

# Cut the costs: Reducing financial barriers to volunteering

*Volunteering Victoria, the state peak body for volunteering is calling for funding to reduce barriers to volunteering for diverse communities. Current out-of-pocket costs of volunteering make it inaccessible for many community members in view of rising cost of living expenses and inflation. Reimbursing volunteers for the costs associated with volunteering is crucial to promoting increased uptake of community participation by those under-represented in volunteering.*

There are distinct, evidence-based benefits of volunteering for individuals and communities. Those who volunteer report a significant improvement in their health, social connections, employment prospects, and life satisfaction.<sup>1 2 3 4</sup> However, despite the universality of community giving across all population groups, many cohorts remain underrepresented in formal volunteering through an organisation due to social inequity and systemic disadvantage. People with English as a second language, young people, and those with lower education, employment and income levels are much less likely to volunteer within an organisation.<sup>5 6</sup>

The [State of Volunteering in Victoria 2020 report](#) highlights the out-of-pocket costs absorbed by individuals who volunteer. In 2019, volunteers reported spending an annual average of \$1,710 on their volunteering. Of these expenses, volunteers were reimbursed an average of \$212.65 (12.4%), leaving them with \$1,497.11 in out-of-pocket costs.<sup>7</sup> While these costs may be affordable to those from middle and high socio-economic groups, they are highly problematic for marginalised and financially disadvantaged individuals. Data on household income and financial stress over 2020-2021 shows that close to 40% of Australian families are experiencing financial stress with rates expected to rise as cost-of-living expenses continue to increase.<sup>8 9</sup> Many people are willing to devote their time to making a difference in their communities but are rarely able to absorb the associated costs.

All individuals and communities should have access to volunteering and its myriad of benefits.<sup>10</sup> Traditional notions of volunteering in policy and program development place the emphasis on individual choice. However, there needs to be an increased emphasis on the structural factors that prevent people from volunteering. It is paramount that government and community leaders recognise the current barriers and use their power and influence to foster increased opportunities for participation.<sup>11</sup>

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

2 [Evidence insights: Volunteering & Mental Health](#). Volunteering Australia. 2021

3 [Universal Declaration on Volunteering](#). IAVE. 2021.

4 [Key Volunteering Statistics](#). Volunteering Australia. 2021.

5 Southby, K., South, J., & Bagnall, A.M. [A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering for Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Implications for Health Inequalities](#). 2019. *Voluntas*, 30, 907.

6 [Volunteering, health & wellbeing: what does the evidence tell us?](#) Volunteering Scotland. 2018.

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

8 [Australian families' experiences of financial stress](#). Savvy and Australian Digital Finance Analytics. 2021.

9 [Household financial resources, June 2020](#). Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2020.

10 [Universal Declaration on Volunteering](#). IAVE. 2021.

11 Southby, K., South, J., & Bagnall, A.M. [A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering for Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Implications for Health Inequalities](#). 2019. *Voluntas*, 30, 907.

[The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement](#) outline best practice on reimbursing the costs associated with volunteering. However, poorly resourced volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) are not in a position to do so.

A government fund to help VIOs cover the out-of-pocket expenses of volunteering for volunteers from under-represented cohorts would reduce financial barriers to volunteering, including those associated with screening checks, transportation, uniforms, equipment, and essential training and professional development.

To access funding for reimbursement of volunteers, VIOs would need to demonstrate that:

- » They are engaging volunteers from under-represented communities
- » Their organisation and volunteer programs work with or provide services to marginalised or disadvantaged communities
- » They have a formal process by which funds are transferred directly to volunteers
- » They can account for the out-of-pocket expenses of volunteers

Reimbursing the expenses of community members from under-represented cohorts in formal volunteering is a practical and achievable intervention to increase community participation, promote equitable access to the benefits of volunteering, and assist in the sustainable delivery of programs and services delivered by volunteers. It is also a key means of achieving the goal of the Victorian Volunteer Strategy to make volunteering inclusive and accessible for all Victorians.