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Working with vulnerable People (Background Checking) Bill 2013

**A submission from Volunteering Tasmania Inc.
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Introduction

Volunteering Tasmania (VT) is the peak body for volunteerism in Tasmania. VT represents the interests of the Tasmanian volunteer sector including both current and non-current volunteers, and volunteer-involving organisations. VT's mission is to create an environment that promotes and sustains effective volunteering.

VT welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Draft Working with Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Bill 2013. There is currently no legislation that requires organisations to screen volunteers in Tasmania although many choose to do so as part of their internal risk management strategies. Current practice among volunteer-involving organisations varies considerably when it comes to the available screening checks (i.e. National Police Criminal History Check). Often volunteer-involving organisations realise that they need to conduct a police check as part of screening volunteers, but they are likely to have no clear policy and procedure in place to guide how this is done, how the results are interpreted and how exclusionary decisions are made based on the results of the police check. Responsibility for making these decisions is often held at a program manager level, possibly an inappropriate degree of responsibility for someone in that position. Therefore the establishment of an external, standardised agency to conduct the checking, risk analysis and decision-making in relation to working with vulnerable people is a positive step in alleviating this substantial responsibility from organisations and their staff members.

Registration Costs for Volunteers

Given the short consultation period and our particular focus on the rights of volunteers our comments address the cost of registration for volunteers. The fact sheet states that the costs for volunteers will be \$30.00 - \$40.00. We believe that this will be cost prohibitive for many volunteers in the community. Costs such as these have the potential to be a barrier to volunteering and could result in significant recruitment issues for volunteer-involving organisations and threaten their ability to continue to function and deliver services to the community.

Participation in volunteering, more so than the paid workforce, is very vulnerable to the imposition of costs. Costs can present a barrier in two ways – firstly, if there is a cost incurred by individuals in order to become volunteers many may be excluded from volunteering because they are unable to meet that cost, or they may be deterred to another volunteering option that does not involve an out-of-pocket expense. This would have serious implications for organisations that rely on volunteers to deliver their service. Secondly, if organisations that involve volunteers are required to meet

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the new expense for screening volunteers under the legislation they may not have the capacity to do so within their current funding arrangements. It may be that they will need to re-negotiate with their funding bodies to gain additional funding to meet this expense. Or in a worst case scenario, they may be forced to entirely reconsider the involvement of volunteers in their organisation or program and choose to discontinue that involvement in the face of insurmountable costs.

Recommendation

Currently in relation to National Police Checks it has been recognised that the full fee of \$45.00 presents a significant barrier to participation in volunteering and a reduction of the fee to \$5 is applied to volunteers. VT would strongly promote a fee reduction of a similar magnitude for the Working with Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Bill or that registration for volunteers is available free from fees.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the draft legislation. VT would welcome the opportunity to provide further input or discuss any matters related to this submission.

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