

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES SELECT COMMITTEE ON REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

Questions on Notice

Addressed to Volunteering Australia

Hearings held Tuesday 16 May 2020.

1. Could you tell the Committee about any particular challenges your organisation is facing in the current COVID 19/post-bushfire environment?

As a function of the COVID-19 pandemic Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIO's), whose volunteer ranks have been materially depleted, face significant structural and situational barriers in re-engaging their volunteer workforces.

Issues such as a lack of clear and consistent information and guidance from federal and state/territory governments hamper volunteer re-engagement efforts and create ongoing uncertainty. Furthermore, an absence of illness insurance cover for non-emergency volunteers who, should they contract COVID-19 whilst volunteering, are generally unable to claim for a loss of earnings and/or leave entitlements. As a corollary, many VIO's are reluctant to re-engage volunteers due to perceived legal liability, and corporates are reluctant to re-engage staff in corporate volunteering programmes.

2. How important is your organisation to the regional communities in which you serve?

Volunteering is central to the social fabric of rural and regional communities and to community well-being. Volunteering in regional communities is what binds rural communities together and enhances social connectivity.

As the national peak body representing state and territory volunteering peak bodies specifically and the wider community of Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIO's) and their volunteers more generally, Volunteering Australia develops policy and advocates for greater recognition of volunteer contributions, better resourcing, stronger and more supportive regulation and legislation to assist VIO's deliver services to their communities.

3. What are the activities you undertake that make the most difference in regional communities?

The policy and advocacy work undertaken by Volunteering Australia helps to guide legislation and regulation which influences volunteering activities in regional communities and assists in ensuring volunteers are available and able to meet a growing community need.

Facilitating or otherwise being involved in sector-wide engagement in needs based analysis of regional community need assists in coordination of services and community support.

4. The Committee would like to hear some stories of your volunteers working in difficult times and making a difference.

5. What can be done to encourage more involvement in volunteering in regional communities?

Greater funding of regional VIO's to enable them to adequately resource their administration and operations to successfully deliver the services so keenly needed in regional Australia.

Greater investment in recruitment campaigns, systems and technologies run by state and territory peak bodies, such as:

GoVolunteer and other online recruitment platforms which enable Volunteer Involving Organisations and volunteers to connect and undertake formal volunteering opportunities. As the sector evolves and grows, maintenance and enhancements are required to ensure functionality is up to date with user expectations and user needs.

Administrative processes can create barriers for volunteers and increase workloads for managers of volunteers. The nature of the recent crisis resulted in many volunteer responders moving between jurisdictions under different regulatory regimes. While administration and regulations are in place for the protection of the whole community (for example through police checks and working with children checks), any ways of streamlining or supporting Volunteer Involving Organisations to reduce red tape would be beneficial, particularly to facilitate people volunteering interstate.

6. What is your organisation's single most valuable contribution to your community?

7. What could government do to better support the community sector?

A whole of government strategy which understands the breadth and depth of volunteer involvement and contribution. Volunteer Involving Organisations and the volunteers they rely upon are fundamental to the operation of communities by assisting those in need and enriching the lives of those in regional Australia each and every day.

A whole of government strategy for volunteers which recognises that volunteering involves nearly 6 million registered volunteers and countless unregistered volunteers and that their activity is as important to social cohesion and economic prosperity whether there is a crisis or not.

There are various elements of supporting infrastructure that facilitate a thriving, efficient and safe volunteering sector, including online tools, inter-organisational networks, Volunteering Support Services and so on.

Volunteering Australia has made proposals to broadly and holistically strengthen the volunteering sector in the recent Volunteering Australia 2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission.