



## **Community Giving in First Nations Communities in Gippsland:**

Strengths, Barriers, and Opportunities.



### **Acknowledgment of Country**

Volunteering Victoria acknowledges the Bunurong Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples, the traditional custodians of the land on which our office stands, and we pay our respects to them, their culture and their Elders past and present.



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Volunteering Victoria welcomes members of the LGBTIQ+ communities.



## Introduction

Volunteers contribute their time for free and for the greater good of their community, delivering essential services and providing invaluable support and connection. Volunteering or contributing to community outside of paid roles occurs in all communities in different practices and forms. Many cultures including Australia's First Nations communities, have longstanding practices of community giving. Western conceptualisations and understandings of volunteering focus on the distinction between organisational or role-based volunteering, and more informal forms of community support and contribution. However, these binary definitions do not adequately capture the diverse forms of community giving that occurs across communities.

First Nations communities in Australia have a long history of giving their time to support their family, kinship groups, and broader community. Anecdotally, First Nations Peoples report giving their time through both direct support of community members and activities, and in structured roles, such as on organisational boards or advisory groups. However, First Nations communities do not necessarily relate to the concept of volunteering as a distinct practice, but rather see community giving as an intrinsic part of living in community.

The aim of the project *Community Giving in First Nations Communities in Gippsland* was to explore the various ways that people give their time and the meaning that they impart to this contribution. Program and funding initiatives for First Nations communities have traditionally operated from a deficit-based approach. This project sought to understand the valuable ways that First Nations Peoples in Gippsland support and sustain each other, using a strengths-based model and underpinned by the principle of self-determination. The project also aimed to explore socially constructed barriers identified by participants, that impact on their capacity to contribute to community.

## Background to the Volunteer Management Activity (VMA)

The VMA is a federally funded program that has historically provided resources to Volunteer Support Organisations (VSOs). These organisations have previously supported volunteer involving organisations through the provision of advice, training, and volunteer placement. Volunteering Victoria has previously provided this program in the Gippsland region on Gunaikurnai country due to a gap in service provision. The structure of the VMA program changed in 2020, with new funding allocated to promote volunteer opportunities for three priority groups – First Nations Peoples, newly arrived migrants, and people with disability. The new structure has two distinct but complementary programs of work:

- » Breaking Down Barriers (BDB) Program; and
- » Online Volunteer Management (OVM)

Collectively this program aims to create a thriving volunteering culture, which meets the changing demands for capable and committed volunteers in local communities across Australia. The VMA also aims to increase opportunities for people to participate in the social and economic life of their broader community through volunteering, by building effective volunteering practices and opportunities within organisations and communities. Under the new structure Volunteering Victoria has only provided services under VMA1. Volunteering Victoria will no longer oversee service provision in the Gippsland region under VMA5.

As part of VMA1 Volunteering Victoria aimed to develop a further understanding of First Nations community giving in the Gippsland region, enabling us to hand over preliminary learnings to the consortium taking over service delivery in Gippsland from July 2022 (VMA5). Cognisant of the importance of strengths-based approaches and the need for self-determination of First Nations communities, a project plan was developed that would allow for the voices of First Nations communities to be heard and their priorities communicated to government.

## Methodology

The project focused on engaging First Nations communities or organisations in the Gippsland region to explore practices and concepts of community giving. The project initially commenced as a mapping project, planning to partner with an Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation (ACCO) to explore the way that they engage volunteers and identify areas where they required further support. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent pressure on local ACCOs, and feedback from the community, the methodology for the project was adjusted to instead engage more broadly with community.

Information was collected through three yarn ups (group discussions) on community giving. The discussions were intended to be exploratory in nature, using initial open-ended questions and then exploring the topics and themes that emerged through the sessions. A question guide was developed to support the process.

The yarn ups were promoted through Local Aboriginal Networks, place-based Aboriginal Community Brokers, and ACCOs. Flyers advertising the yarn ups were placed on community notice boards and on social media. Participants were provided with \$100 gift vouchers to recognise the value of their contribution to the project.

Volunteering Victoria partnered with Community First Development, a First Nations Community Development organisation, to plan, develop, and implement the project. A staff member from Community First Development participated in the development of project information and guides and participated in the yarn ups.

## The yarn ups

Three yarn ups were held across three different locations in Gippsland. They were conducted at ACCOs with the aim of providing a culturally safe space for participants.

Participation varied across the groups:

- » **Yarn up 1:** Three participants, all First Nations community members.
- » **Yarn up 2:** Ten participants, all Aboriginal community members; all participants were employed at an ACCO.
- » **Yarn up 3:** Seven participants, both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous community members; all participants were employed at an ACCO.

# Themes on Community Giving

Four key themes were identified across the three yarn ups:

- » Practices of community giving
- » Reasons and motivations for community giving
- » The value of community giving
- » Social and systemic barriers to community giving and volunteering

## 1. Practices of community giving

Participants in the yarn ups described the ways in which they and their communities engage in unpaid community giving using a diverse range of terms. These include:

“jumping in”

“putting your hand up”

“helping out”

“getting involved”

“doing things for community”

“supporting community”

“something that you just do”

With reference to the term volunteering, participants described that when they are giving back to their community or engaging in unpaid activities, they do not think of it as an act of ‘volunteering’.

*“When you’re doing things for community you don’t realise you’re volunteering, you’re just happy to do it without any question. You just say, ‘yeah I’ll put my hand up”:*

–Yarn up participant



Community members identified a diverse array of community giving activities based on their own experience and their observations of community giving across their communities including:

Community events including organising activities, celebrations, and on-country camps or cultural activities, setting up and packing up, catering, and assisting with transport to events.	Sport clubs and events including staffing the canteen, setting up matches and venues, organising teams, coaching, hosting regional sport events, and supporting children to get involved in sport and attend games.
Being on boards for organisations and community programs.	Helping family and friends with practical, financial, and emotional support.
Providing community transportation.	Food bank / food relief.
Providing childcare for community members who cannot afford childcare or outside of childcare hours.	Youth volunteering, through secondary school programs.
Emergency assistance / crisis support / bushfire relief.	Establishing and running grassroots community programs.
Cultural education at schools and community groups.	Participating on Elder boards and Elder councils.
Garden and facility maintenance.	Applying for funding / fundraising.
Foster Caring.	Supporting community elders.

Notably, volunteering through organisations was cited as much less common. Participants who hold paid roles at ACCOs described extensive amounts of unpaid work or overtime for the benefit of their communities. At times, these unpaid activities are an extension of their paid work, however they also described additional community giving outside of their paid roles and responsibilities.

*“You don’t think of yourself as a worker, you’re just serving your community. Sometimes that is through your role, but it can also be anytime of the day or week. We’re all doing it. The pay is nice, but we do it anyway...it’s part of community- one in, all in – we’re all in on it.”*

–Yarn up participant

Participants discussed that unpaid activities associated with supporting non-Indigenous organisations or more formal activities such as writing reports, should involve remuneration. The expectation to provide skilled or cultural contributions to non-Indigenous organisations without pay was described as tokenistic. When non-Indigenous organisations offer remuneration for these roles, it is seen to acknowledge the contribution of community, and demonstrate a genuine commitment to valuing Aboriginal culture, knowledge, and engagement.

## 2. Reasons and motivations for community giving

Participants across the three yarn ups discussed their reasons and motivations for community giving, particularly a desire to support their community. Most participants feel driven to engage in unpaid activities in response to identified needs or challenges faced by family members, friends, and the broader community. This commitment motivates them to identify opportunities to address community issues and give their time to provide assistance or develop community programs.

*“If there is an identified gap in community, we just do it. We use our initiative and if you’re happy to do it and capable of doing it, you do it.”*

–Yarn up participant

This commitment to community was also conveyed by those employed at ACCOs. Employees described giving their time outside of their paid hours in response to community need or gaps in funding. This contribution is not only considered an extension of their paid roles, but as a responsibility associated with being part of community.

*“We just don’t have access to additional funding. If crises happen that becomes the priority, and we do what we need to do in our own time. We joke that our job isn’t 9 to 5 and it’s true. We’re all giving time and it never stops for community.”*

–Yarn up participant

Other participants also described the contribution of their time to unpaid community activities as an intrinsic part of living in community that forms part of their everyday lives. They described community giving as something they feel compelled to do to ensure that the responsibility for supporting community is shared.

*“You know that you should do it. And if you don’t other people will, it always gets done. But you want to make sure it’s shared, and everyone is doing their bit. We’d all rather help out than see it not get done.”*

–Yarn up participant

Another reason cited for participating in community giving is that it developed skills and experience for future employment opportunities. This is considered particularly important for younger community members. One participant discussed the benefits of a secondary school-facilitated volunteer program.

*“They started it so that kids get experience, and it looks good on their resume if they have volunteer experience. It also means they’ve got references when they go for jobs.”*

– Yarn up participant

In reference to volunteering within a non-Indigenous organisation, group participants said it motivates them if they can see other Aboriginal community members volunteering, and that this provides them with reassurance that the organisation is culturally safe.

### 3. The value of community giving

Community giving was identified as a strength of the community in the way it fostered care and support for each other. Participants identified that while community giving may take away from their 'free time', this is rarely a deterrent. A shared sense of community results in reciprocal community giving and ensures that all community members are supported in times of need.

*“You just call people up, you see if they need anything, and you drop stuff off. It’s just something that you do for your loved ones and friends. And they do it for you...we help each other out.”*

– Yarn up participant

The groups described a variety of challenges or difficulties experienced by their communities. They identified that community giving enables them to develop opportunities and programs to address these issues and support those in need, resulting in better outcomes for people. This shared sense of justice and commitment to members of the community who experience challenges or disadvantages goes beyond individual support, and aims to promote fairness and equality within, and for the community.

*“We do it because we don’t want people to miss out, some people have more opportunities than others, but it doesn’t mean they should miss out” ... “Going back to culture, it’s just something that you do, you share with each other and make sure that everyone gets a hand up and step up. It’s the equality that we want in community.”*

– Yarn up participant

Community giving is also seen as a way to address systemic disadvantage and inequality, including gaps in services and funding, to ensure that everyone is supported. This occurs across areas such as foster caring, childcare, and supporting community through crises such as bushfires or the COVID-19 pandemic, where government programs and aid is insufficient.

*“Childcare is really hard, it’s expensive, there are limited spaces...we look after kids so the family can get on with what they need to. You look after the mob, we all look after each other’s babies. It might take away from what you’re doing but it’s a sacrifice you’re willing to make”.*

– Yarn up participant

Community giving also enables the community to come together to identify self-determined solutions to their identified issues. Creating opportunities and promoting equality is seen as especially important for children and younger people in the community. In one community, this has led to the development of a volunteer led program that enables children to engage in sport and travel to regional tournaments.



*“Registration fees have gone up, fuel prices have gone up, and if you’ve got multiple kids, it’s quite difficult to pay all the costs. So, the community established it [the program] was something that was needed. Sport is so important for health and mental health.”*

– Yarn up participant

Other benefits of community giving described by the groups include:

- » Feelings of pride and self-worth.
- » Increased social connections and the chance for community members to meet.
- » Opportunities for leadership and role modelling to younger generations.

Depending on the type of community giving, it is also seen as an opportunity for the voice of community to be heard.

*“A lot of time they [elders] want to go on all these different boards and have their say and for their voice to be heard because it hasn’t been in the past. So, it’s a pride, an honour thing for them too.”*

– Yarn up participant

#### **4. Social and systemic barriers to community giving and volunteering**

Barriers to community giving were discussed across all three groups and were specific to volunteering in sports clubs, organisations, and structured activities. Participants discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteering. While the strengths of community giving have been helpful during the pandemic in terms of supporting community members and crisis initiatives such as food relief, COVID-19-associated restrictions greatly impacted volunteering in organisations and sports clubs. One group described how this form of community giving has been slow to return.

*“COVID has turned a lot of people off doing it [volunteering] and because of all the lockdowns it’s stopped the rhythm....so people aren’t going back, it’s not what it used to be...some people have picked up work on the weekend and found other things to do other than volunteering their time.”*

– Yarn up participant

Other barriers were described in relation to volunteering in a non-Indigenous organisation, particularly a fear of judgement by non-Indigenous community members and uncertainty about organisations being a culturally safe space to volunteer.

*“You worry about how you’ll be treated or how people will look at you, it’s just the worry of that sort of stuff. It’s not racism. Us, as an Aboriginal community, a lot of us, we’re scared of the looks that people give us and the comments” ... “It’s just people judge too quick, they’re not getting to know us. It’s minor things, the looks, the judgement, but it puts you off. It creates anxiety and then a lot of people don’t want to volunteer because of that.”*

– Yarn up participant

Participants identified that a lack of community members volunteering in these organisations also deters them from volunteering. They identified that when another Aboriginal community member volunteers in an organisation, it encourages others to also give their time.

*“A lot of our community members don’t get involved with it [volunteering in organisations]. If we saw more [Aboriginal] people doing it, we would get involved and put our hand up...You’ve got to see another person taking that first step. Otherwise, you just feel on the back foot, hesitating.”*

– Yarn up participant

The groups also discussed the importance of non-Indigenous organisations remunerating community members for roles that are time intensive or require them to provide cultural education. This was observed to be heightened for elders in the community who are often under pressure to attend events to provide a Welcome to Country or cultural contribution.

*“Often organisations think ‘you should be doing the Welcome’ but we don’t like it because it’s often tokenistic. And we see that way too often organisations have a box they need to tick...but the pressure on the community and elders is huge...so we say it shouldn’t be a given. It needs to go both ways and for there to be respect and maybe sometimes a payment is required”.*

– Yarn up participant

A further barrier to volunteering in organisations including ACCOs is screening check requirements, specifically police checks, which are prohibitive for many community members who either do not possess the identification documents required to complete a screening check or have a criminal record. This results in people not being given opportunities to engage in the community.

*“A lot of the older fellas just want to get out of the house and help but then they can’t if something is on their record, so it’s really hard, it’s a catch 22. We want them to help and they’ve done their time but then they can’t get on board because of that record” ... “Even some of the young fellas might want to do maintenance but they can’t with a record”.*

– Yarn up participant

One group also identified how the inability to volunteer due to screening check requirements has far-reaching effects on family and community participation.

*“It has a huge effect in getting parents involved in the early years. They might want to help out with what their kids are doing but the minute they have a criminal record, bang, they can’t always volunteer which means they then can’t be involved with what their kids are doing.”*

– Yarn up participant

In the context of foster caring, it was identified that even when community members do volunteer, there is a lack of culturally appropriate support.

*“For our Aboriginal community, they wouldn’t go to those support groups because the email you get about the support group, it’s run by a non-Indigenous organisation, so it comes from them, so Aboriginal community members are not going to get that, they’re not connected to them”*

– Yarn up participant

Other barriers include:

- » Organisational policies and requirements.
- » Limited public transport and many community members not holding a driver’s license.
- » Cost of living issues and not being able to afford costs associated with volunteering.
- » A necessary focus on paid employment.
- » A lack of knowledge about volunteering opportunities.
- » Organisations not advertising volunteering roles in a way that was accessible to community.

The groups also identified that Aboriginal community members are extensively contributing their time to their communities. This often means they do not have the capacity to engage in further volunteering in a non-Indigenous organisation.

*“For many community members they are working, looking after their family, and then supporting their community all the time. It’s overload, so they’re not going to have time to do more volunteering.”*

– Yarn up participant

## Discussion

Participants in the yarn ups in Gippsland broadly described a strong culture of community giving that encompassed a range of activities, from supporting community members on an individual basis to organising community-led initiatives and programs. The participants described being driven to give back to community because of a shared sense of responsibility and obligation, and a desire to support community members, create opportunities, and address social inequities. Giving back to community was not seen as an additional role or responsibility, but rather an intrinsic part of living in community. While the yarn ups were with small groups of community members, every participant described giving back to community in a variety of ways and as part of their everyday experience living within community. Participants described spending large amounts of their time in these unpaid activities with little expectation of acknowledgement or reward. This feedback contests current data and volunteering funding rationale that indicates lower volunteering rates in First Nations communities.

Community giving enabled communities to address gaps in funding and services and strive to ensure all community members were supported and had access to important health, wellbeing, and social activities. The participants almost unanimously described a strong sense of social justice and a commitment to supporting and strengthening their community. The unpaid activities or programs they participated in were in response to community need and addressed inequalities experienced by their community. While this is testament to the strength of communities in the region, there is also a risk that it may conceal the degree to which current funding is inadequate in supporting community and highlights the need for improved support of community services in the area. It is also likely that these community needs and responses are able to be identified and addressed because they are led by community, strengthening the rationale for self-determined and collaborative responses to volunteer policy and program design. Grassroots community groups require funding and support to reduce the risk of burnout and exhaustion within community.

While all participants engaged in multiple forms of community giving, they described an array of social and systemic barriers to volunteering within organisations. Attitudinal barriers and a feeling of judgement often deterred people from volunteering in non-Indigenous organisations. Bureaucratic and legal requirements associated with volunteering in larger organisations such as screening checks and occupational health and safety requirements is also a barrier. Aside from these barriers, there appeared to be little sentiment or motivation to volunteer in non-Indigenous organisations as participants were largely consumed by their existing community giving and addressing needs in their own communities. The expectation of non-Indigenous organisations to provide cultural-specific knowledge and experiences without remuneration was a point of frustration and highlights the need for broader adoption of policies on appropriate remuneration for cultural education and the sharing of knowledge.

Of concern for the participants however was screening and bureaucratic barriers that prevented people from volunteering within Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations or organisations through which their children were affiliated. This exemplifies how socially determined inequalities that result in higher rates of criminal records and lower education levels in the community can have long term ramifications for community and family participation. There is a clear need for volunteer policy makers to highlight and advocate on the issues that impact on the ability to participate in community giving.

Though not the focus of the yarn ups, the groups all discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their community in the closure of sports clubs and other community events, where people had previously socialised with others and engaged in community giving. In particular, sporting clubs were described as a key place in the community that fostered connection, meaningful activity, and positive health outcomes. The recovery from restrictions was different across local communities, with participation slow to return in some areas, while others were almost back to previous rates.

Participants also described how the pandemic has significantly impacted people's financial situations and cost of living, with community members experiencing rising household costs including petrol. These additional pressures limit the ability of people to engage with community activities over a large geographical area due to a focus on paid employment and an inability to meet transportation costs. This highlights the need for place-based approaches and resources to better understand the needs of regional and rural communities and address barriers to community participation.

Notably, there was a difference in the perspective of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous participants in the yarn ups. All participants acknowledged the barriers to volunteering experienced by the community, however the focus on barriers (rather than experiences and strengths of community giving) was more dominant for non-Indigenous participants. This may have also been influenced by the type of service provision that the non-Indigenous participants engaged in, which was focused on high needs and trauma-affected families. It also reinforces the need to give primacy to the experience of First Nations communities and the importance of self-determination and strengths-based approaches when supporting communities to identify and address barriers to community and social participation.

## Implications for policy and practice

The learnings on community giving in First Nations communities have implications for government policy and practice.

	Policy	Practice
<b>Political</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Develop policies that ensure the concept of self-determination and strengths-based approaches to funding and program development for the volunteer sector.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Prioritise collaboration and co-design with First Nations communities in the development of all volunteer funding and program streams for their communities.</li> </ul>
<b>Economic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» State and Federal governments and Volunteering peak bodies to develop and disseminate best practice policies and recommendations on reimbursing First Nations communities for cultural contributions, advice, and education (to non-Indigenous organisations and government departments).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Relevant government departments to review and fund gaps in service provision based on community-led needs assessment.</li> <li>» Selected government departments resource grassroots community groups that develop self-determined solutions to community goals and need.</li> <li>» Allocate funding to reimburse community members for out-of-pocket expenses associated with community giving or volunteering.</li> </ul>
<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» State and Federal governments and Volunteering peak bodies to incorporate community-centred language e.g., ‘community giving’ in reference to volunteering or unpaid activities.</li> <li>» State and Federal governments and Volunteering peak bodies to acknowledge the culture of community giving in First Nations communities as distinct from volunteering.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» State and Federal governments and Volunteering peak bodies to promote the practices, strengths, and contribution of First Nations community giving.</li> <li>» Encourage and resource training on First Nations cultural awareness and safety for volunteer involving organisations.</li> </ul>
<b>Technological</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Embed culturally appropriate and participatory methods of research and data collection on diverse forms of community giving.</li> <li>» Use community-led language when collecting data on volunteering and community giving.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Work with First Nations communities to simplify bureaucratic processes that pose a barrier to community giving or volunteering.</li> <li>» Address gaps in internet coverage and inaccessible costs of internet access in regional and rural areas, to improve access to online screening processes and community giving resources.</li> </ul>
<b>Environmental</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Utilise a place-based approach to explore strengths, challenges, and needs of community, so local area factors are incorporated into policy and planning on community giving and volunteering.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Allocate resources for communities in regional and rural areas which may have additional challenges and costs related to community giving across large geographical areas.</li> </ul>
<b>Legal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Acknowledge the impact of incarceration rates on the culture of community giving in First Nations communities, and their access to opportunities.</li> <li>» Address social inequities that lead to higher incarceration rates in the community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Provide guidance, education and risk management advice to community and volunteer involving organisations, on discretionary responses to screening checks for community members with a criminal record</li> <li>» Promote and educate on the importance of providing opportunities for community participation for community members with a criminal record.</li> </ul>



## Organisational reflections and learnings

There were many learnings during the development and implementation of the project that can strengthen non-Indigenous organisational practices of engaging with First Nations communities and achieve strengths-based, self-determined outcomes. These learnings include:

- » The requirement for long term commitment and investment in developing meaningful engagement and trusted relationships with First Nations and other diverse communities.
- » The need for self-determination, co-design, and community investment in projects that aim to explore practices of community giving, to ensure they are in line with the interests of communities and provide tangible benefits to those communities.
- » The need for flexibility and adaptability in project design and implementation to respond to changing social context and community need over an extended period.
- » The importance of collaborating or partnering with community organisations or those who have established relationships with the community.
- » The need to appropriately value and remunerate people for their time, particularly when asking community to assist non-Indigenous organisations in their cultural learning or on projects that are not driven by the community.
- » Allowing adequate time for staff reflection and learning during the project so that it also builds upon the cultural competence skills of the organisation.

For the volunteer sector, it highlights the responsibility to acknowledge, value, and promote diverse forms of community giving and their context, rather than trying to fit them into western frameworks of volunteering. These learnings can also inform the way in which the sector promotes and advocates for First Nations Community Giving.

## Conclusion

The First Nations community giving yarn ups in Gippsland, Victoria outline a strong culture of community support through the contribution of unpaid time and labour. Rather than being viewed as a distinct activity or role, community giving is seen as an intrinsic part of living in community and supporting each other to thrive. Community giving also enables the communities to develop self-determined solutions to community need and address socially constructed barriers. Embedded in this form of community contribution are values of equality, reciprocity, and inclusion. However, the communities also face many barriers to volunteering within ACCO's and organisations through which their community is associated, namely bureaucratic processes, social inequity, and lack of resources. There is a need for future volunteer program development and government funding to take into account the goals, strengths, and barriers faced by First Nations communities and to prioritise the participation and self determination of communities in decision making processes.