

Plans to overhaul the definition of volunteering in Australia

The definition of volunteering in Australia is being reviewed to consider the new ways people give their time under a proposal released today by Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia CEO Brett Williamson said the definition of volunteering in Australia was developed almost 20 years ago (1996) and did not reflect the extent of volunteering today.

“A lot of volunteering that is common today simply didn’t exist 20 years ago,” Mr Williamson said.

Mr Williamson said the current definition that it only recognises formal volunteering undertaken for non-profit organisations.

The narrow definition does not recognise aspects of virtual volunteering, social entrepreneurship, corporate volunteering, volunteering for government organisations such as museums nor does it cover informal volunteering in the community.

“The spirit of volunteering hasn’t changed, but it’s important we refine what volunteering means in Australia to make sure we better recognise, measure and support it,” he said.

“ABS figures show one in three Australians – 6.1 million people – volunteered in 2010. If we don’t accurately recognise the types of volunteering people do, we risk undervaluing it.

“In reviewing what volunteering is, we also need to be clearer about what volunteering *isn’t*.”

“The rise of internships, work for the dole programs, and community service orders has created grey areas for organisations. They want to know if these activities overlap with volunteering, particularly around roles, rights and responsibilities.”

Volunteering Australia’s issues paper raises the following key issues for consideration:

- Benefit to the community (versus primary benefit to an individual or organisation)
- No payment or financial reward
- Only unpaid work? (should certain types of activity be included or excluded?)
- Choice? (whose choice is it and are there degrees of choice?)
- Structure– is it only volunteering if performed for a charity? Can organisations volunteer?

The release of the Issues Paper today marks the start of a national engagement on the definition of volunteering. Stakeholder information sessions will follow and an online survey for all Australians to submit their views will be open from 16 March to 17 April 2015 on Volunteering Australia’s website. The Issues Paper, titled *National Review of the Definition of Volunteering in Australia* is available from today on Volunteering Australia’s website at www.volunteeringaustralia.org

BACKGROUND

Review of the Definition of Volunteering in Australia

About the National Review: Volunteering Australia's current definition of volunteering was developed in 1996 and may be too narrow for the breadth of volunteer activities undertaken today. The review of the definition spans two phases:

- Phase 1: The development of an Issues Paper regarding the reasons, implications and opportunities around changing a definition.
- Phase 2 – National Engagement which will result in a final recommendation on a definition of volunteering to be made to the Volunteering Australia Board.

Current Definition of Volunteering

The current Volunteering Australia definition of volunteering states:

Formal volunteering is an activity that takes place:

- ***in non-profit organisations or projects and***
- ***is of benefit to the community***
- ***and undertaken of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion***
- ***for no financial payment***
- ***and in designated volunteer positions only.***

Other potential definitions include

Option 1

Volunteering is an activity undertaken as an individual or in a group, for the benefit of the community, without expectation of financial reward. Volunteering is a choice freely made by each individual and can include formal or informal community participation.

Option 2

Volunteering is doing something willingly, for no financial gain, that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives or the individual.

Option 3

We define volunteering as any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives. Volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual. This can include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation

As a result of the Australia wide engagement process, one of these definitions may be adopted (or the current definition re-affirmed), one of these may be modified, or an alternative definition may emerge.

Your views

Volunteering Australia is encouraging stakeholders to have their say on the definition of volunteering. Please see the Issues Paper: Review of the Definition of Volunteering in Australia at www.volunteeringaustralia.org

We will be updating our website and social media channels with new information throughout the National Engagement period.