



Women's Health In the North Response to Volunteering Australia's Discussion Paper: Towards a National Volunteer Strategy, October 2008

Women's Health In the North (WHIN) appreciates the opportunity provided by Volunteering Australia to contribute to the discussion on a National Volunteer Strategy.

As the regional women's health service for the Northern Metropolitan Subregion of Melbourne¹, Women's Health In the North undertakes a number of activities to support the health and wellbeing of women who live and/or work in the region, including:

- Health information and community education to women;
- training to service providers on women's health issues;
- innovative health promotion and community development projects that improve the experience and quality of women's health and wellbeing;
- collaborative partnerships with health providers to improve services and programs for women; and
- research and advocacy on women's health and wellbeing needs.

WHIN has 16 years experience in providing services to women in the region, and has particular expertise in meeting the needs of women who are most marginalised by the health system, and who might generally be referred to as 'hard to reach' or 'at risk'. WHIN is committed to making all the difference to the health and wellbeing of women in Melbourne's north.

In September 2007, Women's Health In the North (WHIN) commenced planning for a program that addresses the barriers and maximises the enablers to women's economic participation. Prior to addressing the questions set by Volunteering Australia for the discussion paper WHIN has included some of the research findings from its *Women & Economic Participation: The Labour Market & Beyond Draft Discussion Paper* (2008).

Women and Volunteering

Research into this program established that women's economic participation is a crucial ingredient in the recipe for both mental and physical health.

One of the aspects on this research was centred on Women and Unpaid Work which had a focus on volunteering. The research established that women are incredibly generous volunteers. Women tend to be engaged as volunteers across the lifespan; as young women attempting to increase their job/study prospects, as women in the middle years who wish to retrain and participate after a period of time away from the paid workforce due to familial responsibilities, and as older women who continue to have significant contributions to make to people and organisations within their community.²

Unpaid work is a very large and important part of any economy and, most frequently, no economic value in measuring production and output is attached to women's many unpaid contributions ... the vast

¹ Comprising the municipalities of Banyule, Darebin, Hume, Moreland, Nillumbik, Whittlesea and Yarra.

² Women's Health In the North, (2008) *Women & Economic Participation: The Labour Market & Beyond Discussion Paper*

majority of older women would not even think of the many arduous tasks they perform daily as 'work'.³ Indeed, in a study conducted by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (2006), 69 per cent of Australian adults indicated that they believe that women are obliged, based on gender, to provide the majority of care to children, older parents and dependents with a disability.⁴

The ABS paper *Occasional Paper: Unpaid Work and the Australian Economy* (ABS Cat no 5240.0), which was based on data collected in the 1997 Time Use Survey, found:

- Females accounted for more of the total value of all types of volunteer work than males across age groups up to 55, and independent of whether they're also engaged in full-time or part-time paid work.⁵
- People aged 35-44 years reported the highest rate of volunteering (40 per cent). At these ages people are more likely to be coupled, with children, and their higher than average volunteer rate reflects family commitments. This was particularly the case for women.⁶
- Women who were not employed accounted for a higher percentage than employed women.⁷

In reading through the *Towards a National Volunteer Strategy Discussion Paper* WHIN found that gender was not thoroughly considered as an important factor in the development of a national strategy. Given the above findings, Women's Health In the North advocates that any National Volunteer Strategy should include gendered information in order to address the different barriers and enablers to women and men's participation in Volunteering.

³ Feldman, S. & Poole, E. (1999). *A Certain Age: Women Growing Older*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

⁴ National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (2006). *Who Cares? The cost of caring in Australia 2002 to 2005*. http://www.apo.org.au/inkboard/results.chtml?filename_num=76775 accessed on 08 March 2008.

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Cat. No. 2068.0 Labour Force Status by Voluntary Work for an organization or group. Count of Persons 55 years and older.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Cat. No. 2068.0 Labour Force Status by Voluntary Work for an organization or group. Count of Persons 55 years and older.

⁷ Office for Women. *Voluntary work in Australia*.

http://www.ofw.facsia.gov.au/work_education/unpaid_work/volunteers.htm accessed on 30 January 2008

Responses to the Volunteering Australia Discussion Paper

How relevant is a National Volunteer Strategy to the future of volunteering in Australia?

A National Volunteer Strategy is important to the future of volunteering in Australia because it will influence all levels of government (Federal, State and Local) to value the role and contribution of volunteers in the community. A National Strategy would provide additional support to current volunteering programs by encouraging at all levels of government to consider volunteering.

A national strategy should recognise both formal and informal (carers, grandparents caring for grandchildren) volunteering undertaken by people in the community. The Discussion Paper reports that the Productivity Commission anticipates that with the ageing population older people will prefer to live independently in favour of residential aged care services. In terms of informal volunteering, as our population continues to age, the expectation that women will also care for their elderly parents is also growing. Many women are experiencing the dual demands of caring informally for the very young, and the very old. The type of care that will be provided to many of the ageing population will take the form of informal volunteering and so these gendered issues would need to be considered in a National Strategy.

What issues need to be addressed in a National Volunteer Strategy?

As a women's health service, Women's Health In the North suggests that a National Volunteer Strategy needs to address:

- The impacts gender has on participation in volunteering.
- The enablers and barriers experienced by women volunteering, including transport costs associated with undertaking their work.
- Programs that are sensitive to the specific needs of women, such as childcare costs.
- The link between volunteering and employment pathways, in particular for women returning to work after a period of not undertaking paid employment, and skilled migrant women looking at increasing their employability prospects in Australia.
- The different types of volunteering, formal and informal volunteering, in particular the informal volunteering that women undertake through their social constructed role as carers and therefore linking it with the National Respite for Carers Program.
- The enablers and barriers to participation for different population groups including women from Culturally And Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, young women, women with a disability, women experiencing low socio economic status and older women.
- The impacts of CentreLink income support payments and volunteering obligations, in particular for single parents, women from CALD backgrounds and women with disabilities.
- The strategy needs to be integrated with other National strategies so as to recognise that volunteering is a part of all sections of society such as in community, government and business.

What resources are required in the development of a National Volunteer Strategy? (250 words)

Women's Health In the North believes it is important that the development of a National Volunteer Strategy should provide an opportunity for individuals, local communities, volunteers, and organisations to have input into the development of the Strategy.

Within the Northern Metropolitan Subregion of Melbourne there are a number of organisations that support volunteers and organisations that have specific volunteer programs. Therefore as these organisations would have extensive experience in working with volunteers, resources should be

provided to them to enable ongoing opportunities for participants in their programs and the organisations to have input into the National Strategy. Community organisations that work specifically to support volunteers should be provided with additional resources to enable volunteers to have the opportunity to provide adequate input into the development of a National Volunteer Strategy.

What would a success of a National Volunteer Strategy look like for you? (250 words)

- It would clearly articulate the gender differences in volunteering.
- It would address the impacts of gender on volunteering participation.
- It would address issues for both layers of volunteering, i.e. those undertaking formal and informal volunteering.
- It would have been developed with the guidance of volunteers in the community and the input from organisations that have volunteer programs.
- It would have a long term vision to ensure the sustainability of the strategy into the future.
- It would have ongoing evaluation mechanisms including ongoing consultation with all key stakeholders.
- It would address the barriers to participation in volunteering such as the cost of transport and access to appropriate childcare.
- It would consider the different interpretations and types of volunteering for people from different cultural backgrounds.
- It would be put into practice and take effect in the near future with a thorough implementation and evaluation plan.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the stated recommendations for the development of a National Volunteer Strategy?

Women's Health In the North agrees with all four recommendations.

Recommendation 1

That all levels of government make an in-principle commitment to the development of a National Volunteer Strategy with a long term vision to strengthen volunteering in Australia.

A commitment by all levels of government to the development of a National Volunteer Strategy would be a great first step to supporting and providing recognition to the contributions of volunteers across Australia.

The recommendation should also consider including a commitment to the development of implementation plans for all levels of government to ensure the National Volunteer Strategy is implemented across the nation as soon as possible. The first step in the development of the National Strategy should include thorough consultations with all key stakeholders across the nation, including peak bodies and the local communities where volunteers are currently contributing.

Recommendation 2

That an appropriate level of government funding be allocated to support the development and ongoing viability of a National Volunteer Strategy.

It is important that appropriate funding is available to undertake the consultations, development, implementation and evaluation of the National Volunteer Strategy. In terms of the strategy's vision, appropriate funding should be considered within a long term framework.

Adequate funding should be allocated to all key stakeholders at all levels of government, peak bodies and local programs and services; in particular with a focus on local programs and services where volunteers (the beneficiaries of the strategy) can have an opportunity to have their say.

Recommendation 3

That a National Volunteer Strategy be sector-driven with input and support from all stakeholders — community, government and business.

As was stated in Recommendation 1 and 2 all key stakeholders should be involved in the consultation, development, implementation and evaluation of the National Volunteer Strategy. A successful National Strategy should be driven by the needs of the community who are volunteers. The national strategy should be driven by those who are going to be directly impacted by it; the volunteers and organisations working with and supporting volunteers.

Recommendation 4

That the development of a National Volunteer Strategy would serve to expand volunteering infrastructure of national, state and regional organisations avoiding duplication of resources in the creation of parallel infrastructure.

No comments.

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