

# VOLUNTEERING *and* CONTACT ACT

## Volunteering and Contact ACT

Submission in response to the Consultation for the Collection of Volunteering and Giving Data

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## About Volunteering and Contact ACT

Volunteering and Contact ACT (VCA) is the peak body for volunteering and community information, and the volunteering support service for the Canberra Region. VCA has a vision of an engaged community, enriched by volunteering, participation, and knowledge. Through our services and programs, we foster community networks and undertake research, advocacy, projects, public education, and events.

VCA is a people driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of more than 200 individual and organisational members, and the wider public. This submission provides input to the ABS consultations on the collection of volunteering and giving data.

### Overview

The Australian Capital Territory boasts the highest rate of volunteers in the country, at 36.8 per cent.<sup>i</sup> Further, an estimated 56.8 per cent of 12-25 year-olds in the ACT are involved in volunteering.<sup>ii</sup> Despite the relatively high rate of volunteering in the ACT, resourcing for volunteer involvement remains a key issue, and this impacts the data that organisations are able to collect on their own volunteers and programs. The flow on effect of this is that it is difficult to obtain accurate and timely data from volunteer involving organisations (VIOs).

In the ACT, only one in three VIOs has a dedicated volunteer manager or coordinator.<sup>iii</sup> Further, half of all respondents to a state of the sector survey agreed that it is becoming harder for their organisation to recruit volunteers, and 58.6 per cent of organisations felt they were not adequately resourced to involve volunteers.<sup>iv</sup> These statistics influence volunteering and giving data as under resourcing in the sector, both in the ACT and nationally, affects the breadth and depth of data that VIOs are currently collecting.

### Understanding Volunteering

More robust data collection methods are required to truly understand the full extent of voluntary activity being undertaken across Australia. Whilst it is important for the General Social Survey and the Census to map this data generally, there needs to be investment in additional data collection methods for the full picture to be captured. As identified in the overview of this submission, such efforts are impeded by under resourcing in the sector, and the Federal Government should consider investing in data collection systems that are accessible, easy to understand, and do not place an undue burden on VIOs by increasing

red tape. Access to more robust data will strengthen our understanding of volunteering, and enable us to map trends and identify issues and opportunities.

### Understanding Giving

Giving data should continue to be collected by the General Social Survey, the Census, and the Giving Australia research. Information can also be obtained through the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission (ACNC) about donations and philanthropic giving in Australia. It would be prudent for the ACNC to consider how the information, obtained through mandatory reporting by charities, could be extrapolated to provide an annual overview of rates of giving.

Individual giving information is already obtained through individual tax returns. It would be worth exploring what scope there is for the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) to collate and analyse this data to provide greater insights into who gives, how much they are giving, how often they give, and if there is a correlation between giving and salary. The Giving Australia 2016 research shows that volunteers give, on average, nearly twice as much as non-volunteers.<sup>v</sup> This suggests that enhanced mapping of volunteering and donation data could assist to bolster both forms of giving.

### Understanding the Economic Impact of Volunteering and Giving

VCA agrees that understanding the economic impact of volunteering and giving is important, but it should not be the only criteria mapped through data. Research demonstrates that volunteering has exponential benefits that reach far beyond mere wage replacement savings. From a purely economic standpoint, based on the number of hours given through volunteering identified in the Giving Australia research, adult Australians undertook voluntary work to the value of \$31,417,720,000 in a twelve-month period.<sup>vi</sup>

In addition to the simple wage replacement figure quoted above, research demonstrates that the economic, social, and cultural value of volunteering yields a 450% return for every dollar invested.<sup>vii</sup> In considering data collection on volunteering and giving it is essential to look beyond economic benefits, to the broader benefits provided through human capital, social capital, and symbolic capital. The mapping of such benefits is integral to understanding the overarching value that volunteering provides to Australia.

### Understanding Motivations and Barriers to Volunteering and Giving

The *State of Volunteering in Australia 2016* report identified that 41 per cent of volunteers were motivated to 'give something back to the community', with the second highest

motivation being 'personal belief in a cause/issue', and the third being a 'desire to make a difference'.<sup>viii</sup> The report also looked at barriers to volunteering and found that work and family commitments were the top two barriers identified by respondents. The report also found that the third biggest barrier was that there were no barriers, suggesting that organisations need to identify and create suitable and meaningful opportunities to keep volunteers engaged. This is reflected in the first key finding of the report that, 'there is a disconnect between the volunteering roles that people are interested in and the roles that organisations are offering.'<sup>ix</sup>

Research undertaken by VCA in 2016 into the barriers to skills-based volunteering found that the number one barrier to volunteering was time, closely followed by difficulty finding a suitable role. Organisations not being flexible enough was also identified in the top five barriers, further supporting the findings of the *State of Volunteering in Australia* report that organisations are not adapting to the needs of the modern-day volunteer. This issue is rampant across the sector, yet 86 per cent of VIOs identify that they need more volunteers.<sup>x</sup>

The Giving Australia *Philanthropy and Philanthropists* report identified several barriers and challenges to giving in an Australian context. One of the barriers most relevant to data collection is, 'the perception that giving to charity is ineffective, or that significant proportions of donations will be consumed by administrative costs.'<sup>xi</sup> The other relevant barrier identified by the research is, 'quality of reporting and communication is important in perceptions of impact.'<sup>xii</sup> Many charities may receive disproportionately low levels of donations because of their ineffectiveness at articulating impact, which is directly influenced by the ways in which they collect, collate, and analyse their own data.

Broadly, there is enough research into the barriers and motivations to giving and volunteering, with key factors remaining relatively stable over time. Integral to these key factors is the role that data collection, collation, and analysis is both an enabler and an inhibitor. Greater investment into consistent, easy to use, and accessible data collection systems would be advantageous, as it would allow VIOs to better articulate their impact. This would ultimately foster higher levels of giving of time and money.

### Data Literacy and Improved Access

VCA agrees with the discussion paper that the piecemeal collection of volunteering and giving data is a serious concern. One of the primary issues is that there is no standardised

set of outputs or outcomes that VIOs are asked to measure, and these often differ across jurisdictions and across funding portfolios. Further, the information that is being gathered is not being shared across government agencies or across organisations, or being collated in a meaningful way.

For example, any organisation receiving funding under the Department of Social Services' (DSS) 'Volunteer Management Program' grant funding stream<sup>xiii</sup> is required to submit data collection forms and activity workplans on a biannual basis. However, this data is not collated and shared with grant recipients, or with other government agencies at a federal or local level. Volunteering Support Services across the country play an instrumental role in collecting volunteering data, and in supporting local VIOs with volunteer recruitment and management. The data reported back to DSS on the outputs and outcomes achieved by Volunteering Support Services is a rich source of data on activities in the volunteering sector, but to VCA's knowledge this data is not being used beyond the Department.

VCA strongly advocates for a holistic, online platform for the collection, collation, and dissemination of giving data. As volunteering spans every part of our community, this platform should incorporate data across agencies and jurisdictions. The creation of such a platform could further be informed by ACNC and ATO data to provide a clear picture of the volunteering and giving activity of all Australians. An online platform would reduce literacy and access issues, and provide a consolidated avenue for organisations to track and record giving activity.

A standardised, online platform would also reduce reporting requirements for organisations and reduce red tape across the sector. Further, it would allow for the data to be analysed and used in a more productive way by providing a more holistic picture than the current, fragmented system can provide. Finally, better collection of data, facilitated through a holistic, online platform, would save time and money over the long-term as real-time data becomes more readily available to inform things such as the Giving Australia research.

The availability of more comprehensive data sets can also influence both local and federal budgets when setting targets in priority areas. For example, the 2017 budget has committed the Federal Government to a \$165 million package to prioritise mental health support and prevention. Volunteering has proven health benefits, with a growing body of research showing that, 'volunteering is associated with better physical health and mental health outcomes.'<sup>xiv</sup> These outcomes are so pronounced that doctors now prescribe volunteering

and community involvement to patients experiencing mental health difficulties.<sup>xv</sup> This evidence suggests that volunteering can play a vital role in preventative health, and could be a key way for the Government to action priorities under the new budget measures for mental health support and prevention. Critical to this is the availability of robust data on volunteering and giving, and its ongoing measurement and analysis.

### Broadening the Scope of Volunteering for Data Collection and Preservation of Time Series

VCA suggests that the ABS should start using Volunteering Australia's definition of formal volunteering: '*Volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.*'

Volunteering Australia's review of the definition in 2015-16 was a robust process that clearly identified three main elements of volunteering: that it is a choice, that it contributes to the common good, and that it involves an element of the giving of time. Demarcating the definition in this way provides specific parameters within which to consider formal voluntary activity. The use of Volunteering Australia's definition would allow for the preservation and comparison of data over time, as the three fundamental elements of volunteering are not likely to change.

VCA notes that while the 2014 General Social Survey reported a decline in the rates of formal volunteering for the first time in 20 years, the subsequent Giving Australia research was more positive about the rates of volunteering, estimating this to be 43.7 per cent of the adult population. Further, an estimated 53.5 per cent of Australian youth are volunteers, suggesting there is a strong future for volunteering.

VCA is of the view that the reported decline in the GSS is likely due to the questions not accurately reflecting the nature and scope of voluntary activity being taken across Australia today. VCA advocates for further consultation with Volunteering Australia and its state and territory peak body counterparts in the design of questions to be included in the 2018 GSS and 2021 Census.

The measurement of informal volunteering is useful, but can be measured through fewer questions. VCA would advocate for the bulk of questions to be focused on formal volunteering as this is the easiest to quantify, and is of the most use.

## Suggestions to Improve Collection

As identified above, VCA would advocate for a centralised, holistic, online platform for the collection of volunteering and giving data. This would reduce red tape, and ensure that the data is accessible and useful for a broad range of audiences. Key to this is interagency collaboration, and collaboration across jurisdictions. The platform should endeavour to incorporate all the available volunteering and giving data, including data on corporate/employee volunteering and international volunteering. Investment in such a platform would yield exponential benefits over time by encouraging more robust reporting, and enabling more in-depth analysis. In theory, the availability of such data should also increase rates of volunteering and giving, as it will enable VIOs and charities to utilise the data to encourage more giving behaviour.

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<sup>i</sup> Australia Bureau of Statistics (2015) General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014 Cat. No. 4159.0, table 22.1

<sup>ii</sup> Mission Australia (2016) 'Youth Survey Report 2016', available online at <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/documents/research/young-people-research/677-mission-australia-youth-survey-report-2016>

<sup>iii</sup> Social Policy Research Centre (2016) 'The State of the Community Service Sector in the Australian Capital Territory', available online at <https://www.actcoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/publications/2016-report-state-of-the-community-service-sector-act.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services) (2016) 'Giving Australia 2016 Fact sheet – Individual volunteering', available online at [http://www.communitybusinesspartnership.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/giving\\_australia\\_2016\\_fact\\_sheet\\_-\\_individual\\_volunteering\\_accessible.pdf](http://www.communitybusinesspartnership.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/giving_australia_2016_fact_sheet_-_individual_volunteering_accessible.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> 'Giving Australia 2016 Fact sheet – Individual volunteering provides that volunteers contributed 932 million hours in 2016. This number was multiplied by the agreed wage replacement cost for volunteering of \$33.71 per hour.

<sup>vii</sup> Volunteering Western Australia (2015) 'The Economic, Social and Cultural Value of Volunteering to Western Australia', available online at [https://volunteeringwa.org.au/assets/downloads/vwa\\_report%20book\\_web.pdf](https://volunteeringwa.org.au/assets/downloads/vwa_report%20book_web.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> Volunteering Australia (2016) 'State of Volunteering in Australia', available online at <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/State-of-Volunteering-in-Australia-full-report.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid

<sup>x</sup> Ibid

<sup>xi</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2017) 'Giving Australia 2016 Philanthropy and Philanthropists' available online at [http://www.communitybusinesspartnership.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/giving\\_australia\\_2016\\_philanthropy\\_and\\_philanthropists\\_report.pdf](http://www.communitybusinesspartnership.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/giving_australia_2016_philanthropy_and_philanthropists_report.pdf)

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> This funding stream is to become the Strong and Resilient Communities grant funding program in 2017.

<sup>xiv</sup> Roeder, A. 2016, 'Can volunteering lead to better health?' available online at <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/features/can-volunteering-lead-to-better-health/>

<sup>xv</sup> Cahalane, C. 2016, 'Is it time for doctors to prescribe volunteering?' available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2016/jan/18/is-it-time-to-prescribe-volunteering>