



Australian Government
Department of Employment
and Workplace Relations

Inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

Submission from the Department of
Employment and Workplace Relations to the
Senate Standing Committees on Foreign
Affairs, Defence and Trade

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Introduction

Employment and Workplace Relations Portfolio acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations would like to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army). The department's mission is to support people to have safe, secure and well-paid work with the skills for a sustainable future. This includes fostering a productive and competitive labour market through policies and programs that assists people into work, including secure work, and meet employer and industry needs.

This submission provides the committee with details of the department's current programs and activities that have similarities with the proposed National Volunteer Incentive Scheme. The department offers a range of activities under Workforce Australia that people can undertake to improve their employability while receiving income support. Most people in receipt of unemployment payments have mutual obligation requirements, which can include participating in activities. Unemployment payments include:

- JobSeeker Payment
- Youth Allowance for job seekers
- Parenting Payment after their youngest child turns 6
- Special Benefit

Mutual obligation requirements are designed to help people improve their employability and connect to work. In addition to participating in activities, these requirements might include attending provider and other compulsory appointments, job search requirements, following up on job referrals, attending job interviews or accepting any suitable job offer.

Voluntary work and Work for the Dole are examples of activities people can undertake to meet their mutual obligation requirements. The committee may wish to consider the extent to which these existing activities could also be considered under the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry. The relevant detail of each activity is outlined below, noting that the policy settings for Workforce Australia (including these activities) are currently being reviewed as part of the Australian Government's response to the House Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services final report. Should a Climate Army be established, it is possible that recipients of income support may elect to volunteer into the Climate Army and therefore consideration would be required as to how their participation in Climate Army would intersect

with their mutual obligation requirements. The department is happy to discuss this submission further as the inquiry progresses.

Voluntary Work

Program overview and eligibility

Voluntary work is a work experience placement which gives participants the opportunity to gain skills to improve their employment prospects, while also benefiting the community.

Voluntary work placements are unpaid and can only be undertaken in not-for-profit organisations that provide a community service. Government sector agencies are considered not-for-profit organisations for the purpose of voluntary work.

To be eligible to undertake voluntary work, participants need to be 15 years old or over. The duration of a voluntary work placement can range in length but will generally be no longer than 26 weeks.

There are three types of voluntary work in the employment services context:

- **Provider Sourced Voluntary Work** - an activity arranged by Workforce Australia employment services providers.
- **Participant Sourced Voluntary Work** - an activity participants can find and undertake themselves
- **voluntary work** - an activity undertaken by participants that can be approved by Services Australia to fully meet a participant's mutual obligation requirements.

Participants who undertake these types of voluntary work can use their participation to count towards their mutual obligation requirements.

Examples of Provider Sourced Voluntary Work activities include volunteering at local op shops, Landcare groups and in school canteens. Voluntary Work with organisations such as the State Emergency Services, Country Fire Association and Rural Fire Services can also contribute to meeting mutual obligation requirements.

Incentives of participation

People do not receive any additional payments while undertaking voluntary work. Some of the incentives of participating in voluntary work include the ability to gain work experience, skills development, increased confidence, expanding networks and contacts that can be used as referees on job applications. Some cohorts can also participate in voluntary work to fully meet their requirements. For example, participants aged 55 and over are also able to 'fully meet' their mutual obligation requirements through 30 hours per fortnight of approved voluntary work.

Providers are also able to assist Workforce Australia Services participants undertaking voluntary work with any costs that may be required to support participation, such as appropriate clothing or uniforms and travel costs.

Services Australia also have discretion to give participants an exemption from having to meet their mutual obligation requirements for up to 13 weeks if they are volunteering during a state or national emergency such as floods or bushfires.

Results of participants surveyed who exited their voluntary work activity between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024 indicates that more than half believe the activity increased their chances of getting a job (60.3%) and increased their desire to find a job (72.4%). Most participants also believed that the activity improved their work-related skills (75.8%), self-confidence (82.7%) and their ability to work with others (82.7%).

Work for the Dole

Program overview and eligibility

Work for the Dole is a work experience program that offers participants the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities, contribute to their local community and equips them with skills to help find secure work. Work for the Dole activities provide participants with work-like experiences and are run by host organisations. Work for the Dole host organisations must be not-for-profit organisations such as charities, not-for-profit arms of for-profit organisations or government agencies.

Activities are designed to help participants improve their skills, increase their confidence, meet new people and make contacts, while also meeting their mutual obligation requirements. To be eligible to undertake Work for the Dole, participants need to be 18 years old or over, receiving income support and be registered with a Workforce Australia employment services provider. People are generally required to participate for a period of 8 weeks.

Examples of Work for the Dole activities include retail work in an op shop, restoring and/or maintaining the gardens at a neighbourhood centre, and preparing for a cultural festival.

Incentives of participation

Participants receive an Approved Program of Work Supplement of \$20.80 per fortnight to assist with the costs of participating in Work for the Dole, such as travel. This payment is administered by Services Australia.

Work for the Dole activities can also provide participants with the opportunity to undertake formalised training including the ability to gain a licence or work towards a qualification. Most participants surveyed who exited their Work for the Dole activity between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024 believed that the activity improved their desire to find a job (67.1%), work-related skills (61.1%), self-confidence (65.9%) and their ability to work with others (69.1%).

Community Support Projects

There are a range of Work for the Dole activity types, including Community Support Projects (CSPs). CSPs are activities that contribute to recovery efforts following a disaster event or assist with nationally significant projects at a local level that have been identified as providing a social, economic, environmental, cultural and/or heritage benefit to the Australian community.

CSPs can:

- respond to, and assist with the recovery from declared national, state, territory and local community natural disasters
- assist not-for-profit and volunteer organisations that are supporting affected communities
- support local residents and assist rebuilding of the local economy
- provide logistical support to emergency services personnel in areas such as food preparation, delivery of clothing and maintenance of emergency services accommodation and infrastructure
- respond to other events and/or identified tasks that positively impact on local communities or at a national level
- assist the community where there is an identified need for a coordinated national activity and human resources and finances are limited.

Where a CSP is assisting because of a natural disaster, the project should not compete with the work of, or replace the roles of, specialised emergency services such as the State Emergency Service.

Unlike general Work for the Dole activities, CSPs can also be hosted by for-profit providers and operate on private residential property or in private commercial businesses. Written approval from the department is required before a CSP can commence. Where the additional flexibilities permitted under CSPs are not required, providers can create general Work for the Dole activities that can assist with climate change related initiatives which don't require departmental approval.

Payments

There are 2 different payments that could apply to a CSP depending on the activity type. Work for the Dole activities can either be a Placement activity or a Project activity. Work for the Dole Placements are for one or more participants who undertake work-like activities within a host organisation. Work for the Dole Projects are for groups of participants who work as part of a team on work-like activities that benefit the community.

A Work for the Dole Placement Fee of \$500¹ is paid to the provider for each participant to support the upfront costs of placing the participant in the activity. At least \$250 of this placement fee needs to be passed onto the host organisation. Work for the Dole Project funding is notionally allocated to providers each financial year. Providers can access funds once a Project is approved to support costs directly related to the activity. All costs related to Work for the Dole Projects needs to be acquitted twice a year. There are no additional payments where an activity is a CSP.

¹ Funding amount as at 1 July 2022, subject to indexation from 1 July 2025

In relation to CSPs, Work for the Dole payments cannot be used to purchase materials that may be funded through other sources, such as insurance or flood recovery funding, grants or payments that improve the capital value of a property to the sole benefit of a property owner or entity.

In addition, providers cannot purchase or reimburse the following items using Work for the Dole payments for CSPs:

- additional supervision costs where the supervisor is the farmer on the site where CSPs are taking place
- material costs such as water, fuel, stock feed and fencing materials
- upgrades to equipment owned by a landowner, or
- costs involved in the transport of such things as fencing material or stock feed.

Under the previous employment services contract, jobactive, some of the CSP activities created included:

- Rebuilding of fences destroyed by fire to contain farm animals and clearing of the damaged fencing.
- Repairs to facilities owned and used by the Surfers Paradise Australian Football Club that were damaged by a series of heavy rainfall and flood events.
- Assisting with the cleanup, rubbish removal and deliveries to private land holders impacted by the bushfires on Kangaroo Island.

There have not been any CSPs created under the current employment services contract, Workforce Australia, which commenced in July 2022. This is due to a number of factors including:

- Less Work for the Dole activities created in general due to more flexibilities for participants to meet activation requirements through other activities in Workforce Australia than under jobactive
- People can receive exemptions by Services Australia if they volunteer to assist with natural disasters
- People who are unemployed and receiving income support who are in a local community impacted by natural disasters usually receive exemptions from their mutual obligations during this time. Therefore, there is no need for providers to engage them in an activity.

Work Health and Safety – Work for the Dole and Voluntary Work

Providers are contractually required to ensure that participants are in a safe environment when undertaking activities and ensure that activities comply with all relevant laws and requirements of any Commonwealth, state, territory or local authority, including Work Health and Safety Laws. Providers are also required to comply with a range of Work Health and Safety requirements outlined in the Deed and Guidelines relating to risk assessments and supervision requirements.

Before someone can commence a Work for the Dole or Provider Sourced Voluntary Work activity, the provider must arrange for a Host Organisation Agreement and both a Participant Risk Assessment and Activity Risk Assessment to be completed. Host Organisation Agreements outline the details of the activity and the required terms and conditions of the Agreement. The risk assessments need to be completed by a Competent Person who has the knowledge and skills to carry out specific work health and safety tasks to ensure the activity is safe and suitable.

Providers must ensure that host organisations provide adequate supervision to participants and that any work health and safety incidents that occur at the activity are reported to the department as soon as possible (or within 1 hour for critical incidents).

The department purchases the following insurance policies to cover Work for the Dole and Provider Sourced Voluntary Work activities:

- Personal Accident insurance - covers the participant in respect of personal injury or death that occurs while undertaking activities, including direct travel to, from or during such activities
- Public and Products Liability insurance for participants - covers the legal liability of the participant arising out of their negligence that causes personal injury to a third party, or damage to a third party's property, while participating in approved activities.
- Public and Products Liability insurance for Work for the Dole activities - covers the legal liability of host organisations who are receiving assistance from participants undertaking CSPs which would otherwise be denied under the host organisation's own insurance policies.

Providers are also required to confirm that the host organisation has appropriate insurance coverage. If the insurance coverage is insufficient the provider can decide to purchase or fund additional insurance for the activity.