



EMERGING STRONGER: Increasing volunteer capacity project

Summary Report

May 2023



Community Information
& Support Victoria

Helping local communities

The Community Information & Support sector is experiencing a workforce crisis. Since COVID-19, a volunteer decline has impacted agencies' capacity to support community members seeking assistance.

CISVic, working with members, conducted an action research project to help identify reasons for the decline and possible strategies and solutions to address this challenge.

This summary report details the findings and recommendations from this project.

We would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of the Reference Group members: Karen Peters (SPCS), Kelli Nunes (Camcare), and Sophie Kocev (LCIS), for guiding this project. We would also like to thank all the CISVic member agencies that have contributed their experiences and views to this project.

CISVic acknowledges the true custodians of Country and pays our respects to Elders past and present.

Introduction

CISVic members have reported a dramatic drop in the number of volunteers to carry out their core support work, especially since the onset of COVID in early 2020. Many also report difficulties in engaging new volunteers. This is a crisis for many agencies, and their stop-gap measures to address it are unsustainable. In fact, staff and volunteers are often experiencing 'burnout'.

The Community Information & Support sector is highly dependent on a volunteer workforce, so this challenge was deemed worthy of methodical investigation. This was carried out via two phases within an action-research approach.

Phase One: Volunteer Trends

Phase One of the project included a literature and data review of broader volunteer research and consultations carried out with participating members.

Key findings of general volunteering trends:



Community service organisations are suffering from a decline in volunteering, with most requiring more volunteers.



Barriers for starting or continuing volunteering: out-of-pocket expenses, lack of flexibility in roles, demanding life circumstances, and being put in traumatising situations without adequate support.



There appears to be a disconnect between the (lower) level of commitment that many volunteers prefer and the higher level of commitment required by organisations.



It is important to proactively take an interest in volunteer aspirations and motivations in recruitment, and in the allocation and creation of roles.



Word-of-mouth and personal approach are effective methods of recruitment often used by organisations, even while more organisations are using social media and their own website to recruit volunteers.



Incentives to start or continue volunteering include: contributing to the community, help others, a sense of purpose, connecting with others, feeling of belonging, access to professional development, a feeling of self-worth and confidence, being respected, given autonomy and experience to obtain paid employment.

Key findings of CISVic volunteering trends:



Most members reported a dramatic drop in volunteer capacity since COVID, with only a couple of exceptions. Many volunteers who left during the lockdowns did not return. Thus, many agencies are struggling to meet community needs with a depleted workforce.



Volunteers who returned were sometimes working more hours than before to make up for the shortfall in personnel, and/or they were being confronted by much more serious and complex presenting issues, often in the absence of viable referral options for serious issues.



Several agencies are recruiting a different cohort of volunteers, including younger people, people from different cultural backgrounds and students (i.e. students not on placement, or prior to placement).



Agency capacity to support volunteers was an issue, particularly for mentoring. This was a particular issue with a younger cohort of volunteers who volunteer for shorter stints of time. In these cases the increased turnover requires more training, induction and mentoring resources of the agency.

Phase Two: Evaluation of piloted strategies to increase volunteers

Phase Two of the project included the action research delivery model. Building on the learnings from Phase One, CISVic trialled various activities to increase members' volunteer capacity.

Activities delivered:

training	Modified Community Support Worker (CSW) training
recruitment	Advertisements, information sessions with TAFE students, and a roundtable with member agencies about student placements
management	in-depth investigation of volunteer management software, and a special edition of CISVic's Ebulletin
resources	various resources and tools for agencies.

Evaluation

While certain factors presented obstacles to Phase Two activities, especially the awkward time of year over the Christmas period that mitigated against optimal agency participation, as well as the web designers engaged for the project running months over schedule, important learnings were gleaned.

Positive aspects of the project included providing support and resources to agencies, linking agencies with each other around volunteering issues, and recognising the value of volunteering. The recognition of current difficulties facing volunteer-delivered services was particularly appreciated by Volunteer Coordinators.

Key learnings from the project were the importance of localised word-of-mouth forms of recruitment, the need to expand recruitment beyond traditional cohorts, and the importance of having an organisational culture that values and supports volunteers while providing opportunities to contribute their talents and skills.

“There needs to be a minimum of paid CSWs on every shift, complemented by volunteers. Volunteers need more support and training than what we can give. I don't think it's a fair deal. Crisis and trauma needs a complementary program mix of staff and volunteers.”

Feedback about the modified Community Support Worker (CSW) course was positive. However, the current iteration is deemed necessary for the work of CSW, given the high demands and complexity of this role.

It was also thought that the CSW training and experience could be marketed to prospective volunteers better as a positive attainment and contribution to the community.

Overall, most member agencies felt vastly under-resourced to recruit and manage volunteers and appreciated the efforts being made and flagged for the future through this project. Without dedicated support for volunteer management, staff and volunteers at many agencies are stretched to the extent that their situation is unsustainable.

Ethical considerations

CISVic members are delivering vital and essential help to community members, which raises ethical considerations; for example, to what extent should our communities depend on the specialised work of volunteers without proper funding and resourcing?

One major issue in this research was the increasing burden on volunteers as community members present with more complex and troubling issues. This is a particular issue for the 30 per cent of CISVic member agencies that are totally volunteer-run and without paid staff to provide professional support and debriefing (even while acknowledging that some volunteers have professional support backgrounds). A compounding issue is the lack of easy remedy to the complex issues that people present with, in many cases, in the absence of adequate specialist support services to refer to, e.g. for housing and family violence. Along with the often-diminishing number of volunteers to share the load, it is probably unsurprising that many remaining volunteers have felt burnt out and subsequently withdrawn their services.

In general, it was suggested that more focus be placed on the ethics of 'using' volunteers, with the later addition: 'within the constraints of current resourcing'. This qualification goes to the heart of the dilemma of volunteers being responsible (to varying degrees) for the delivery of vital and essential support to community members - usually in the absence of adequate funding for recruitment, training, induction, support, mentoring, debriefing and the creation of a friendly, supportive and enriching environment.

Recommendations for the future

Government

- Acknowledge and adequately resource the critical work of our volunteers for the community.
- Provide funding for a paid coordinator in CISVic member agencies to support them in volunteer recruitment, screening induction, training, mentoring, and debriefing and to foster a volunteer-friendly culture and workplace.
- Fund CISVic to provide coordination and specialised support for member agencies to recruit and support volunteers. (See below).

CISVic

- Enhance and increase the volunteer capacity of member agencies, including:
 - training for mentoring volunteers
 - procedures, guidelines and templates for managing volunteers
 - guidelines and forums for discussion around the ethical dimensions of managing volunteers
 - proactive promotion of volunteering in general, and specific volunteering opportunities, using a range of avenues
 - support for agencies to locally recruit using face-to-face, word-of-mouth opportunities and engagement with local groups and organisations
 - centralised online training and induction, to be used by agencies in combination with agency-relevant components
 - webpage with information and resources for agencies to recruit and manage volunteers.
- Create and implement a five-year strategic plan based on this report.

Members

- Foster a positive volunteer experience and a volunteer-friendly culture where social connections are encouraged.

- Ascertain volunteer interests and talents and endeavour to match these with volunteer opportunities where possible.
- Expand the range of possible volunteer roles as far as possible and feasible.
- Provide volunteers with adequate training, support and debriefing to assist community members with various issues.
- Ensure that volunteers do not have out-of-pocket expenses due to their volunteering role (other than travelling to and from the agency)
- Focus on awareness-raising and word-of-mouth recruitment of volunteers in the local community.

Quotes about positive aspects of the project

"A real appreciation of and recognition that the problems we face are sector-wide rather than a local problem."

"Putting a stronger focus on assisting with volunteering."

"It is great to talk about challenges in engaging volunteers with other agencies and hear about their experiences."

"Linking agencies together seeking potential volunteer engagement."

"Great ideas and resources to share."

"We are really looking forward to the volunteer database offering as tracking data is a big time drain. Our biggest challenge is paid resources to support, train and recognise volunteers."



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