

VOLUNTEERING *and* CONTACT ACT

Volunteering and Contact ACT

Submission to the Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre

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Volunteering and Contact ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra Region. Volunteering and Contact ACT pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and their vital ongoing contribution to the community.

Volunteering and Contact ACT acknowledges the contribution of the volunteers and volunteer involving organisations that contribute to the health and happiness of the community. Volunteers include people of all genders and sexualities, with all abilities and from all cultures. Their skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering services and programs, and in making Canberra a better place to live.

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Overview

Volunteering and Contact ACT (VCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre. This submission will focus on the opportunity for volunteering to deliver outcomes against two pillars of the healthy prison framework: purposeful activity and rehabilitation and preparation for release.

VCA is the peak body for volunteering and community information in 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, training, and events. VCA is a people-driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of 178 member organisations.

Background Information

Volunteering spans every aspect of Australian life, with 5.8 million Australians, or 31 per cent of the population, engaged in formal volunteering.ⁱ These volunteers make an annual social and economic contribution of \$290 billion.ⁱⁱ In the ACT nearly one in three people volunteers, contributing an estimated \$1.5 billion to the ACT economy each year.ⁱⁱⁱ

Research demonstrates that for every \$1 invested in volunteering there is a \$4.50 return to the community.^{iv} Economically, the return on investment in volunteering is exponential over time, and delivers tangible outcomes that government and private sector services would not be able to achieve in isolation.

In addition to the economic benefits generated through volunteering, it also delivers significant social and cultural benefits. Volunteers play a pivotal role in creating connected, diverse, and inclusive communities. With the highest rate of volunteering in the country, the ACT benefits tremendously from the work of volunteers who contribute to the health and happiness of the Canberra community.

Benefits of volunteering for people experiencing disadvantage

Volunteering has pronounced benefits for people experiencing barriers and/or disadvantage. Individuals with low levels of human capital, such as lower levels of education and less work experience, may benefit from volunteering more than their affluent peers.^v However, despite the

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benefits that volunteering can provide for people experiencing disadvantage, volunteering is more accessible to people with a higher socioeconomic status. Further, those who are employed, even on a part-time basis, are more likely to volunteer.^{vi} Barriers to volunteering can be highly complex and can involve multiple issues for people experiencing disadvantage, including recently released detainees. Additional inhibiting factors, such as difficulty obtaining background checks, may further impede former detainees from engaging in volunteering. The removal of such barriers, as well as positive efforts to reduce stigma, would likely result in positive outcomes for those in and exiting the justice system who seek to participate in volunteering.

Pillar 1: Purposeful Activity

Active citizenship during incarceration can be a powerful mechanism to engage detainees in purposeful activity. Enabling detainees to participate in volunteering provides opportunities for them to take on responsibility, perform constructive work for the benefit of others, and contribute to life within and outside the prison community.

In addition to the tangible benefits that volunteering provides to society, it is also proven to make people happier, healthier and sleep better than those who do not volunteer. Detainees who participate in volunteering are likely to reap the same personal rewards as volunteers in the general community.

Establishing a structured volunteering program within Alexander Maconochie Centre, aside from providing a raft of benefits to detainees, could also add valuable capacity for volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) in the Canberra Region. Relationships created through such a program could be leveraged following release from prison, giving detainees an anchor point in the community, and further opportunities to engage in voluntary work.

Based on outcomes achieved in different settings, such as volunteering programs for people on a mental health recovery journey, VCA suggests that participation in a structured volunteering program whilst incarcerated and/or following release would have a positive effect on reducing recidivism. The tangential benefit of a structured volunteering program within AMC is the potential surge capacity it could provide for VIOs who may be able to access the latent potential of detainees.

An example of a structured volunteering program that could be introduced to AMC is the Inclusive Volunteering Program (IVP) run by VCA. IVP assists people experiencing barriers to source or create

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meaningful and viable volunteering placements. At present, the program works with people with a disability and migrants and refugees, which provide a valuable case study for the benefits of volunteering for people experiencing disadvantage.

The power of IVP is that it transforms people who have historically been service users into service providers. The program empowers people to give back to their community, which can be incredibly restorative for those who have often had to access the services delivered by volunteer involving organisations.

Expanding the program to work with both current and former detainees would enable people in the justice system and those exiting it to have access to a program designed to reduce barriers to participation. One of the primary benefits of involving an intermediary in this process, such as Volunteering and Contact ACT, is navigating barriers such as the Working with Vulnerable People Scheme. Without an intermediary, finding a suitable and meaningful volunteering placement may prove too difficult for those unable to obtain a background check, and this may act as a deterrent to participation.

VCA is the Volunteering Support Service for the Canberra Region and has both the expertise and networks to foster positive and purposeful relationships between detainees and former detainees and VIOs in the Canberra Region. Volunteers sourced through a Volunteering Support Service are 28.5 per cent more likely to be retained by a volunteer involving organisation, 38.8 per cent more likely to volunteer for more hours, and 20.5 per cent more likely to be better prepared for volunteering.^{vii} This evidence further underscores the value of having a conduit between those seeking to volunteer and the VIOs who are able to place volunteers in their programs.

Pillar 2: Rehabilitation and Preparation for Release

Volunteering has the potential to play a powerful role in rehabilitation and restorative justice in the ACT, and exploration of possibilities could result in enhanced outcomes for detainees, former detainees, the community, and the wider justice system.

Volunteering is a proven pathway to employment, with research demonstrating that participation in volunteering can improve an individual's odds of gaining employment by 27 per cent.^{viii} For those seeking employment after incarceration, volunteering could provide a valuable entry point to paid work. A program run in the UK aimed at improving employability for disadvantaged groups and communities, known as the Volunteering for Stronger Communities Programme, provides an

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example of the benefits that a structured volunteering program could provide for people in the justice system. The UK program exceeded all core targets for supporting participants and VIOs and, “displayed impressive capacity to move individuals into volunteering and paid work.”^{ix} Further, the program evaluation found that, “one in five participants said they had found paid work since participating in volunteering.”^x In addition to improving employability, volunteering also builds human and social capital, delivering significant benefits to the community.

Opportunities for Detainees and Former Detainees

Volunteering and Contact ACT has identified four interrelated projects that could be established to enable detainees to engage in purposeful activity, and to allow those exiting the justice system to participate in the community as part of their rehabilitation. All four projects leverage VCA’s experience as the peak body for volunteering and community information, and in running inclusive programs.

1. Structured Volunteering Program within Alexander Maconochie Centre

Establishing a structured volunteering program within AMC could provide a valuable opportunity for detainees to engage in purposeful activity through volunteering. This would provide detainees with an opportunity to use or build new skills and create connections with the external community which could be leveraged on release. Further, there would be broader benefits to the community as the voluntary work being undertaken by detainees would provide valuable capacity and capability to VIOs in the Canberra Region who regularly report being under resourced. This program could be an extension of VCA’s existing Inclusive Volunteering Program, providing efficiency gains through reduced duplication and leveraging of subject matter expertise.

2. Structured Volunteering Program for Former Detainees

As identified above, an iteration of VCA’s existing Inclusive Volunteering Program could be established to assist those exiting the justice system to engage in voluntary work. One of the primary benefits of involving VCA as an intermediary in this process is to assist with navigating background checking requirements, which may prove more onerous for former detainees, and to help reduce stigma by providing warm referrals to volunteer involving organisations. The iterations of IVP for detainees and former detainees could be run in tandem, providing further efficiency gains for AMC and the ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate.

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3. Social Support and Mentoring Program for Former Detainees

In addition to the Inclusive Volunteering Program VCA also runs the Connections Program, which provides one-to-one social support for people on a mental health recovery journey. VCA recruits and trains volunteers to engage in structured friendships with program participants to help these participants reconnect with the community. Participants and volunteers meet for a minimum of one hour per fortnight and engage in social activities. Like the Inclusive Volunteering Program, Connections could be expanded to work with former detainees.

4. Information and Referral through the Community Info Hub to Assist with Reintegration

VCA runs Canberra's Community Info Hub, which provides information and referral to free and government-subsidised events, programs, services and hobby groups. During preparation for release, detainees could be supported to access the ACT Community Directory to find services and programs to assist on their journey following incarceration. This includes finding access to essential services as well as linking detainees with support groups and interest groups to foster community connection.

The above four programs could be run in partnership with the Transitional Release Centre to ensure a community of care for participants.

The outcomes achieved through the Inclusive Volunteering Program and Connections Program for current and former participants demonstrate the benefits delivered through involvement with a structured volunteering program. Participants across both programs consistently report reduced feelings of loneliness and social isolation, and increased feelings of confidence and self-esteem. The expansion of these two programs to focus specifically on the needs of detainees and former detainees could contribute to the Alexander Maconochie System meeting the Healthy Prison Framework by providing purposeful work and assisting with preparation for release and rehabilitation.

VCA suggests that active involvement in volunteering during and after incarceration would deliver enhanced outcomes to detainees and former detainees and reduce recidivism rates. Further, a significant community benefit would be realised through increased levels of volunteer involvement.

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Whilst the Healthy Prison Review is specifically measuring the performance of the Alexander Maconochie Centre, VCA suggests that the above programs could also be introduced in the Bimberi Youth Justice Centre.

Volunteering and Contact ACT would welcome the opportunity to expand on this submission in further detail, and thanks the Office of the ACT Inspector of Correctional Services for the opportunity to put forward our views and ideas for consideration.

ⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015) 'General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014', available online at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4159.0>.

ⁱⁱ Flinders University (31 October 2014) 'Volunteering worth \$290 billion a year', <https://indaily.com.au/news/2014/10/31/volunteering-worth-290-billion-year/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015) *General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014*, available online at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4159.0>.

^{iv} Volunteering Western Australia (May 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

^v Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Evaluation (2012) 'Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment: Does Volunteering Increase Odds of Finding a Job for the Out of Work?' available online at

http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/employment_research_report.pdf

^{vi} Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015) *General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014*, available online at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4159.0>.

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Evaluation (2012) 'Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment: Does Volunteering Increase Odds of Finding a Job for the Out of Work?' available online at

http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/employment_research_report.pdf

^{ix} Sheffield Hallam University Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (2013) 'Final evaluation of the Volunteering for Stronger Communities Programme' available online at

https://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/practical_support/volunteering/vsc_final_evaluation_report_dec_2013.pdf

^x Ibid.