

The definition and principles of volunteering: What's all the fuss about?

Annette Maher presents Volunteering Australia's definition of volunteering

Abstract

There is a wide range of unpaid activity that takes place in Australia, including volunteering, student placements, caring, unpaid work in the home and unpaid work trials. All of these may have some common elements but it is only volunteering that encompasses the definition of *benefit to the community and self; activity that takes place through not-for-profit organisations; is without payment; is by choice and without coercion and occurs in volunteer designated positions*. This article discusses the definition and principles of volunteering as articulated through consultation with government, business, the not-for-profit sector and volunteers.

Introduction

You may think that volunteering activity is so much a part of community life that there is little need for time and energy to be spent on talking about a common definition. It may surprise you to know that there are a variety of understandings. In fact, if you enter the words 'volunteer definition' into Google, 8,250,000 references appear. And the on-line encyclopaedia Wikipedia lists one of the definitions of volunteers as those who '... may even donate their bodies to science after ... death!'

As social beings, people like to be involved with their families, friends and communities. As well we all undertake an enormous number of activities that are unpaid ranging from household duties, to practical support of neighbours and even fighting fires and saving lives. Some of these activities may be part of volunteer roles but others are definitely not. For instance, when I wash our evening dishes or mind my neighbour's children for an hour or so, I do not undertake those activities as a volunteer. I do it because I want to eat from clean dishes at our next meal and because my neighbour and I have a reciprocal arrangement where we care for each other's children as acts of neighbourliness. So what do we mean when we talk about volunteering?

In 1996 Volunteering Australia undertook a national consultation to consider the definition and principles of volunteering, as understood and practised in Australia. Two main forms of volunteering were identified – formal and informal. One of the main differences between the two is that formal volunteering is carried out through a not-for-profit organisation or project, while informal volunteering is a more fluid activity that occurs without the protection of incorporation and the standards of organisational practice. Both forms are popular and valuable to our society. In this article I will concentrate on formal volunteering.

Through this national consultation with government, business, unions,

not-for-profit organisations and volunteers, eleven principles were articulated:

- Volunteering benefits the community and the volunteer;
- Volunteer work is unpaid;
- Volunteering is always a matter of choice;
- Volunteering is not compulsorily undertaken to receive pensions or government allowances;
- Volunteering is a legitimate way in which citizens can participate in the activities of their community;
- Volunteering is a vehicle for individuals or groups to address human, environmental and social needs;
- Volunteering is an activity performed in the not-for-profit sector only;
- Volunteering is not a substitute for paid work;
- Volunteers do not replace paid workers and do not constitute a threat to the job security of paid workers;
- Volunteering respects the rights, dignity and culture of others; and
- Volunteering promotes human rights and equality.

It is these principles which inform the definition of volunteering.

Formal volunteering is an activity that takes place through not-for-profit organisations or projects and is undertaken:

- to be of benefit to the community and the volunteer;

- of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion;
- for no financial payment; and
- in designated volunteer positions only.

Features of the definition

When we look more closely at the definition some of the elements are relatively straight forward, such as the one concerning benefit. This is clear and something we would all agree with – the community benefits by having meals delivered, trees planted, bushfires fought and lives saved. And people benefit in many ways, such as making new friends, learning new skills and being part of their community. Similarly, people intuitively understand the point on 'no financial payment' – if you want a paid job you go out and get paid work. But when you volunteer there is a clear understanding that the work does not result in a wage. While there are reimbursements made to volunteers for the costs they incur as a result of their volunteer activities, these payments are not a substitute for a wage. Other elements are more complex and can be elaborated.

Why designated volunteer positions?

Ensuring that volunteers have position descriptions which are written specifically for them ensures that both paid and volunteer staff are aware of the differences between their respective roles, if not in actual tasks then in recognising the different qualities that volunteers bring to a role and the values and beliefs underpinning volunteer involving organisations. A position that is defined as volunteer marks a number of things:

1. that there is clarity between the two roles;
2. that the organisation acknowledges those differences; and
3. that both roles add value to the organisation and its mission.

Why not-for-profit organisations?

The main difference between a not-for-profit organisation and a for-profit business is the distribution of profit. In not-for-profit organisations any financial surplus is reinvested back into the organisation while for-profit businesses distribute profit to owners or shareholders. Individuals may undertake unpaid work in for-profit businesses, and those businesses may even term this unpaid work as volunteering, but these 'volunteers' may feel differently about their involvement when there is understanding that their efforts profit the owners or shareholders of that business.

Why free choice and without coercion?

Volunteering is a lifestyle choice of millions of Australians. People choose to volunteer because it has meaningful purpose to them. The concept of choice is built into the word *voluntas* which means free will, so it would be a contradiction in terms to try to coerce people to volunteer. Coercion negates the essence of the activity. Free choice occurs when people make a gift of their time. There are a number of reasons for volunteering, including:

- to help others and their community;
- for the personal satisfaction;
- to do something worthwhile;
- for social contact and to make new friends;
- to use skills and experience;
- as an expression of religious beliefs;
- to be active;
- to learn new skills; and
- to gain experience beneficial to securing paid employment (ABS, 2001).

The Australian Government's inclusion of volunteering within labour market policies and employment-related programs led to concerns within the volunteering sector, given the potential for

unemployed people to be penalised for non-participation. Unemployed people regularly take part in volunteering, for a wide range of reasons, but if they feel that they are *made* to volunteer they may perceive the activity as a chore to be completed as quickly as possible, and at worst something one has to do against one's free will. This would be fundamentally contrary to the definition and principles of volunteering.

Strength of numbers

The first national survey on volunteering was in Australia in 1995 (ABS, 1996). The percentage of adults volunteering was found to be 24 per cent. This figure has steadily risen since then, to 32 per cent in 2000 and 34 per cent in 2002 (ABS, 2001, 2002). The Australian Bureau of Statistics plans to hold another national survey in 2006 and indications are that a further increase will be found.

The very latest research on volunteering on behalf of the Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership (2005) has found that 41 per cent of Australian adults volunteered in not-for-profit organisations for a total of 836 million hours, with each person giving an annual average of 132 hours.

In 2006 the Australian Bureau of Statistics will include a question on volunteering in the census. For the first time people in every household in Australia will be asked to provide information about their unpaid and volunteering roles. The depth and amount of research on volunteering is increasing in an attempt to understand its impact and true value to our society.

Conclusion

The principles and definition ensure that volunteers can work compatibly alongside paid workers in community organisations. The growth of volunteering poses no threat to employment growth

or maintaining employment. To understand the social and economic growth of this country we must further explore the relationship between paid and volunteer work. Overall, volunteering has provided a diverse range of Australians with a sense of engagement with society and the satisfaction of making a meaningful contribution. With the development of the definition and principles of volunteering we are able to differentiate those aspects that are peculiar to volunteering and thus acknowledge and honour the effort and value of that activity – so, yes, it is worth making a fuss about the definition and principles of volunteering.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996, *Voluntary Work Survey 1995*, Catalogue No. 4441.0, Canberra.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001, *Voluntary Work Survey 2000*, Catalogue No. 4441.0, Canberra.
- Cordingley, S., 2000, The Definition and Principles of Volunteering: A framework for public policy, in J. Warburton and M. Oppenheimer (eds.) *Volunteers and Volunteering*, Chapter 6, pp. 73–82, The Federation Press, Sydney.
- Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership, 2005, *Giving Australia: Research on philanthropy in Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Trewin, D., 2002, *General Social Survey*, Australian Bureau of Statistics
- Wikipedia on-line encyclopedia www.wikipedia.org accessed 11 October 2005.

Author

Annette Maher is the Information and Research Officer at Volunteering Australia. Volunteering Australia is the national peak body working to advance volunteering in Australia. Its role is to represent the diverse views and needs of the volunteer sector while promoting the activity of volunteering as one of enduring social, economic and cultural value.



A volunteer fire fighter assists primary school children during a visit to their school. (This picture is part of the Value our Volunteers Photographic Competition, more photos on page 39). Photo courtesy Ashley Hosking.