

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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## **VOLUNTEERING INQUIRY SUBMISSION**

**Communify Queensland**

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### **COMMUNIFY'S VOLUNTEER PROGRAM**

Communify provides support services in the inner northern, inner city and inner south suburbs of Brisbane to over 7500 people annually who are in crisis, living with mental health and addiction issues, facing homelessness and poverty, families struggling with parenting, older people and people living with a disability.

Programs assist people to manage the challenges that life presents, delivering care and support for mental and physical wellbeing, social connections, and economic participation. Communify's Neighbourhood Centres are 'Open Door' hubs where people experiencing life's challenges come to find connections, seek information and get support. These hubs are also open doors for people looking to volunteer in their local communities.

Communify currently engages over 220 volunteers in roles across the organisation's programs including; community transport, food relief programs, social support programs for people who are aged or who live with disability, neighbourhood centre programs, English language classes, asylum seeker support, community gardens and other small volunteer led groups.

Volunteers are from a range of backgrounds and age demographics and include people who are retired, students, full-time or part-time workers and Centrelink mutual obligation participants.

### **BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION**

#### **Economic Barriers for Volunteer Involving Organisations - The Administrative Load**

Volunteers are not free. They provide time, expertise, fresh ideas and perspectives and they contribute measurably to clubs, not for profit organisations and to informal groups and associations. Volunteer involvement in these organisations are a feature of healthy, thriving communities. There are however, costs associated with recruiting, on-boarding, scheduling, supervising and recognising volunteers that may not be able to be met by general program funding and may need to be met by fundraising or, in some organisations, by the volunteer themselves.

Volunteer involving organisations could have capacity to include and retain more volunteers if funding was available for the costs associated with managing their volunteer programs. Volunteers would experience smoother pathways to volunteering if costs such as criminal history checks, uniforms, insurance, training and volunteers' out of pocket expenses such as fuel or transport were covered by funding provided to the volunteering involving organisation.

## Barriers to Participation experienced by Volunteers

- Limited availability of volunteer work on weekends and evenings.
- Limited opportunities for short-term volunteering.
- Organisational compliance requirements
- Lack of participation support needed by some volunteers

Additionally, some volunteers engaged by Communityfy reported that some organisations they have approached about volunteering have been unorganised or inefficient in their recruitment and on-boarding processes. These comments most likely reflect an inadequate response of overloaded and under resourced volunteer involving organisations. Responding to volunteer enquiries in a timely way is a vital part of ensuring a positive experience for the potential volunteer. Appropriate interviewing and screening is vital to ensuring volunteers are matched with the right role.

### Pathways to Volunteering for people with psychosocial disability or mental illness.

Symptoms of mental illness and psychosocial disability and their associated medication can affect people's cognitive and interpersonal abilities, in turn impacting people's ability to volunteer, work and participate in community activities. People with mental illness and psychosocial disability may want to participate in volunteering but can experience participation barriers due to organisations' expectations or capacity to provide the support needed for this cohort to participate.

'The unemployment rate for people with moderate mental illness in Australia is about two and half times that for those without mental illness. For people with severe mental illness, it is more than five times the rate of those without mental illness.' (Productivity Commission Mental Health report 2020)

Community service clients may want to volunteer as a way to 'give back' when they have received assistance or volunteering may be identified as a recovery goal or as a pathway to reconnecting with their community. Volunteering can also build experiences and confidence that can lead to further training or to employment. Receiving peer support from a volunteer can help individuals feel understood, connected, and less alone. Organisations including Communityfy have identified that members of this cohort may need additional help or side by side support to participate in volunteering. There is support needed to address these barriers with providing help with gaining confidence, mentoring and support with interpersonal relationships as well as consideration for the need to sometimes take time out from participation.

Building participants' capacity to participate in volunteering can also foster pathways to further training or employment. Supported volunteering programs can help to shift participants from passive service users to active volunteers by offering tailored support for meaningful community engagement and ensuring a positive and sustainable volunteering experience. Participants would benefit from community connections, skill development, and a sense of purpose. Supported volunteering can serve as a pathway to independent volunteering and would combat social isolation and stigma.

Addressing the barriers experienced by people with disability who want to volunteer would meet the objectives outlined in **Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031**, particularly in addressing the goals of promoting inclusion, empowerment, and economic participation for people with disabilities.

‘Research suggests that social interaction and sense of purpose are the key mechanisms linking volunteering activity to better mental health. Volunteering in the community creates opportunities for social interaction, and evidence suggests that giving support to others is a particularly beneficial form of social connection. Meeting and offering support to other people creates a positive emotional state and replaces stress-causing emotions, such as anger or loneliness. Some studies indicate that social interaction is the primary reason that volunteering improves mental health.’ (Volunteering and Mental Health July 2023 Jack McDermott)

“Volunteering has been found to improve self-assessed psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, happiness, and satisfaction with life.” (Evidence Insights: Volunteering and Mental Health, Volunteering Australia October 2021)

## Recommendations and Conclusion

- **Volunteer Program funding** to specifically address the management of volunteers by volunteer involving organisations.
- **Supported Volunteers Program funding** to address the needs of volunteers and peer support volunteers who require additional support to participate in volunteering.
- Support for **compliance checks** – universal and nationally accepted volunteering ‘passport’. Checks could be conducted and costs met by peak bodies and/or be transferable between volunteer involving organisations enabling volunteers to engage in short term, episodic and emergency response volunteer roles as well as to seamlessly move between volunteer involving organisations.
- **Volunteer training** provided online by peak bodies or through a peak body portal with certification universally accepted by volunteer involving organisations. Courses could include; food safety, manual handling, fire training, privacy and other OHS, WHS and inclusion programs applicable to most workplaces. This would free resources in volunteer involving organisations to focus on program specific training.
- **Volunteer Insurance** made accessible and affordable for small organisations and particularly for volunteer managed groups such as community gardens and other unincorporated groups.

The **National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033** describes a vision where ‘Volunteering is the heart of Australian Communities’ and ‘where people...realise their potential for creating thriving communities.’ Volunteering is a rewarding and meaningful activity that reduces loneliness and delivers rewards of wellbeing and community connection. The experience of volunteering should be available to all and with the right supports in place can be an experience available to people with mental illness or psychosocial disability. To realise this vision, it is essential to invest in the infrastructure that supports volunteering, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their circumstances, can contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Investing in volunteer coordination is not just an administrative necessity—it is an investment in the strength and resilience of Australian communities. By providing financial support for volunteer involving organisations, government can empower volunteers to contribute more effectively, enhance service delivery, and ensure the sustainability of volunteering across the country. Additionally, supporting volunteers with disabilities or mental ill-health can help combat social isolation and stigma while providing pathways to training and employment.



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## **Formal Volunteer Activity and Psychological Flourishing in Scandinavia: Findings from Two Cross-sectional Rounds of the European Social Survey**

- (1) Evidence Insights: Volunteering and Mental Health October 2021 Written by: Jack McDermott (Policy Officer, Volunteering Australia) Background research by: Dominic O'Neill (Volunteer Research & Policy Analyst, Volunteering Australia)
- (2) Volunteering and Mental Health July 2023 Jack McDermott

<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report>

<https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/the-strategy/>