



Comment on the Volunteer Statement Information Paper

September 2011

About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges that Canberra has been built on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people. We pay our respects to their elders and recognise the displacement and disadvantage they have suffered as a result of European settlement. We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage and low-income citizens of the Territory.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS' objectives are a community in which all people have the opportunities and resources needed to participate in and benefit from social and economic life and the development of a dynamic, collaborative and viable community sector.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS receives funding from the ACT Government - Community Services Directorate.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

Contact Details

Phone:	02 6202 7200
Fax:	02 6281 4192
Mail:	PO Box 849, Mawson ACT 2607
E-mail:	actcoss@actcoss.org.au
WWW:	http://www.actcoss.org.au
Location:	Weston Community Hub, 1/6 Gritten St, Weston ACT 2611
Director:	Roslyn Dundas
Deputy Director:	Kiki Korpinen
Policy Officer:	Samara Rahman

September 2011

© Copyright ACT Council of Social Service Incorporated

This publication is copyright, apart from use by those agencies for which it has been produced. Non-profit associations and groups have permission to reproduce parts of this publication as long as the original meaning is retained and proper credit is given to the ACT Council of Social Service Inc (ACTCOSS). All other individuals and Agencies seeking to reproduce material from this publication should obtain the permission of the Director of ACTCOSS.

Introduction

ACTCOSS welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *Volunteer Statement and Information Paper*. As the peak body for people experiencing disadvantage and as a voice for community sector organisations, ACTCOSS believes volunteering facilitates a sense of social inclusion, which in turn plays an important role in addressing social disadvantage.

The purpose of the *Volunteer Statement Information Paper* is to recognise and support volunteers in their endeavours. The focus of this comment is three areas where the ACT Government could develop and expand policies relating to volunteers. Firstly, the ACT Government could assist community organisations develop practices which will facilitate mutually beneficial relationships for the organisation and the volunteer. Secondly, there needs to be additional support and training for people on volunteer boards. Finally, the issue and procedures surrounding spontaneous volunteers and the role of organisations need to be reviewed to ensure the needs of communities affected by disaster are given highest priority.

Volunteering and Social Inclusion

Social exclusion incorporates issues such as inadequate social participation, a lack of social integration and a lack of power. While related to poverty, social exclusion is also linked to the important notion of social capital. One can be socially excluded without being in poverty.

Volunteering has a role in facilitating social inclusion, for both the volunteer providing the service and the recipient. For the individual, volunteering can increase physical and psychological wellbeing, create a wider social network, enhance career opportunities, reduce loneliness and build self-esteem. The table below from the Association of Voluntary Services Organisations summarises how volunteering can aid in combating social exclusion:¹

DISADVANTAGE	OBJECTIVES/BENEFITS OF VOLUNTARY ACTIVITY
1. Geographic disadvantage - people living in rural communities	- access to new networks of people and information - increasing possibilities of and access to new opportunities - bringing new inspiration back to the sending/original community - added value non-formal education possibilities

¹ Association of Voluntary Services Organisation (AVSO), *Social Inclusion and Volunteering/Civic Engagement*, 2007, p. 2.

2. Disability - physical disability - learning difficulty	- integration in mixed-ability projects to increase mutual understanding and tolerance - enhanced self confidence, self worth
3. Socio – economic disadvantage - people living in poverty - people who have basic education attainment - substance abuse - Former prisoners - People experiencing homelessness - long term unemployed	- enhanced self confidence, self worth - acquiring skills and competences - access to employment opportunities - identifying different role models, different ways to live, respect for work
4. Disadvantage linked to ethnicity - minorities - refugees - immigrants	- in mixed ethnic groups foster exchange of knowledge and mutual understanding - encourage pride in their own identity and cultural heritage - possibility to be active in a host community - acquiring host language and other skills and competences - intercultural dialogue
5. Demographic challenge - ageing population	- active ageing - health benefits of volunteering - transfer of experience and knowledge

Support for Volunteers

The *Volunteer Statement* can be expanded to include a discussion around how the ACT Government can assist non-government organisations to support volunteers. Some small community organisations do not always have the experience or the capacity to support a volunteer to have a meaningful experience. To ensure the volunteer experience is mutually beneficial for both the organisation and the volunteer, organisations need to be aware of the rights of the volunteer. All volunteers have the right to be treated as co-workers. They are entitled to the same protections specified under Equal Employment Opportunity, Occupational Health and Safety and Anti-Discrimination legislation. They are also entitled to be assigned a task which is worthwhile to them, have the right to be heard and make suggestions.

One way community organisations can better support volunteers is by having a policy on volunteering within their internal policies and procedures. The policy on volunteering could be discussed with the volunteer as part of the induction process. The *Volunteering Statement* can assist community organisations to support volunteers by providing guidance and strategies to support the development of policies and procedures on working with volunteers.

Recommendation

- Include strategies on how community organisations can form meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships with volunteers.

Volunteering, Governance and Community Boards

The *Volunteering Statement Information Paper* states

many Canberrans engage in volunteering as Volunteer Board Members on community boards. They form part of the community's management infrastructure, without which the organisation could not operate. Their responsibilities as Directors are equivalent to those in the private sector, covering all legal aspects including contract and financial management, occupational health and safety and as employers.²

The governing body provides leadership, is responsible for setting board directions, and to ensure policies and plans are put in place by management and staff. The governing body is also required to ensure the organisation complies with relevant legislation, awards, regulations and policies. The application of sound governance processes contributes to an organisation's success, reduces risk and increases confidence in the performance of the governing body. In order to achieve effective governance, the governing body needs to be clear about its role, duties, responsibilities and the extent of its powers.

It is also fundamental community board members understand their legal obligations in being a part of a board of governance. The law requires board members of community organisations to meet certain standards of conduct while managing the affairs of an organisation. There are a number of provisions in the *Incorporated Associations Act (ACT)* and *Corporations Act (Cwlth)* which apply to board members. These include provisions relating to the holding of an Annual General Meeting (AGM), providing financial information to agencies such as the Office of Regulatory Services (ORS), Australian Security and Investment Commission (ASIC) and other obligations specified under various legislation. ACT community organisations need to also be familiar with provisions in the *Human Rights Act*, especially if the organisation could be considered a Public Authority under the Act.

As the peak body for community organisations in the ACT, ACTCOSS works very closely with many community organisations in developing governance procedures. It is important to note there is a tremendous need for governance skills and training for people sitting on community boards. Furthermore, there is a need for community organisations and people opting to volunteer on the board of a community organisation to be aware of the governance training which is available.

² ACT Government, *Volunteer Statement and Information Paper*, 2011, p. 8.

While the *Volunteer Statement Information Paper* does state the Australian Institute of Company Directors provides training to support volunteer board members, their programs can be beyond the resources of small organisations. ACTCOSS, for example, provides training and support for community boards and for volunteers with very little to no experience of being on a board through seminars and an online *Organisations Information Kit*.³ This work is supported by the ACT Government through the Community Services Program under the Community Services Directorate. The volunteer statement could be expanded to include links to organisations and programs which will assist people to develop their knowledge on governance.

Recommendations

- Support volunteers on community boards by providing links to a range of resources on governance in the *Volunteer Statement*.

Spontaneous Volunteering

Spontaneous volunteering is the sporadic volunteering which occurs after a disaster. Spontaneous volunteers generally seek to offer assistance to an organisation or cause as part of the recovery phase. Spontaneous volunteering is not mentioned in the *Volunteer Statement Information Paper*. As this form of volunteering is becoming increasingly present in the volunteering and emergency management landscape, it is worth highlighting the nature and issues associated with spontaneous volunteering in the *Volunteer Statement*.

Spontaneous volunteering requires effective management, for a number of reasons. The challenge of managing spontaneous volunteers lies in harnessing and maximising enthusiasm and skills without sacrificing the integrity of the core emergency response team's activities. There has been concern organisations providing emergency services during a disaster may struggle to maintain core activities while simultaneously managing the spontaneous volunteers themselves. Key learnings from the South Australian experience of the Lower Eyre Peninsula bushfires in 2005 confirm resources required to manage spontaneous volunteers in terms of building information management systems, allocating resources to accommodate people and undertake induction and training often detracted from agencies primary task of responding to the affected members of the community.⁴

There is a need to minimise the risk to spontaneous volunteers, organisations and the community affected by the disaster. Research by

³ ACTCOSS, *Organisation's Information Kit*, <<http://www.actcoss.org.au/oik/index.html>>, 12 September 2011.

⁴ Government of South Australia, *Collaboration is the Key: Lessons from the South Australian Governments Recovery Operation Lower Eyre Peninsula Bushfire*, <www.familiesandcommunities.sa.gov.au>, accessed 12 September 2011.

the Red Cross identifies 5 types of spontaneous volunteers, whom can be distinguished by their motivations:

1. Returnees, the survivors of the incident;
2. the Anxious, those looking to be empowered by their actions;
3. Curious, also known as “disaster tourists”;
4. Helpers, who are altruistically motivated; and
5. Exploiters, who are opportunistic individuals looking to gain recognition or gain access to vulnerable people to exert power in a number of ways.⁵

Working with Vulnerable People Checking System

Under the proposed Working with Vulnerable People Checking System, regular volunteers who work with vulnerable people will undergo background checks. There may be scope for organisations to consider the mix of spontaneous volunteers working with their organisation if checks have already taken place. In addition there also needs to be efficient processes in place to enable organisations to work with spontaneous volunteers who have not previously undertaken a Working with Vulnerable People check. The ACT Government can support and work alongside organisations to ensure processes are in place to enable spontaneous volunteering to be conducted in a safe and consist manner.

Recommendation

- Work with community organisations to devise procedures which will prioritise the needs of communities affected by disaster, while enabling spontaneous volunteers to undertake meaningful contributions to the recovery process.

Role of Community Organisation under the ACT Community Recovery Plan

According to the ACT Community Recovery Plan, released in 2008, community organisations which are part of the Emergency Recovery Sub-Committee have specific and functional roles in mitigating the effects of a disaster. The responsibilities include:

- Providing emergency accommodation;
- Collecting donations;
- Catering and proving food;
- Child care;
- Providing clothing and personal needs;
- Counselling;
- Financial assistance;

⁵ K. Greenwood, *Waving Not Drowning-Keeping Afloat on the New Waves of Spontaneous Volunteers*, <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/files/2UH1HWPGFS/bn08033_VA8_Katie%20Greenwood.pdf>, Accessed 12 September 2011.

- First aid and medical support;
- Pastoral care;
- Translating and interpreting services; and
- Transport.⁶

In the event of an emergency in the ACT Volunteering ACT is tasked with coordinating spontaneous volunteers. Volunteering ACT would however require significant support to carry out this task in the event of an emergency. In addition, the development of a spontaneous volunteer register, within Volunteering ACT or the Community Services Directorate would be a useful tool in managing spontaneous volunteers. People who believe they may want to volunteer in the event of an emergency could register their interest under this tool and specify what sort of work they would be interested or capable of undertaking in the event of an emergency. A similar tool exists in the context of regular volunteering through Volunteering Australia's *Go Volunteer* website. Further consultation and partnership with Volunteering ACT is required to develop effective coordination plans to manage spontaneous volunteers.

Recommendation

- Include a section on spontaneous volunteering and how to support organisations manage spontaneous volunteers in the event of an emergency.

Conclusion

Volunteering facilitates social inclusion. As stated in the *Volunteer Statement Information Paper*

Research indicates volunteering enhances social cohesion, enhances social cohesion, strengthens communities and provides benefits to the volunteer themselves.⁷

There needs to be greater commitment from governments to support the volunteering sector in the ACT. Organisations need to be supported to create meaningful experiences for volunteers.

The issue of spontaneous volunteers was not canvassed by the *Volunteer Statement Information Paper*. Given spontaneous volunteering is becoming increasingly significant in the emergency management landscape, the statement can be expanded to include a discussion on how organisations can manage spontaneous volunteers.

⁶ ACT Government, *ACT Community Recovery Plan*, 2007.

⁷ ACT Government, *Volunteer Statement and Information Paper*, 2011, p.9.