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Consultation for the collection of volunteering and giving data

Volunteering Tasmania is the Peak body for volunteering in Tasmania. Having a strong research and evidence base is essential to support our mission of promoting effective volunteerism in Tasmania. We believe that research and data collection is one of the first steps to fully understanding the volunteering industry. It helps us to better support people on their volunteering journey; better manage volunteers and analyse new and emerging industry trends.

Volunteering Tasmania welcomes the opportunity give feedback on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) collection of volunteering data. While Volunteering Australia has given a perspective on behalf of volunteering nationally, we are giving additional feedback from Tasmania to raise issues specific to our locale.

Core to our response is an agreement that robust and reliable statistics on volunteering are essential for future planning of the volunteering industry - both nationally and at a local level. It is therefore important that we firstly highlight how valuable the work of the ABS is in our daily policy and research work. Impartial, longitudinal data of a high quality is essential for us in the work we do supporting local communities. Data helps us understand the changing nature of volunteering; to see barriers to participation and understand which sectors are rich with activity and those which may be struggling. The data gathered by the ABS is not just numbers on a page – it is a fantastic consistent measure of the cornerstone of our society: volunteering.

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Understanding volunteering and giving activity

Volunteering Tasmania is pleased to see the new national definition of volunteering referenced in the ABS consultation. This definition was designed deliberately and with significant consultation to reflect a more modern day volunteering industry. As we move throughout the 21st century and see new trends in giving, this definition is broader and more inclusive. It captures the different and varied ways in which Australians volunteer. In leading this review, Volunteering Tasmania found it particularly important to agree to a definition which captured the less formal ways of volunteering in Indigenous and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities. We believe this definition best captures the way people are fitting volunteering into busier lifestyles, online or virtual volunteering; volunteering in corporate and for profit entities; sporadic and one off events.

Volunteering Tasmania appreciates that the ABS may want to keep longitudinal data but we believe that future surveys of voluntary work must align with the new definition of volunteering. Our own research in Tasmania highlights the enormous difference this would make. In 2014 Tasmanians were asked if they gave time, freely and unpaid to the community. This question, which aligned with the new definition of volunteering, found that on average 78.8% of Tasmanians were giving time or volunteering in this way (State of Volunteering Report 2014). In contrast, the last ABS General Social Survey estimated that 36.6% of Tasmanians were engaged in volunteering for an organisation.

This brief comparison highlights how the way volunteering is measured has a direct result on the responses gathered. The former, capturing the new definition of volunteering, gives a more holistic view of giving in our community.

In Volunteering Tasmania's opinion, we are more interested in changing the definition used by the ABS to better capture an accurate measure of volunteering rather than keeping the time series steady. We would be happy to give further feedback or suggestions on how this information could be gathered based on our own work in this field.

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Understanding the economic impact of volunteering and giving

Volunteering Tasmania has led the way in its unique analysis of measuring the economic impact of volunteering and giving. In 2014 we worked with the Institute of Project Management to deliver a full cost benefit analysis of volunteering in Tasmania. This approach differs from other populist research presented nationally which essentially offer a cost replacement analysis. We felt that existing research using the cost replacement method only attributed value to volunteering by multiplying volunteer hours by a set hourly rate. This approach is limited, and severely under values the social and economic impact of volunteer work.

If the ABS is considering opportunities to understand the economic impact of volunteering we would urge to look beyond a simple cost replacement method. In our view, what it costs to replace a volunteer is not the same as a volunteer's value. The model used in our research does not just analyse what a volunteer program 'saves'. It examines the overall economic, social and cultural benefits a community gains from that volunteer program. There are three distinct reasons that highlight the benefit in this approach:

- The cost replacement methodology is inadequate. In Tasmania, for example, we found that the total cost replacement for our volunteering industry could be estimated at \$2.5 billion. However, the value of volunteering as an industry to Tasmania is \$4.9 billion
- We would argue a cost replacement method suggests that a volunteer's role is replaceable. In our view, a better focus is on value because a volunteer adds distinct value to their community – volunteers are not a substitute for paid labour.
- Additionally, a cost benefit analysis proves that volunteering is a significant value-add to the economy. While volunteers offer their time for free, a cost benefit analysis shows that their time is more valuable than this. Volunteers and the organisations they may be involved with are not a 'nice to have' in our society. Nor are they simply about generating warm and fuzzy feelings. Volunteering as an industry is a major economic contributor to the Australian economy. A cost replacement methodology just does not capture the wider economic impact of this industry.

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Our methodology and rationale on measuring the value of volunteering can be found in our *2014 State of Volunteering Report: the Economic, Social and Cultural value of volunteering* at www.volunteeringtas.org.au

Understanding motivations and barriers to volunteering and giving

Volunteering data captured by the ABS has always been useful for Volunteering Tasmania to capture a wide range of data on motivations and barriers to volunteering. We have also found it useful (while only currently focused on a formal, more narrow definition of volunteering) to understand what sectors people are volunteering in, the ages where volunteering rises and declines. The ABS give us one of the few opportunities to analyse this data with full confidence in its collection and rigour.

However, the current predominant data captured through the General Social Survey - Survey of Voluntary work, could be boosted significantly to better measure some of these complexities. We would rather see a focus in the General Social Survey on the measure of volunteering in local communities. Currently the Census gathers a lot of this information, while giving a good snapshot of volunteering at a very local area (e.g. being able to focus on a Local Government Area or small community like Brighton or Burnie)

However, we have found consistently that volunteering rates are a lot lower in this capture. This could be attributed to:

- The length of the Census and where the volunteering question is placed
- The focus in the Census on population data compared to the General Social Survey which focuses on communities, giving and measures of social activity
- The focus in the Census on asking people if they volunteer in a not for profit organisation

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We would prefer to see a greater breakdown of volunteering in Local Government Areas or regional communities in the General Social Survey. This is valuable for the organisations we support in activities like:

- Recognition events locally for National Volunteer Week and International Volunteer Week
- Responding to trends in volunteering – e.g. growing or declining youth volunteering; volunteering activities across different sectors
- Understanding distinct barriers to volunteering at a community level
- Supporting a strong, local evidence base for funding applications or reporting
- Starting a longitudinal measure of volunteering at their local level and comparing against other communities

Seeing the types of sectors in which people volunteer and understanding the barriers that prevent them from volunteering is important. However, our priority is to be able to better understand the demographics in volunteering - at a local community or regional level. Our further priority – particularly given Tasmania's ageing population – is to see the ages of people volunteering at the community or regional level. These trends are critical to the types of services and support we offer in Tasmania and the demand from the Volunteer Involving Organisations in our region.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to give feedback on the way the ABS capture and measures volunteering.

Rather than giving broad and largely superficial responses to the consultation we have chosen to focus on some of the key needs from Volunteering Tasmania's perspective:

1. Adapting to a new definition of volunteering
2. Appropriately measuring the economic impact of volunteering
3. Understanding the levels of volunteering at a community level

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These are our priority areas and we welcome the opportunity to discuss these in more detail.

Please contact me at alisonl@volunteeringtas.org.au or on (03) 6231 5550 if you wish to clarify our comments or discuss any of these issues further.

Kindest Regards

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Alison Lai'.

Alison Lai

Chief Executive Officer

Volunteering Tasmania

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