

# The case for a dedicated Ministerial Portfolio for Volunteering

*Volunteering Victoria, the state peak body for volunteering is calling for the introduction of a Ministerial Portfolio for Volunteering to strengthen the volunteer sector through a coordinated response to complex sector issues and to maximise the benefits of volunteering for collective wellbeing. A Minister for Volunteering will recognise the enormous contribution of volunteering to Victorian communities.*

Victoria's 2.3 million volunteers contribute an average of 223.9 hours each per year or over half a billion hours collectively (the equivalent of 250,000 full time EFT). Volunteers are one of the state's largest workforces and contribute \$58.1 billion in value to the Victorian economy.<sup>1</sup> Volunteers deliver essential services across all community sectors and make an invaluable contribution to collective wellbeing, social connection, and community resilience. During the pandemic, volunteer participation rates plummeted, limiting the capacity and delivery of community services.<sup>2 3</sup> Strengthening the volunteer sector and providing support and protections to volunteers requires the leadership and governance of a Ministerial Portfolio for Volunteering.

Volunteers encounter - and will continue to face - many barriers that prevent them from performing their roles and deter many other community members from volunteering in the first place. Volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) consistently report significant barriers to recruiting and retaining volunteers that place the viability of their services at risk. At the back of a decade-long downward trend in volunteering participation, the pandemic has further heightened these barriers. Based on current volunteer rates, many essential services such as emergency and recovery responses in natural disasters, will not be delivered. Volunteering will not recover on its own and our communities will be far worse off without the skills, time, and care that volunteers contribute.

The current government structure around volunteering needs to be strengthened to address:

- » The trend of declining volunteer rates
- » The multiple and ongoing complex challenges facing the sector
- » The implementation of measures to protect volunteers and VIOs

The Victorian Volunteer Strategy (VVS) is a promising start and commendable commitment by the government to strengthen the volunteering sector. However, a strategy is only effective with strong leadership, governance, and dedicated resources to implement and operationalise programs to achieve its goals.<sup>4</sup> There are also gaps in the VVS in addressing longstanding systemic barriers that will require co-ordination across multiple departments, and in developing innovative partnerships across government, the not-for-profit sector, and private enterprise.

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1 Ellis, C., Muller, P., & Szeker, D. [State of Volunteering in Victoria 2020](#). Volunteering Victoria. 2020.

2 [The COVID-19 Community Sector Impact Survey](#). Our Community & Salesforce. 2021

3 [Submission to the Independent Panel Review on COVID-19](#). Volunteering Australia. 2022.

4 [Global Trends in Volunteering Infrastructure](#). United Nations. 2018.

A Ministerial Portfolio for Volunteering will enable the required leadership, governance, and advice to address the complexity of issues that impact the sector. This includes issues related to resourcing and sustainability, legal protections, inclusion and diversity, digital inclusion, and the pandemic recovery. A Minister for Volunteering will support improved consideration and resourcing of volunteering in other government departments and portfolios. It will also acknowledge the enormous contribution of Victoria's volunteers and enable government to strategically highlight its commitment to promoting connected communities and the wellbeing of Victoria.

### **Western Australia's Minister for Volunteering**

Western Australia introduced a Minister for Volunteering over 10 years ago, reflecting the invaluable contribution of volunteers to the state and their commitment to supporting the volunteer sector. The implementation of a dedicated portfolio has meant that government now has the structure, resources, and dedicated staff to support volunteering and address key issues. The Minister has established a 'Volunteering Community of Reference' group enabling continued consultation and increased government oversight on issues impacting the sector.

Key benefits of the Ministerial Portfolio for Volunteering in Western Australia include:

- » Improved visibility over complex issues impacting volunteering
- » Timely, effective, and collaborative solutions to key issues
- » Improved relationships with the volunteering peak body and key organisations in the sector
- » Reduction in time and funding associated with ad hoc consultation and initiatives
- » Inherent acknowledgement of volunteers and their contribution to the state
- » Unique insights into the variety of issues impacting communities through increased contact with volunteers from within those communities
- » Increased opportunities to connect with communities



"The creation of a Volunteering Ministerial Portfolio has had a significant impact as it has allowed for a much greater synergy between the Minister, Government, Volunteering WA, and key organisations in the sector. Volunteers and the communities they serve across Western Australia are the true beneficiaries of this enhanced collaboration."

– Tina Williams, CEO, Volunteering WA

A Ministerial Portfolio for Volunteering will allow for a significant shift in the way that government and decision makers think about volunteering. While the contribution of volunteering clearly calls for equitable reinvestment, a purely economic reading represents a risky approach in an era facing unprecedented social crises. Investing in the future wellbeing of our communities is critical. Supporting volunteering, with its established culture, infrastructure, benefits, and universally held values, is a key means of building strong and thriving communities and fostering the wellbeing of Victoria.

***This recommendation is endorsed by Volunteering WA.***

