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MEDIA RELEASE

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The volunteering sector breathed a sigh of relief across Australia last month when the Australian Government reversed their decision to cut funding dedicated to volunteer support programs and services.

The change of heart, a result of extensive lobbying by the volunteering sector, will ensure funding for programs and services supporting volunteering remains available for the next 3.5 years.

This includes the programs and services delivered by Volunteering Tasmania.

This news is viewed as a victory for the volunteering sector, not only because it saves the only funding stream dedicated to volunteer support programs and services, but because the advocacy campaign successfully showcased how important volunteering is to communities across our nation.

It is indeed a victory.

But for anyone who has worked in a community organisation that relies on government funding it's a victory that comes a sense of de-ja-vu in the form of three words; 'non-ongoing funding'.

What this means, is despite the confirmation that the funding has been reinstated, it is only a reprieve.

The good news has come with a firm directive from the Australian Government that the funding will not be ongoing and any organisations receiving it should not expect the support to continue beyond 2021.

That is, organisations like Volunteering Tasmania are under strict instructions to find other funding streams for their volunteering support programs because the Australian Government doesn't believe this is something they should be funding moving forward.

This means that in 2021, the volunteering sector will have to unite to once again to compel the Australian Government to change their mind.

Whilst the diversification of funding streams is a key result area in the strategic plans of community organisations across the nation, the Australian Government's stance poses an important question.

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Should we expect the Australian Government to prioritise investment into developing and sustaining a healthy volunteering sector?

I empathise that the Australian Government does not have a bottomless bucket of funding which allows them to commit long-term funding to every worthy cause.

However, would the community expect taxpayer money to be invested into services that help Australians find volunteering roles, or programs that help organisations that involve volunteers to find them and look after them?

I believe this is a fair expectation, and not just because I lead an organisation dedicated to those aims.

I believe it's a fair expectation because the figures support it.

With 4 in 5 Tasmanians generously giving over 7 million volunteer hours to the tune of \$4.9 billion every year, if volunteering was identified formally as an 'industry' I suspect we would see more money thrown at it to ensure its sustainability.

I believe it's a fair expectation because the liveability of our communities depends on volunteers.

Not just in the delivery of our community health services but during natural disasters, for our iconic festivals and events, to maintain our wilderness tracks and trails and to keep us physically active and healthy.

These examples are just touching the surface, with volunteers contributing an estimated \$290 billion annually across the nation.

The Australian Government could never afford to replace our volunteers with paid-workers.

But most importantly, I also believe it's a fair expectation that the Australian Government invest in nurturing volunteerism because volunteers are not an entitlement.

We should never take them for granted and we should never assume that they will always be there.

With more organisations seeking volunteer support, and an increase in organisations experiencing volunteer shortages, volunteers are becoming a scarce commodity in some regions.

This is an issue that is happening here on our island and right across Australia.

So if we know that volunteers are keeping our communities alive and that the Australian Government could never afford to replace them with paid workers, then surely it's in their interest to invest in programs and services that nurture volunteerism.

Because to do otherwise increases the risk of community organisations having no other option than to approach the Government for financial assistance to hire paid workers to replace their volunteers because they don't have enough.

These requests are already happening, and I am sure these organisations, and the people in the communities they support, would also think it's a fair expectation that the Australian Government set some funding aside aimed at keeping volunteering alive.

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Because a future that doesn't prioritise investment into developing innovative ways to get more Australians to volunteer, or help organisations to involve volunteers, is a future with few volunteers.

And a future with few volunteers, is one with less junior sport, the closure of regional museums, no-one available to take our older Tasmanians to their doctors' appointments, fewer friendly faces welcoming our cruise-ships, and less people to help the homeless or those in crisis.

It's not a future I want to ponder, but unless we can convince the Australian Government to put funding for volunteering towards the top of their long-term priority list, and not on the bottom, it's one that we have to bravely accept.

But I'm not ready to accept it yet and despite those three words 'non-ongoing funding', I am feeling optimistic.

It's the mission of Volunteering Tasmania to create an environment that promotes and sustains effective volunteerism, and I now have 3.5 years up my sleeve to help persuade them that this priority should also be one of theirs.

And knowing that our island is built on the generosity of volunteers, I look forward to the challenge.

Alison Lai is the chief executive officer of Volunteering Tasmania