

Volunteering is a government workforce issue

Volunteering Victoria, the state peak body for volunteering is advocating for the inclusion of volunteering into all government workforce strategies to address the inadequate resourcing of volunteer programs and the direct impact on volunteer retention and satisfaction. Planning for the critical and unique role of volunteers is crucial to resourcing and supporting this important part of the workforce.

Volunteer time is given willingly and without financial gain. However, volunteers require acknowledgement, support, and training to sustain and grow their contribution.^{1 2 3 4} In medium to large volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs), volunteer programs are often under-valued and receive minimal funding, curtailing the capacity of managers to unlock the full potential of large volunteer workforces and greatly limiting the social and economic contribution of volunteers. In community led and small VIOs, volunteer management is often a volunteer role with little, if any, discrete resourcing.

[Volunteering Australia's recent briefing](#) to the Federal Government's Jobs & Skills Summit outlines that volunteers are a critical part of the national workforce and highlights the capacity of volunteering to facilitate pathways into paid employment.⁵ This is supported by the [Discovery Insights Report](#) released as part of the development of the National Strategy for Volunteering.

Discovery Insight: 'Volunteering is a Workforce Issue'

Consultations with 400 key stakeholders across Australia for the National Strategy for Volunteering identified that "volunteering is a core workforce issue, but the social, cultural, and economic contribution of volunteers is absent from workforce conversations"⁶.

Key findings include:

- » Volunteers significantly supplement the paid workforce, provide critical surge capacity in times of crisis, and build inclusive and resilient communities
- » The boundary between what could be done by volunteers and what should be done by paid employees is increasingly being blurred
- » Discussions around Australia's workforce do not currently reference volunteering
- » It is critical that volunteers are strategically considered as an indispensable and unique workforce and are consistently accommodated
- » There is an opportunity to re-position the volunteer workforce alongside the paid workforce and promote an understanding of the important contribution of volunteering to society⁷

1 Al Mutawa, M. [Impact of volunteer management practice on volunteer motivation and satisfaction to enhance volunteer retention](#). 2015.

2 Kragt, D., Wilson, S., Newstead, T., & Forner, V. [Without leadership there is no volunteering: The importance of strategic investment in leadership development in Australia](#). 2022.

3 Studer, S. Volunteer Management: Responding to the Uniqueness of Volunteers. 2016. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 45(4), 688–714.

4 Tsai, A., Newstead, T., Lewis, G. [Emergency volunteering: Leading engagement and retention](#). 2022.

5 [Volunteering and the Jobs & Skill Summit](#). Volunteering Australia. 2022.

6 [Discovery Insights: Towards a National Strategy for Volunteering](#). Volunteering Australia. 2022.

7 [Discovery Insights: Towards a National Strategy for Volunteering](#). Volunteering Australia. 2022.

There is currently an absence of sector-specific workforce mapping and evidence on volunteer-specific roles, volunteer workforce challenges, and the requirements for volunteer support, training, and management.⁸ Similarly, while the importance of volunteer management is increasingly acknowledged as critical to volunteer recruitment, retention and satisfaction, further evidence is needed to best support the volunteer management workforce and the skills required for these roles. This information could be acquired by including volunteering in government workforce planning.

Government workforce strategies highlight key issues and challenges facing each sector, and appropriately plan and resource for the delivery of services and programs. However, most current workforce strategy frameworks only account for the paid workforce. The need for increased planning and support of the volunteer workforce was endorsed by VCOSS in their [response to the 2022 Victorian State Budget](#).⁹

The problematic absence of volunteering in workforce planning was exemplified in the government's [Mental Health Workforce Strategy 2021-2024](#),¹⁰ which failed to acknowledge or plan for the role of volunteers. This omission will have a detrimental impact on volunteers who are a critical part of the mental health workforce. Their contribution can also not be maximised without appropriate resourcing. The national mental health workforce includes, at a minimum:

- » Almost 65,000 people volunteering in mental health and crisis intervention charities and not-for-profits
- » 10,000 Lifeline volunteers across Australia. In 2018, these volunteers answered 739,481 calls and initiated 5,840 emergency interventions for Australians in need of crisis support¹¹

Workforce planning that includes the volunteer workforce will also be critical to the success of upcoming major events, such as the 2026 Commonwealth Games, and the recovery of sectors impacted heavily by the pandemic including tourism, the arts and creative industries, and community sport.

Ensuring the volunteering workforce is accounted for and recognised in all government workforce strategies will enable better planning, protections, and resourcing to harness the invaluable contribution of volunteers in essential services and sectors. Volunteering cannot be strengthened unless it is acknowledged as a critical and unique part of the workforce. This is key to achieving the five goals of the Victorian Volunteer Strategy, the success of which depends on planning, resourcing, and leadership to grow the volunteer sector and support the work of volunteer managers.

This recommendation is endorsed by the national peak body for volunteering, Volunteering Australia.



8 [Discovery Insights: Towards a National Strategy for Volunteering](#). Volunteering Australia. 2022.

9 [Breaking down the 2022 Victorian Budget](#). VCOSS. 2022.

10 [Victoria's Mental Health and Wellbeing Workforce Strategy 2021-2024](#). Department of Health, Victorian State Government. 2021.

11 [Volunteering and the Jobs & Skill Summit](#). Volunteering Australia. 2022.