

VOLUNTEERING AUSTRALIA

brief submission to

INQUIRY INTO ISSUES SPECIFIC TO WORKERS OVER THE AGE OF 45 YEARS SEEKING EMPLOYMENT, OR ESTABLISHING A BUSINESS, FOLLOWING UNEMPLOYMENT

‘Work’ according to Charlie Fox has ‘no intrinsic meaning’. Its meaning is produced by the culture in which it is performed’. Fox, C. *Working Australia*, 1991.

Australia in the late 1990’s is a society where most people sell their labour to survive. The ability to gain or maintain paid work therefore determines lifestyle and status. Lack of work can influence health and self esteem. In today’s environment work is a term generally applied to paid employment.

Volunteer work, however, is a form of unpaid work and defined as an activity that is undertaken:

- for the benefit of the community;
- of the volunteer’s free will and without coercion;
- in not for profit organisations;
- for no payment;
- in designated volunteer positions; and
- is underpinned by the principles of volunteering

Not to be confused with volunteer work is work experience, community service orders, caring for relatives and friends, student fieldwork placements, work trials and fostercaring.

The defining characteristics of volunteering distinguish it from its most other forms of unpaid work in ways that can be of real value to unemployed people. For example the ability to demonstrate free will in undertaking volunteer work has been noted by unemployed people as an advantage in the job market. Additionally being involved in volunteer work keeps people work ready and helps them maintain their skills.

In 1995 the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted a national survey on voluntary work which showed that 19% of the population over the age of 15 volunteered regularly. The largest representative group was the 34 to 45 years, effectively dispelling the myth that the volunteer workforce is largely comprised of older women. The referral statistics from Volunteering Queensland show about 20% of their total referrals are aged over 55.

Volunteer commitment appears to follow the life cycle of individuals, with the greatest involvement around the times in life where it has the most meaning, for example parents of young children are well represented in sporting, recreational and educational activities.

Speculation over the reason for the lower representation of older volunteers are that as the population ages people are reliant on volunteers rather than providing volunteer services themselves. Many self-funded early retirees, predicted as a valuable source of volunteers, appear to have chosen a lifestyle that does not include volunteering.

Organisations such as Red Cross, Meals on Wheels and fundraising auxiliaries now have an aging population of volunteers who have put in many years of volunteer service. But as one volunteer who worked in Meals on Wheels stated 'I'm older than most of the clients'. The aging of volunteers in these organisations is now an influencing factor in their recruitment strategies.

In 1997 the Commonwealth Government funded a three-year volunteer referral program for unemployed people. The two major target groups were people who had been unemployed for over twelve months and unemployed people over the age of 55. The Voluntary Work Initiative was designed to remove the disincentives to volunteering and to provide older people in particular with a meaningful option.

The success of the program for older volunteers is largely dependent on the organization for which they volunteer and the intrinsic value of the volunteer role. To this end Volunteering Australia and its eight state members have produced standards for the involvement of volunteers (enclosed). Two 'case studies' appended to this report illustrate the impact volunteer work can have on older volunteers who are either seeking re entry to the paid workforce or dealing with the effects of retrenchment.

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Attachments:

Case studies (2) [Not reproduced]

Standards for involving volunteers in not for profit organisations