

I am writing as an individual, but I'm sure I speak on behalf of the millions of quiet people who go about their "jobs" pretty much under the radar. I'm also speaking on behalf of the community service clients who dare not complain about the limited services they receive for fear of losing the few hours' attention they do have. I don't know what the ratio is of service delivery hours to accountability hours, but I know which I think is more important.

With one hand, awards are passed out to recognise volunteer contributions, and we celebrate Volunteer Week with media releases and the occasional morning tea or lunch.

With the other hand, heavy burdens and complicated systems are heaped on small, shoestring- budget operations who just want to get on with the job.

It is nearly impossible to measure the contribution of these people, but if you'd like to ask all volunteers to take long-service leave over the same 3 month period, we'd get a pretty good idea of what would happen to the nation.

A morning tea and a certificate of appreciation is lovely if all you have to do is front up, deliver meals or take someone shopping. If the volunteers have to have manage paid staff and be responsible for complicated reporting, then there simply must be some tangible credit that can be earned.

The main obstacle to performance, in my opinion, is the time and effort demanded to plan and account rather than to provide the service. It sounds simplistic, and of course safety and health are important, but the pendulum has swung too far into bureaucracy and out of the community.

Non-profits vary greatly, with some operating with a strong business model and many paid staff while others operate with minimum financial assistance and maximum volunteer hours.

Volunteers like what they do and they like to be appreciated. But they do not want to feel they are being taken advantage of by what they see as a government that's too cheap to do what it's paid to do ... because that's what it looks like to a lot of people when they find out what's going on in the thousands of little community service offices around the country.

I have been associated with volunteering for many years through community service groups, schools and Landcare.

I am currently a member of the Board of Governors of the NSW Meals on Wheels Association (which has made its own submission), I'm a board member of Volunteering Coffs Harbour (which auspices several community services including Neighbour Aid, Community Visitors Scheme, etc.), and I'm on several other community service-type management committees

My husband, Rod, is a former Deputy Mayor of Coffs Harbour City Council and is a Board Member of the Northern Rivers Catchment Management Authority and many natural resource management committees, so between us we see a lot of government funding arrangements and have watched the changes over the years.

A good friend of mine migrated here from Scotland more than 40 years ago and couldn't believe that there were no government services available. Then she discovered the world of volunteers and became a very committed (overly-committed) volunteer herself.

I migrated to Australia from the US in 1968 and began volunteering with Meals on Wheels in Sydney's northern beaches in the early 70s, with my first toddler in her baby-seat, and later in the Hills District.

I also volunteered at the local schools as a tutor and an ESL aide, because the real ESL teacher visited only once in a blue moon. She was underpaid, underfunded and overworked then, and not much has changed.

At Meals on Wheels in those days, food was delivered in metal containers stacked in a giant thermos-type carrier which had a small tray of hot coals at the bottom. There was no orientation, no training - just maps, a warm welcome and a tray of sandwiches waiting at the end for volunteers to enjoy together on their return.

Real seat-of-the-pants stuff, and OH+S issues were not about the temperature of the meals at the client's house but the temperature of the meal containers, which often burned the volunteer's hands in spite of awkward oven mitts.

By the 90s, I was farming in Inverell and continued my Meals and school volunteering, becoming a Management Committee member and helping with the demands of the new HACCC program funding.

There were many people at the time who were furious the government was intruding into their activities, saying "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." The system did need fixing, but the paperwork is more difficult than the service delivery, and in the end, it's the clients who suffer.

That was my initiation to the world of community service Action Plans, Strategic Plans, Planning Days, Business Plans, Budgets, Financial Plans, etc. which all require long hours of meetings, filling out forms, ticking boxes and making "strategic" decisions.

That was also where I first became aware of how divisive the system was becoming. There were those who wanted to be left alone to cook and deliver, and there were those who were interested in developing a more business-like approach and ticking boxes, preferably for a wage.

Landcare was starting about the same time, and my husband, Rod, and I became very involved in Landcare and natural resource management in general, having bought our property from some of the district's earliest conservationists who held regular working bees, pre-Landcare.

We encouraged everyone to form or join groups, as it gave some very desperate people a hub around which to gather, and they had the possibility of receiving fencing materials and the like for projects they could actually work on without spending money. It was absolutely marvellous to see the difference it made in farmers' day-to-day outlooks, knowing they had a reason to get up in the morning and do something constructive with the help of "their" group.

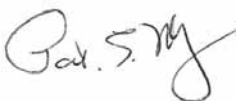
I'm sure program funding for Landcare coordinators probably saved many lives during droughts. These coordinators were, and still are, absolutely essential to coordinating these efforts. Their titles may change (they are now Community Support Officers), but their positions are absolutely essential. However, because there are so many submissions to make for projects and so much accounting to do for reports, the time they have to actually support the community on the grounds is greatly reduced.

And now the same is happening in the community services sector where Ageing and Disability have serious program gaps, and potential clients are falling through the cracks. Services are scurrying to find umbrella groups to take them in as the reporting burdens grow.

Community capacity building, resilience and all the buzz words in the world aren't fixing the fact that a lot of people are expected to do give their all and then justify it.

Volunteers are pretty fed up, I'd say, and the quicker they can be properly supported and rewarded, the safer the country will be.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pat McKelvey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pat McKelvey