

2023



# **POLICY POSITION**

## **RURAL WOMEN'S VOLUNTEERISM IN AUSTRALIA**

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## **Volunteering in Australia**

Volunteerism is an essential aspect of rural Australian communities. Whilst volunteers are unpaid, volunteers are a fundamental part of Australia's national workforce. Volunteering not only contributes to the Australian economy through the unpaid contributions of over 5.8 million Australians, but also contributes an estimated \$290 billion in economic and social good to Australian society (Volunteering Australia, 2023). Within rural Australian communities, typified by geographical isolation, drought stress, high suicide rates, and reduced access to services, volunteerism often fills gaps in essential services left in the wake of reduced funding, alongside difficulty attracting and retaining skilled labour. Rural Australian women often contribute to these causes via unpaid means through formal volunteer organisations such as Foodbank, the Country Women's Association and Sporting Australia, among others. These organisations serve as a platform for public participation for women, and provide valuable opportunities for skills development and networking, improving physical and mental health sense of belonging and social cohesion, education and employment prospects within rural communities (Warburton & Winterson, 2017; Williams et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2019).

On 17 April 2023, the National Rural Women's Coalition held a stakeholder consultation focusing upon the state of volunteerism within rural Australia (NRWC, 2023). The following report outlines an expanded discussion of matters covered during this meeting.

### **The Contribution of Females to Rural Australian Volunteerism**

Women generally contribute more than men to Australian volunteerism, via both informal and formal unpaid service to community (ABS, 2021). These volunteer efforts have huge implications on the liveability of regional communities and meet

significant demand. In fact, according to Volunteering Australia's National Volunteering Strategy, 83 per cent of volunteer organisations indicated an imminent need for volunteers which they anticipate growing over the next five years (Volunteering Australia, 2023).

Volunteerism plays a critical role in both building and challenging gender roles and expectations within rural Australian communities. Women's volunteerism in rural communities is particularly significant, as it provides opportunities for women to build social networks, develop employable skills and leadership abilities, and claim active roles within the community.

### **The State of Volunteering in Regional Australia**

The rate of formal volunteering in Australia has been gradually declining since 2010 and dropped sharply at the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic (Volunteering Australia, 2023). Oftentimes, formal volunteer organisations form the backbone of rural Australian communities through the provision of essential services, as opposed to metropolitan communities which tend to see these services provided by government and council services (NRWC, 2023). The proliferation of informal volunteering at the expense of formal volunteering thus creates a problem acutely felt within regional communities, as it poses a significant risk to much-needed service provision.

Recent years have seen a further drop in volunteerism in Australia as a whole, with millennials reportedly showing an increased desire for volunteer opportunities with less long-term commitments (Volunteering Australia, 2023), placing increased pressure upon community organisations and charities to adapt to ensure they remain attractive to modern day volunteers (Volunteering Australia, 2023).

## **Barriers to Volunteer Recruitment and Retention**

1. Many individuals working in unpaid roles reported a lack of budget provided for training and skills development alongside a sense of being inadequately trained (Biddle et al., 2022; Holmes et al., 2022; NRWC, 2023). It ought to be noted that managing a program dependent on unpaid staff requires similar management and leadership skills to managing a program dependent upon paid staff (Davies et al., 2021; NRWC, 2023). Thus, many volunteer organisations would greatly benefit from increased access to quality leadership and governance training, as well as networking opportunities with other volunteer leaders.
2. According to Volunteering Australia's 2016 survey, responses suggest there is a disconnect between the roles that volunteer organisations are offering and the roles prospective volunteers are seeking out. Volunteers reported feeling as though their skills were not appropriately assessed and utilised, nor their desire for growth and experience effectively tailored to. According to Volunteers Australia (Volunteering Australia, 2023), modern volunteers are attracted not only to measures of social cohesion, but also the promise of professional skills development. A tailored approach targeting the volunteer experience as the forefront of marketing and retention strategies may thus contribute to volunteer organisations' chance of recruitment success. Organisations with high recruitment and retention rates appear to recognise and position volunteers as valuable resources, tailoring their recruitment, advertising and job descriptions around volunteer's goals and aspirations, and harnessing/leveraging upon this intrinsic motivation (NRWC, 2023).
3. The gig economy has seen a change in working lives of Australians, and a shift away from a sole 9-5 business model. Expectations surrounding the

volunteering experience have changed, with modern volunteers demanding more flexibility and more choice. Younger people may perhaps be more engaged than they have ever been, but they want to do it on their own terms, in their own ways. Younger people are politically and socially active, though they are not necessarily connected to formal volunteer organisations and tend to perform these activities individually (NRWC, 2023). This energy could be better harnessed by volunteer organisations through more flexible recruitment approaches to achieve mutual goals.

4. Another possible reason for reduced engagement of young people could be a lack of online presence reducing organisational visibility (Biddle et al., 2022; NRWC, 2023). Resource constraints and skills gaps impact upon the ability of many volunteer organisations to effectively utilise online channels to target and engage potential volunteers, raising brand recognition and awareness. To continue to engage a wide range of volunteers, employing online methods of recruitment and facilitating virtual volunteering is essential, with 28 per cent of volunteers under 24 years old utilising online recruitment methods, and 44 percent of individuals having engaged in online volunteering in the last 12 months (Holmes et al., 2022; NRWC, 2023; Volunteering Australia, 2023). The ability to adapt and pivot to the modern business environment of a digital age, is thus crucial to the ongoing success of Australia's volunteer institutions.
5. Many volunteer organisations are poorly resourced. Lack of resources impede organisational capability to effectively leverage off other mutually beneficial partnerships, such as organisational engagement with corporate Employee Volunteering Programs. Lack of resources may also impede organisational capability to effectively engage volunteers with disabilities and language barriers. Sport Australia have identified this as an area for improvement within their Sport Volunteerism Strategy (Australian Government, 2021; Davies et al.,

2018). Volunteer organisations would benefit from the support of corporate Australia, as well as philanthropic Australia at a grass roots level (NRWC, 2023).

6. Cost of living pressures have caused increased strain upon potential volunteers, contributing to reduced volunteer numbers (CWA, 2017; Paull, 2022; Volunteering Australia, 2023). Amongst young people aged 18-34 years old, 15-25 per cent of people did not volunteer due to financial pressures (Biddle et al., 2022; Volunteering Australia, 2023). This financial pressure impacts upon young people more significantly than other demographics. The Country Women's Association (CWA) note that many of their small groups are feeling financial strain as rates and insurances have increased, placing increased pressures upon volunteers to fundraise (NRWC, 2023). Volunteering Australia similarly state that 54 per cent of individuals surveyed in their 2022 Strategic Report incurred out of pocket expenses, despite reimbursements being provided by volunteer organisations (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). Understanding these types of pressures experienced by volunteers is thus critical to effectively targeting and harnessing the value of this volunteer base (NRWC, 2023).

## **Case Studies:**

### The Country Women's Organisation:

The Country Women's Association (CWA) is one of the largest rural volunteer organisations in Australia, with over 8,000 female members in Australia, and the predominant female advocacy group in rural and regional Australia as established under an act of parliament (CWA, 2017; NRWC, 2023). CWA report that covid isolation saw an increased interest in home-based skill building, such as cooking and craft development for wellbeing and social cohesion, increasing their membership levels (NRWC, 2023). CWA also note that many basic services have been lost within rural communities in recent years, and many of their members have come to view volunteer organisations such as theirs as an advocacy platform to engage politically and voice the needs of rural Australian women (NRWC, 2023).

CWA has an ageing demographic and note resistance to change as an experienced barrier to innovation and agility. Despite this, the CWA has recently managed to implement an online platform for CWA meetings to enable many individuals with diverse needs, work and caring responsibilities to attend meetings in a more flexible manner, and to bridge geographical barriers (CWA, 2017; NRWC, 2023).

### FoodBank:

There are few towns in remote and regional Australia which have not benefited from the work of FoodBank. Foodbank is Australia's largest food relief organisation, providing over 70 per cent of food relief to charities nation-wide (Miller, 2022). Foodbank is a not-for-profit organisation which activates as the critical food provider in all states of emergency, providing critical food relief across natural disasters and pandemics (NRWC, 2023). Foodbank aims to provide nutritional healthy food and

attempts to educate people about the benefits of nutritious meals for families, all whilst reducing food wastage. Foodbank is also part of the global food networking group around the world, consisting of 32 member countries (NRWC, 2023).

The demand for food relief is growing amid increasing cost of living pressures, with nearly a third of all Australian households with a mortgage experiencing food security over the last year (Miller, 2022). Since covid, 30 per cent of individuals have sought food relief who had previously not accessed food relief services before and each month, 1.5 million Victorians are serviced by food relief Australia (Miller, 2022).

Women are more likely to retire into poverty (NRWC, 2023). Women are also more likely to go hungry than men, often forgoing their own meals to feed their children (NRWC, 2023). Over the last 12 months, 2 million households went hungry at some point, and approximately 1.3 million children lived in severely food insecure households (Miller, 2022). Foodbank has developed programs such as school breakfast programs to meet the needs of rural Australian women and children with the support of many rural Australian volunteers.

Foodbank also recognises the criticality of volunteer contribution to the sustainability of their organisation, capturing and harnessing volunteer drive through activities such as gift giving, acknowledgement events, celebrations and lunches to make their volunteers feel valued (NRWC, 2023). Foodbank recognises that investment in volunteer training is core to both increasing volunteer motivation, and in the successful running of a professional organisation which complies with corporate standards such as OH&S best practice requirements (NRWC, 2023).

Foodbank have been an exemplar model for an organisation which has been highly effective at fostering and leveraging strong, innovative corporate and government partnerships to meet a rising need for emergency relief support. As an example,



Foodbank has developed partnerships with farmers, mills and food producers to form a structured chain of voluntary contribution, enabling pasta to be supplied to its service users at extremely low rates (NRWC, 2023).

### Sporting Australia:

Rates of sport volunteerism in Australia have dropped significantly since the beginning of Covid-19 and remain significantly lower than pre-covid rates to this day, placing many local sporting organisations at risk. Sport volunteerism contributes an estimated \$4 billion in labour value each year to the Australian economy and the communities which benefit (Australian Government, 2021; 2022).

The Sport Volunteer Coalition supports Australia's 2.9 million volunteers (Australian Government, 2021) and seeks to highlight the benefits of sport volunteerism as extending beyond the sport itself, to the broader fostering of a sense of belonging; increased connection within communities; and widespread improvements to physical and mental health (Australian Government, 2021; 2022a; 2022b). Within rural communities, these benefits are compounded as local sporting clubs often wouldn't be sustainable without the dedication of volunteers (Australian Government, 2022a; NRWC, 2023).

### Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia was founded in 1997 and is the peak body working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. Over the past few years in association with the Australian National University's Centre for Social Research and Methods, and a consortium of researchers from Curtin University, Griffith University, and the University of Western Australia, Volunteering Australia has conducted multiple studies measuring the value of contemporary Australian volunteerism and

its associated benefits upon the Australian community. In 2023, Volunteering Australia released the National Strategy for Volunteering, a ten-year framework designed to ensure the sustainability of volunteerism in Australia amidst a changing climate.

## **Recommendations:**

### Recommendation 1:

The establishment of structured corporate and government partnerships to support leadership development training through a targeted and formalised approach is essential to harnessing the strengths of volunteer organisations into the future. Volunteer coordinators oftentimes manage huge workloads with immense skill and limited resources, which is a tremendous strength and a great testament to their dedication, but also presents a potential breaking point for volunteer organisations and the communities which rely upon them. In order to create the right conditions for volunteerism to thrive in Australia, volunteer organisations must recognise that volunteering is a cross-portfolio issue across government (NRWC, 2023; Volunteering Australia, 2023). Building strong leadership and accountability within volunteer organisations is critical to mutual success, as government agencies rely upon the continued engagement of volunteers in community to meet their strategic goals.

### Recommendation 2:

Government investment in public awareness campaigns and technological modernisation to spread recognition of the vast-ranging benefits, breadth and value of rural women's volunteer contribution not only to the Australian economy, but also to rural Australian wellbeing, skill development, social cohesion, and sustainability. As many rural volunteer organisations face challenges associated with an ageing demographic (CWA, 2017; Davies et al., 2018; NRWC, 2023; Volunteering Australia, 2023), attracting young people to volunteerism through more targeted communication campaigns is crucial to their sustainability (NRWC, 2023).

### Recommendation 3:

Government investment to ease the financial burden and regulatory requirements placed upon volunteer organisation to meet regulatory and insurance requirements. Rural women volunteers often fill critical gaps in government service provision across regional communities, at great personal cost. Increased demand upon service providers in the wake of covid-19 alongside increased cost of living pressures (CWA, 2023; Miller et al., 2022) are placing many volunteer organisations across Australia at increased risk (NRWC, 2023).

### Recommendation 4:

The National Regional Women's Coalition supports the view of the Regional Australia Institute (2022) in respect of establishing effective wellness indicators. Whilst the Australian Government's recent 'Measuring What Matters: Australia's First Wellbeing Framework' (2023) is an assuring indication that the far-reaching benefits of volunteerism in Australia may be recognised beyond their immediate fiscal contributions to include contributions towards wellbeing, it is crucial that wellness indicators effectively recognise and target the needs of rural Australians. Wellbeing indicators specific to regional communities, such as access to services, transport and telecommunications require sufficient consideration and weighting alongside wellbeing indicators for metropolitan communities, such as traffic congestion, air pollution and walkability.

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**Roundtable Consultation Attended by Representatives from:**

Australian Women in Local Government

Australian Women in Agriculture

National Rural Health Alliance

Transport Women Australia

Women In Seafood Australasia

**The National Rural Women's Coalition is grateful to the following presenters at their Roundtable Consultation:**

Volunteering Australia - Mark Pearce – CEO

Country Women's Association - NSW – Joy Beames - President

Foodbank Victoria – Dorothy Coombe – Ambassador