

Volunteering as Social Inclusion

One of the key social issues for Australia at the present time is seriously addressing disadvantage, deprivation and poverty. There is a clear trend towards a multi-focussed approach to a social inclusion by researchers and politicians.

Social inclusion can be defined as the extent to which individuals, families and communities are connected to and able to fully participate in the economic and social activities of the broader community.

Volunteering has always been central to the effective functioning of our communities and at the core of our efforts to strengthen communities and address social inequities. It is at the heart of an engaged citizenry, an active civil society and plays a key role in both social and community services.

Volunteering Qld is focused on a variety of approaches to ensure volunteering becomes a key means by which social inclusion can be created, supported and built. We are in part focusing on extending the role and the capacity for volunteers working with agencies and projects addressing social exclusion, and encouraging more innovative and impactful volunteer opportunities. At the same time we believe the power, benefits and track record of volunteering itself as a strategy for social inclusion has not been fully focused on. It has been suggested that *“one of the most potent strategies for inclusion involves facilitating voluntary community encounters in settings that support respectful interaction”* (Building inclusive communities, IFS, 2005).



Stafford Meals on Wheels volunteer

There are at least five key attributes of volunteering which make it extremely effective way in which people can experience meaningful inclusion. These five elements are:

1. Providing social cohesion and networks
2. Creating a sense of identity and making a difference
3. Opportunity to share meaning and values
4. Enhancing confidence and self-esteem
5. Opportunities for learning and development

Volunteering Qld is working with nonprofit groups and organisations to re-invent, modify and enhance their way of working with volunteers building on these five elements and take a capacity-building/community building approach. This approach informs our service programs, education and training, advocacy and our resource and information provision.

Volunteering Qld is also a key partner in a range of programs and initiatives to build social inclusion. These include Homeless Connect, Community Leadership programs, and networks.

Volunteering Qld has recognised there are a number of barriers to volunteering as effective social inclusion. Definitions of volunteering which prescribe volunteering as formal volunteering within traditional organisational structures can be culturally and class insensitive and exclude many forms of volunteering. Similarly promotion of volunteering as “nice” or as “helping” reinforce stereotypes and can exclude volunteering which has is engaged in advocacy/social action, community-building or grassroots initiatives

We have put an emphasis on broadening and clarifying definitions of volunteering. Over the past twelve months, Volunteering Qld has developed a framework which identifies five models of voluntary participation. They are:

- formal/traditional voluntary activities;
- project/event;
- governance;
- non-formal community activities;
- social action groups.



Volunteering Qld

Position Paper

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Homeless Connect volunteers

In many organisations there will be a combination of various models of participation. These different approaches to volunteering require the development of a range of resources, policies, recruitment/engagement, promotion and recognition strategies, training and education initiatives and project examples and models.

Many non-profit organisations and groups also require extensive assistance in how to actively support an inclusive approach to the engagement and support of volunteers across their community. Volunteering Qld provides Volunteer Mangers Network meetings, forums etc. which actively provide an avenue for such discussions.

In order to promote and engage wider community participation in voluntary activities from all aspects of society, the challenge for Volunteering Qld is to:

- Encourage traditional volunteer programs to provide more dynamic, flexible volunteer opportunities within their formal frameworks;
- To provide resources, such as training, tool kits, etc for the informal social action/social response groups;
- Identify and document successful volunteer program initiatives across the spectrum of community engagement;
- Provide an avenue across sectors and across communities, to share ideas, strategies and trends and to provide an avenue for collaboration and joint initiatives;
- To promote the activities and provide the opportunity for potential volunteers to connect with all aspects of voluntary activities as a critical part of strengthening and sustaining strong and robust communities;
- Provide information, advise and guidance to State Government, in particular the Office for Volunteering, as the peak body for volunteering across all sectors of the community;
- Develop partnership to undertake major research programs to understand the future of volunteering in the next 10-15 years.

By working collaboratively with partners and stakeholders, Volunteering Qld is well positioned to be able to meeting the needs of community organisations and contribute to a vibrant, sustained volunteering future.

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