

'Now More Than Ever' was the theme of this year's National Volunteer week which has just ended so now is a good time to reflect on where Tasmania is heading with volunteering.

- The Overall rate of Tasmanian participation in volunteering is one of the highest in the nation. Tasmanian volunteers donate 18 million hours of service to the community each year
- 36.3% or 131 000 adult Tasmanians participate in volunteering activities,. Tasmanian volunteers individually contribute an average of 134.9 hours per year
- Almost 2/3 of those involved in volunteering in the last ten years were asked by someone (35%) or did so because they know someone involved in volunteering (29%)
- More than half of volunteers (52%) reported that at least one of their parents had done voluntary work, and a similar number (53%) had participated in volunteering as a child, meaning family and social networks are critical pathways into volunteering.

Most volunteering occurs in the area of sport and recreation (24%) closely followed by community welfare (22%) then education (15%)

- In real terms however the rate of volunteering is decreasing. Compared to 2000, volunteers now contribute a million fewer hours each year ie a decline in the rate not necessarily the numbers.

In Tasmania I have calculated the value of the 18 million hours of volunteering is around \$540 000 000 of costs saved. However, many people, including myself, are cautious about reducing volunteering to economic metrics when the main values of volunteering are about building community capacity and resilience about maintaining and growing the social fabric of our society. Indeed levels of volunteering are often used to measure the pulse of a community, its health and wellbeing.

Overwhelmingly people volunteer because they want to help out in the community and get personal satisfaction from doing so. Volunteering is

part of the social glue that brings communities together and holds them together.

There are 5 major volunteer trends nationally which are reflected herein Tasmania

1. Ageing of volunteers

- Volunteering rates are highest in the older age groups. The highest rate of volunteering is from people aged 35-44 years (43%) and 45-50 years (39%). With younger Tasmanians up to 24 the rate is around 20%.

The ageing population will impact the volunteer work force with the majority of volunteers in the middle to older age groups. I and others are working with the Council on the Ageing looking specifically at how we can increase the capacity of older Tasmanians to volunteer, especially with and amongst their peers. We need to see the ageing as an asset rather than as a liability.

2. Changing patterns of volunteering – especially for the young

- Volunteering Tasmania estimates that— 1 in 5, 11-24 year old Tasmanian's volunteer in some capacity
- The major finding arising from the research is not a lack of commitment from young people in regards to volunteering, nor is it the lack of willingness to be involved. Rather it is the huge gap that exists between the opportunities traditional volunteering roles can offer and young people's expectations.

Many false stereotypes about young people...for example that they don't want to volunteer, they are unreliable etc. Not much has changed about some peoples attitudes to young people indeed as one person stated:

“Children nowadays are tyrants- they gobble their food, contradict their parents and tyrannise their teachers! 2

Socrates commented in 425BC;

In general young people increasingly opt for a range of short term volunteering experiences rather than locking into a particular organisation and we need to be adjusting to accommodate this new style. For example through increased portability between organisations and better understanding of the role of cyberspace as a means of volunteering.

Indeed the new volunteering frontier could well be My Space, Youtube, Twitter and Facebook. How is and can social networking be used as source of volunteering is a threshold issue. For example using an old stereotype, it may well be that the multiple values of a traditional lamington drive, economic social and personal, can be achieved through social networking. We should all ponder that.

Importantly there is now growing evidence that schools are a critical pathway into volunteering for young people and this is a matter I will be putting some effort into supporting over the next few years.

- 3. Our third trend is increased professionalisation...**more and more volunteers are expected to have specific skills sets as well as a reasonable knowledge of, for example, occupational health and safety issues. Increasingly issues of wages and allowances are arising. I note, for example, that our democratic representatives were originally volunteers, but now day's politics are seen as a well paid profession, not necessarily a well respected profession, but a well paid profession never the less. Similarly foster carers now sit in a twilight zone where they have both many volunteer characteristics and some characteristics of employment. Whether and how professionalisation supports or undermines volunteering is a perennial debate as is the growing concern that governments and businesses exploit volunteer goodwill to save costs.

- 4. The fourth trend is the increasing complexity of regulation**

Nationally there is increased concern over just where the appropriate balance is between over and under regulation of volunteering.

The national 2009 volunteer survey found that 30% of organisations surveyed had not been able to access adequate information about the protection of volunteers under occupational health and safety legislation.

The development of a national volunteer strategy by 2010 being led by Ursula Stephens, the Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion, has one of its many tasks to harmonise the regulatory environment between the three levels of government, local, state and federal. In March 2010, the Productivity Commissions' report into the third sector raised similar issues.

More recently, the Henry Tax review failed to tackle the complex tax environment in which volunteers and volunteer organisations operate and indeed proposed removing some of the existing concessions. Again whilst Tasmania has Good Samaritan legislation there is more work to be done here in minimizing the regulatory overload for volunteers.

5. Finally, Increased cost burden, Whilst most volunteers accept some direct personal costs are part of volunteering there is increasing evidence that large direct costs, such as fuel, is a deterrent to volunteering and to continuing to volunteer. • Nationally 44% of volunteers reported that out of pocket expenses affect their ability and/or desire to volunteer, with fuel (84.6%) and telephone charges (65.4%) being the two most common cost problems.

Only 17% of volunteers reported that their organisation offered full reimbursement of their out of pocket expenses.

I will be raising here in Tasmania, with the new Parliament, a proposal for fuel and telephone discounts jointly funded between the big corporations and governments as one way of reducing the burden.

I would like to conclude by noting that slowly but surely the national understanding of the significance of volunteering is increasing.

Volunteering is more than just the sum of its parts. One of the big issues is still that volunteering is still seen as an input rather than an end in itself. For example, volunteering is most often seen as an input to the labor force of the community sector or an input to the operations of the footy club. This means we rarely see the overall value of volunteering. The contribution of volunteering must be understood in its own terms, not as an adjunct or input of something else.

We see this overall value recently in Victoria where after the bush fires. Those communities that had better volunteer infrastructure were better able to deal with the crisis and better able to bounce back and demonstrate resilience.

I will use another example of community gardens to illustrate the multiple values that volunteering can generate.

- Community gardens are usually run by volunteers and they create multiple values.
- Economic value from produce grown and sometimes sold and from innovations that spring up from community gardens such as growing convict food to supply tourism heritage trails.
- Social values from the friendships and trust that grows along with the garden.
- A human capital value from all the skills that can be acquired. For example, food processing and food handling; horticulture; conservation and land management. Around 20 specific polytechnic skills.
- A health value from having local fresh produce to consume.
- And finally the value of increasing our bio-diversity and reducing our carbon footprint by growing food locally.

I use this example because often people don't volunteer because they can't see the specific values that can be created and often governments and businesses don't support volunteering because they can't see the depth of benefits being generated.

Volunteering is particularly important in smaller rural and regional communities, where often there are simply not the economies of scale for the types of services we take for granted in cities, such as access to supermarkets, health services and at least a couple of transport options.

Now more than ever volunteers are needed as increasing risks associated with manmade and natural disasters keep hitting us and volunteers generally are usually in the front line. The concern is that our reservoir of social capital is being depleted and we need to rebuild it again.

When things do go pear shaped in communities it is the local volunteers that are often first on the scene. Not just in a crisis but in rebuilding community economies and the social fabric.

Rather than governments constantly spending large amount of money bailing out failed businesses, my view is that we should be investing in local communities deciding for themselves what the best options are for sustainable businesses to grow. Social enterprises that are locally owned by volunteers but generate a profit to return back into the community are a key to this future now more than ever, with the many uncertainties over the future of traditional forestry and sunset manufacturing in Tasmania. Volunteering may have a much greater role to play in our future in mitigating and rebuilding tears in our social fabric.