Volunteering Victoria is gained from:

- our membership base, and
- our recognised status as a peak body from multiple levels of Australian governments.

¹ <https://www.culturepartnership.eu/en/publishing/advocacy-course/what-is-advocacy>

² <https://www.yourdictionary.com/peak-body>

2.3 What is a “sector”?

A sector is defined as “a distinct part or branch of a nation’s economy or society or of a sphere of activity such as education.”

Volunteering is an activity understood as “time willingly given, for the common good and without financial gain”. The “volunteering sector” comprises not just volunteers but volunteer-involving organisations, associated service providers, and even businesses that sell volunteering-related products and services to others in the sector.

The volunteering sector is a sector in its own right. It is also a “sector of sectors”.

The following sectors typically engage volunteers:

- » Arts
- » Aged care
- » Animal welfare
- » Board and committee leadership
- » Culture
- » Disability support services
- » Education and training
- » Emergency services
- » Environment
- » Faith-based
- » Festival
- » Health
- » Heritage
- » International aid and development
- » Libraries and museums
- » Law and order
- » Parenting, children and youth
- » Political
- » Welfare / community
- » Sports and active recreation
- » Tourism

2.4 Forms of advocacy

Advocacy initiatives can be delivered in many different ways. The forms of advocacy listed below are some common approaches to advocacy and among the techniques that we generally use.

2.4.1 Formal Submissions

Formal submissions are a key mechanism for Volunteering Victoria’s advocacy work. Governments, Commissions, regulatory bodies and other peak bodies seek input to their decision-making processes by calling for comment and/or recommendations from external parties via formal submissions.

Formal submissions are a strong part of the foundation of our advocacy work because there are many strengths to the approach. Submissions are:

- » Responsive to key priorities of government.
- » A window of opportunity to influence structural change and reform.
- » An opportunity to articulate and formalise the views of the peak body and the sector.
- » Helpful to identify key stakeholders and allies with whom to coordinate with and mobilise.

2.4.2 Position Papers

Position Papers are similar to formal submissions – they also provide information on a particular topic and outline a stance from the organisation. However, position papers may be developed at any time, for example in anticipation of pending reforms, or to get the organisation and others in the sector “on the same page”.

A position paper might be developed on a singular abstract topic, for example, what we consider volunteering and what we think does not meet the definition and intent of volunteering.

2.4.3 Victorian Government Ministerial engagement.

Typically, a government will appoint a Minister or Parliamentary Secretary with the responsibility for a portfolio. The portfolio responsibilities will include activities such as:

- » engaging with key stakeholders,
- » understanding challenges and opportunities,
- » organising appropriate resourcing from government, and
- » in general being a leader in the space.

The incumbent with the volunteering portfolio responsibility does all of these things for the “volunteering sector”.

In addition, many other Ministerial portfolios such as in “sports and active recreation”, “environment”, or “community services”, engage a volunteer workforce.

We primarily work with the Victorian Minister or Parliamentary Secretary with responsibility for volunteering. We also aim to engage other relevant government Ministers to bring issues to their attention or make recommendations to them.

To advocate to Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries, we:

- » Write letters alerting them of an issue.
- » Request meetings to discuss an issue.
- » Develop briefs for them to understand an issue.

2.4.4 Political parties

All political parties have their own reasons for supporting volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations. They may have differing views on how the volunteering sector should be resourced and which rules should apply to which volunteers.

We work with all political parties³ to advocate for the appropriate support and resourcing for the volunteering sector. We aim to incorporate the interests of the volunteering sector in political party platforms.

2.4.5 Victorian Government Departments

Not every advocacy issue needs to be elevated to the top decision-makers. Victorian Government Departments regularly make decisions that impact the volunteering workforce. There are many barriers to volunteering. So even small administrative changes can have large implications for volunteers. We work directly with government departments to ensure that their regulations and processes are streamlined.

2.4.6 Campaigns

A campaign will identify goals to achieve, engage allies and “target” a decision-maker or an organisation. Sometimes a critical, pending issue will necessitate a swift advocacy response from the sector. For issues that require long term or significant attention, dedicated campaigns are undertaken to help raise awareness of an issue and call for action to bring about positive change.

³ Provided their platform does not contradict core values and ethics.

2.4.7 Public awareness initiatives

Public awareness campaigns are used to provide the community with the knowledge and awareness to help them to make informed decisions regarding their involvement or response to issues, action or events that have the potential to affect them in a substantial way. Public awareness initiatives might be undertaken via professional videography, media, social media and through traditional media.

2.4.8 Advocacy Special Interest Group

We advocate for our members and our member organisations are also advocates in their own right. In 2021 we launched the Volunteering Victoria Advocacy Special Interest Group for our members that are interested in the topic and want to develop advocacy skills.

4. WHY IS ADVOCACY IMPORTANT FOR VOLUNTEERING VICTORIA?

Advocacy is a core pillar and purpose of Volunteering Victoria. As one of the ‘ancillary objects’ of the organisation noted in the Volunteering Victoria Constitution, we “advance national research, policy and advocacy agendas relating to Volunteering.”⁴

Our Strategic Plan (2019-21) identifies advocacy as one of our organisation’s four priorities.

Advocacy for and by the sector

We build and maintain strong mutually beneficial relationships to ensure engagement and investment for the volunteering sector.

- » Influence State government and members on policy matters that impact volunteering
- » Support VA, State Peaks and others to succeed in the changing world of volunteering
- » Enable members to advocate within their own sector (for example local government, own peak body etc.) to support the rights, well-being and interests of volunteers
- » Develop and promote resources that improve the volunteering sector and the volunteering experience.⁵

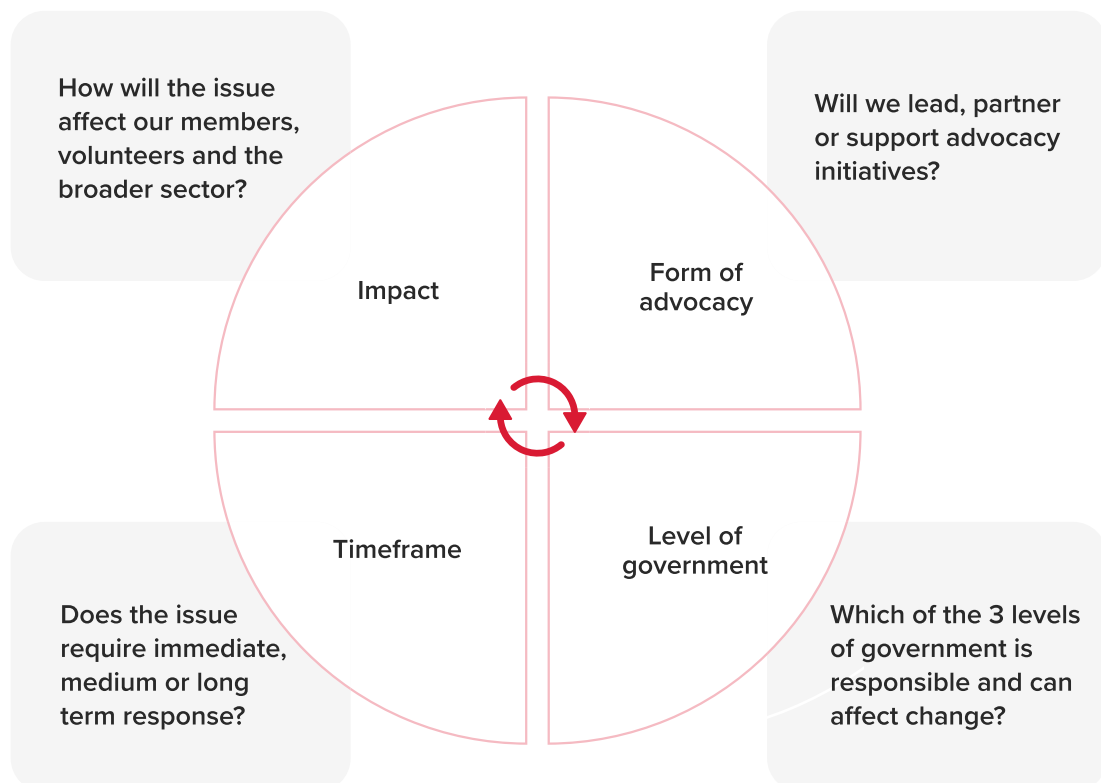
⁴ <http://volunteeringvictoria.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Constitution-FINAL-Approved-2-December-2013.pdf>
⁵ <http://volunteeringvictoria.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Strategic-Plan1.pdf>

In essence, we are the voice of the volunteering sector.

- » We represent a large, diverse, and critical membership base.
- » Whether it is paid or unpaid, volunteer leadership is a profession which requires skills, experience, and professional development. We look out for the interests of the profession.
- » While there are large influential volunteer-involving organisations and Volunteer Support Organisations that represent smaller regions of Victoria, we are the only voice for volunteering across the state.
- » Given that volunteering is spread across so many sectors and geographic areas, facing various challenges and changes, the benefit of having one organisation at the nexus of state-wide challenges and opportunities is fundamentally important.

5. OUR FRAMEWORK FOR ADVOCACY

The following factors must be taken into consideration before and during our advocacy response to an issue affecting the volunteering sector.



5.1 Advocacy Principles

There are many issues and causes that our organisation could advocate for, and many different methods or approaches we can use to achieve our goals. To ensure the resources of Volunteering Victoria used to their maximum potential and focused on areas with greatest likelihood to see positive change, the following advocacy principles guide our advocacy work.

Stewardship	We act in the interest of our members at all times. Our power comes from our collective interest.
Collaborative	Advocacy is more powerful when organisations pool resource and reinforce each other’s messages. We form and maintain strategic partnerships on common-interest issues. Wherever possible we consult or partner with relevant organisation or groups when developing, supporting or delivery advocacy initiatives
Unique Value	We lead with our value proposition as singularly able to bring a sector-wide volunteering perspective to state-wide issues. We complement the expertise of other organisations and volunteers in the sector.
Connections	Not every interaction should be an ask for additional funding and resources. We interact with high level government decision-makers and others in our sector with a view to long-term change.
Innovative	As an organisation with limited resources, and in a competitive funding environment, we seek innovative solutions. We embrace solutions to problems in the context of finite resources.
Leadership	We do not shy away from telling decision-makers what they need to hear. We may have strong positions, but we advocate in a constructive manner.
Strategic	Our advocacy messages and approaches build on our strategies, plans and policies.

5.2 Advocacy Categories

Different advocacy issue will have a different level of urgency and require a different level of resourcing depending on the type of issue and type of response required to meet the advocacy initiative’s goal.

- Long term –** ongoing and systemic issues that disproportionately and significantly affect the volunteering sector over a long period. (E.g. the decline of formal volunteering or the transition away from traditional models of volunteering).
- Medium term –** key national and state issues to be monitored regularly (E.g. the development of the Victorian Government’s Victorian Volunteering Strategy).
- Immediate –** issues that are acutely time critical where responses must be immediate or time specific. (E.g. loss or changing funding models for Volunteer Support Services).

We operate with and advocate to all three levels of Australian governments.

The Australian Government
(Federal Government)

We are a foundation member of Volunteering Australia. We collaborate with and support the policy and advocacy efforts led by Volunteering Australia to Federal decision-makers.

The Victorian Government
(State Government)

Our key working relationship is with the Victorian Government – which also has an interest in matters for the whole of the state.

79 Councils and Shires
(Local Government)

Local Governments are independent entities, running under the auspices of the Victorian Government.

Local governments are not only among our valued members, but also play a key role in place-based support for community volunteering.

5.3 Our advocacy role

Or members, volunteer-involving organisations and others in the community are also often well placed to initiate, partner or lead advocacy initiatives. It is therefore important to recognise our multiple roles when it comes to delivering a comprehensive and effective advocacy approach for the whole of the sector.

Lead –	Where appropriate we will lead and resource advocacy initiatives that align with our priorities and strategic objectives.
Partner –	We regularly engage in partnerships with organisations that have shared objectives and complementary skills or expertise to strengthen and enhance the effectiveness of advocate initiatives.
Support –	we support advocacy issues that align with our strategic objectives and priorities. We also have an important role to build the capacity of volunteer-involving organisations to engage, partner or lead advocacy campaigns.

5.4 Determining advocacy priorities.

In a large and diverse sector, there will always be many valid and important advocacy issues. As it is not possible to advocate at an equal level for all issues. Prioritising advocacy issues is important.

Much like risk management frameworks, we must prioritise our advocacy approaches to issues as they arise. Some long-term issues mainly require regular ongoing discussions with the sector as they adapt to socio-economic change and disruptions (e.g. in the green corner). Other issues require our immediate attention (in the high impact, immediate corner).

	Immediate	Medium term	Long term
Low impact	We will act responsively and decisively when these issues arise.		
Medium impact			
High impact			We will take a more structured strategic approach to these kinds of issues.

Along with the immediacy and urgency of issues, the following principles will guide our responses:

- » We will prioritise our efforts on the issues that affect the whole volunteering sector.
- » At times we focus on a subsection of our membership due to significant impacts or risks that require attention and actions, for example reforms to disability service provision and volunteer screening.

Informing Advocacy Initiatives and Priorities

We draw on many sources to inform advocacy priorities, including but not limited to:

- » Open consultation with our membership – we are always listening to the concerns and suggestions of our members.
- » Formal and informal consultation for policy submissions.
- » Membership surveys
- » Research – e.g. on the decline of formal volunteering rates or the impact of COVID.
- » Feedback during forums, AGMs and events.
- » Discussions in networks and special interest groups.
- » Collaborations with our strategic partners

In addition to this Advocacy Framework, we will develop an Advocacy Strategy to guide internal prioritisation and long-term planning.

6. CONCLUSION

This document is the first public formalisation of our how we advocacy activities. Volunteering Victoria is committed to continuous improvement as we constantly reflect on how we operate and what can be done to improve our processes.

Volunteering Victoria must remain adaptable and versatile. Given the dynamic and resource-limited operating environment in which we operate, it is not feasible to maintain a rigid degree of planning and formal processes to action our advocacy activities.

This framework provides a tool and guidance to fulfil a key role of our organisation, and by updating this documents and others, it will be used in the future to reflect on how we can improve our advocacy function.

