

Volunteer Issues

The study should be looking at the volunteer movement in total; by concentrating on volunteers in designated volunteer positions, many of the ways that services are delivered by not for profit organizations are overlooked. Management committees and advisory committees frequently include volunteers who take on positions which cover the administrative work of skilled staff and thus free up funds to pay staff who have skills directly related to provision of professional services. According to the figures provided in the Issues paper, management committees form 40.8% of the volunteer workforce in up to 700,000 not for profit organizations. To overlook the contribution of these volunteers because their positions are not “designated positions” will distort any findings of the study.

Due to funding restrictions in the not for profit organization sector volunteers frequently take up the slack and allow organizations to provide a wider range of services than would be possible if only paid workers were involved. The value of volunteers in economic terms is enormous but apparently inherently difficult to assess. This in itself creates a problem as there are several ways in which volunteer work can be assessed and until a means has been agreed nationally the sector will continue to guesstimate the dollar value contribution of volunteers. If useful figures are to be gained from this study, new standards need to be formulated to allow clear measures to be available for future planning.

Despite funding restrictions, the sector itself has to employ highly educated people to manage the services provided to communities although it is clear that paid workers will accept a lower wage because of their interest in working for an organization. In Armidale our local North and North West Community Legal Service provides an example of an organization where highly educated people have chosen to work in an area which does not pay them a wage reflecting their earning potential in the corporate sector.

Many volunteers employed in community organizations bring with them a diverse range of skills, which allow them to extend the services of the organizations. In Armidale the Armidale Family Support Service and Helping Children and Families Association use volunteers with years of parenting skills, as well as more youthful volunteers who are currently undertaking studies in social science and who wish to gain experience in the sector.

Number of organizations

The number of not for profit organizations estimated at 700,000 is a daunting figure if counted in this way. However, as a proportion of the communities which they serve, they are far more manageable. Their value to their communities has to be measured in the numbers of people involved in them, including volunteers, to appreciate their worth in a social context as well as a dollar value.

Professional training for all volunteers

The paper does not put enough emphasis on the support of volunteers in the not for profit sector. It is difficult to respond to the paper as it fails to recognize the input of volunteers as volunteer organizations recruit and train this enormous resource. Many local not for profit organizations employ a paid coordinator who looks after a workforce of volunteers as there is no other way to effectively operate the services provided with the funding available.

Training for volunteers needs to be a consideration when looking at the volunteer movement in the way it serves the not for profit organization sector. Specific courses need to be provided which allow volunteers to upskill in order to benefit the not for profit organizations they are volunteering with. For example, Management Committees need knowledge of specific legislation relating to their roles and possible training in business packages such as MYOB.

In services such as the SES and St John Ambulance there is ongoing training provided at regular meetings, and the need for this to be maintained and enhanced will remain an issue and needs to be considered for such vital services.

The Bush Fire Brigade: In times past bush fire brigades were begun by volunteers and made up of only volunteers. With progress and new technology professionals replaced volunteers in the service. Time has overtaken them and the number of fires has increased. The Bush Fire Brigade is now only too happy to use trained volunteers to augment its force. This is just an example of how professionals have taken over services started by volunteers and been unable to sustain the service without a volunteer workforce.

Value of Volunteers

The area of emergency services is likely to be in greater demand as the effects of climate change produce worse weather and more dangerous conditions on land and in our coastal waters. The impact of SES, St John's Ambulance and Rural Fire Services on our community is such that without their presence, insurers would be unable to cover the extraordinary costs that come with the seemingly more frequent occurrences of natural disasters. These services rely on the work of volunteers whose training, uniforms and drilling has to be maintained.

Without looking at how the not for profit sector can attract and accommodate these volunteers an opportunity will be lost. The not for profit sector is immense and covers all areas of the community. To confine the definition to those in designated positions is to ignore more than half our volunteers. Therefore this study needs to look at volunteering in order to reach its optimum level of information. Perhaps one way to go would be to change the definition of "designated volunteer positions".

Recognizing Volunteers

In order to encourage and promote volunteering to ensure that our communities can continue to enjoy the enhanced provision of services allowed by using a volunteer workforce, there is a need to introduce rewards to those who give up days, months and years of their lives to the service of their community. This might be done through tax concessions – for instance a tax credit process. The paper has looked at tax breaks for not for profit organizations – why not for volunteers? Other ways of rewarding volunteers might include a national award scheme such as the NSW Volunteer of the Year Award which highlights the services of volunteers in all sectors and, with a small amount of funding, local centres can also find ways of rewarding their volunteers.

Conclusion

For this study to provide a useful picture of the not for profit sector which can be referenced in the future, it must focus on the area of volunteerism as a major factor, rather than as a peripheral “extra workforce”. Ways to promote and enhance volunteer activities need to be highlighted. Without the input of volunteers most not for profits would have feet of clay – their volunteers are the rock upon which their organization is set. Volunteering is a dynamic sector – there are many aging volunteers who have become the bastions of their organizations – they will need replacing over the coming years. There are also many more volunteers ranging from school age through to retirement age who volunteer when time allows opportunities to occur in their lives. This means their volunteering may be done in occasional projects related to their family situation – school canteens, clubs, etc., and to times of unemployment when they wish to continue to use their skills and develop others. The relevance of these factors means the study must broaden its focus to consider them.