

Volunteering Australia Project: The Review of the Definition of Volunteering

Introduction and Background

The Review of the Definition of Volunteering was initiated in late 2013. Considerable work has occurred, both examining existing Australian and global work already undertaken around definitions (Phase 1, the Issues Paper) and also gathering further input into current views across Australia (Phase 2).

The National Steering Committee, in its report dated 22 June 2015 to the VA Board, recommended a significant change to the current VA definition to ensure Volunteering Australia continues to provide leadership in the field. In summary, the National Steering Committee concluded that a new definition needs to:

- resonate with all parts of the Australian community;
- be inclusive, aspirational and enabling;
- be enduring, robust and adaptive, acknowledging the dynamic nature of the sector;
- be measurable, allowing the value of the sector to be better understood;
- allow VA to take a lead role in advocacy around policy support, infrastructure needs and the ongoing resources needed to improve volunteering; and
- be usable, pragmatic and able to be widely adopted, allowing entities to work constructively with the definition – both individually and collectively.

Based on these requirements the new definition has two sections:

- A succinct, easy to read definition; and
- A set of explanatory notes that provide clarity on what is considered volunteering and what is outside the definition (but is part of the broader civic participation area) that will assist in measurement. In addition, this set of notes includes supportive statements concerning best practice, providing links to the VA website (noting actual documentation such as National Standards guidelines may alter over time).

The implications of a change to the definition for organisations (or agencies/ institutions/ entities) include:

- There are a number of pathways into volunteering. Some organisations may choose to actively work with these areas, in addition to those defined here as volunteering, to support the growth of volunteering. This will depend on the individual organisation's resources and preferred approach.
- Support for volunteer involving organisations, volunteer managers and others will continue to be developed as needed. Support programs may focus on specific

aspects of volunteering, such as spontaneous, crisis management or formal volunteering rather than be applicable to all activities within the whole definition.

- The capacity and propensity to adopt the new definition will vary for different organisations within and allied to the sector. While it is hoped all recognise the change by VA, each will require time to review, determine the emphasis of their own work within the sector and resource the approach they choose to take.
- The VA Board, at its meeting held on 23 July 2015, formally endorsed the new definition and supporting explanatory notes.

Definition:

Volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.

Explanatory Notes for Definition

Volunteering is part of the wider concept of civic participation. These notes clarify what Volunteering Australia considers volunteering is, but also lists a number of somewhat similar activities or areas that are outside of volunteering. These may also act as pathways for people to become volunteers.

The term 'volunteering' covers a wide diversity of activities in Australian society. It includes formal volunteering that takes place within organisations (including institutions and agencies) in a structured way and informal volunteering, acts that take place outside the context of a formal organisation.

While the vast majority of volunteering is undertaken by individuals, entities also donate employee time and this is included within this definition of volunteering.

Consideration of the term volunteering needs to also note best practice guidelines. Volunteering should not be exploitative, or be used to replace paid employment. While volunteering provides substantial benefits to society, importantly it also provides significant benefits to the volunteers themselves. The personal benefits of volunteering need to be recognised and fostered. Further information regarding best practice and the appropriate involvement of volunteers in organisations and more widely is available on the VA website.

Without Financial Gain

- Volunteers can receive reimbursement of out of pocket expenses.
- Volunteers can be rewarded and recognised as part of good practice. While this process may introduce an element of financial or material benefit to the volunteer it does not exclude the activity from being considered volunteering.
- Volunteers may receive an honorarium, stipend or similar payment as recognition for voluntary services or professional services voluntarily rendered, in accordance

with Australian Taxation Office rulings. Based on the nature of such payments and the recipient's circumstances, the receipt of this type of payment does not preclude the person from being considered a volunteer.

For the common good

- This definition aligns with the United Nations view that volunteering 'should be for the common good. It should directly or indirectly benefit people outside the family or household or else benefit a cause, even though the person volunteering normally benefits as well.'¹ Volunteering is often considered as contributing to community wellbeing and volunteering activities cover all sectors of society, leisure and hobby areas and include, but are not limited to:
 - Animal-related including animal welfare
 - Arts/heritage/culture
 - Business/professional/union
 - Education and training
 - Emergency services
 - Environment
 - Faith-based
 - Health
 - International aid/development
 - Law/justice/political
 - Parenting, children and youth
 - Sport and physical recreation
 - Welfare/community
- Activism can be considered volunteering. This definition is aligned to the current UN position on volunteering that states: 'When people participate in peaceful activism, for or against animal research or building of a dam, both sides seek what they consider to be beneficial outcomes. They are included in our definition. Activities involving or inciting violence that harm society and actions not corresponding to the values attributed to volunteerism are not included in our definition'.¹
- Volunteers cannot be exploited for profit.
- Volunteering can include the concept of reciprocity such as participating in groups where a reciprocal exchange of help/services is undertaken for the benefit of others as well as the volunteer.

1. *United Nations (2011). State of the World's Volunteerism Report, 2011: Universal Values for Global Well-being. United Nations Volunteers, P4.*

Concepts Outside the Definition of Volunteering

The following areas are not considered to meet each of the core requirements of volunteering ('without financial gain', 'willingly given' and 'for the common good') and hence are not included in this definition of volunteering. It is acknowledged that many of these have a constructive, positive and vital role in society and may exist alongside volunteering and / or provide a pathway into volunteering.

- Direct family responsibilities are excluded. It is recognised that direct familial relationships vary for different people and social groups and so this is open to individual interpretation. In addition, foster carers have many similarities with volunteers, but because of the family relationship, these are outside this definition of volunteering.
- A number of programs are highly structured, with fixed requirements and provide options of volunteering type activities but with limited choice and/or varying types of in-built financial or reward outcomes. These vary widely and are excluded from this definition. Examples include:
 - Compulsory educational service learning (where students are required to volunteer as part of a course)
 - Mandated court orders including community service and fines
 - Internships
 - Formal work experience / vocational placements
 - Mandatory government programs
 - Limited choice labour market government programs
- Volunteering requires a donation of time. Other types of donating such as giving money or materials and donating blood are not considered volunteering, although it is acknowledged there is a time element required in these forms of donating.

Review:

A structured process for the review of the Explanatory Notes has been established. The first review will be undertaken in 6 months, then annually thereafter. Feedback can be directed to Volunteering Australia at admin@volunteeringaustralia.org

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