



# “I make a difference in this world with what I do”: Older Australians and Volunteering

July 2022

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## FOREWORD: VAL DEMPSEY, 2022 SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR

What a magical year this has turned out to be.

To celebrate seniors across Australia and indeed the world I turn firstly to our magnificent Queen Elizabeth II. Providing service before self, for seventy years, Her Majesty displays at all times the dignity that comes with graceful ageing and continued commitment to her people, her family and indeed the global community.

To Her Majesty I extend my warmest congratulations.

There is no doubt that as we age there are difficulties that we face in our daily lives. From asking our bodies to keep up with the hectic pace of life and its busy schedule and in learning how we can continue to contribute and fit in with our social structure.

Perhaps our role of partner, wife, husband, parent, grandparent, breadwinner, carer, neighbour is changing around us and we are challenged to find ways of mentoring and supporting those we care about as they grow and develop their own pathways. Especially in supporting our younger family members in these trying times.

For myself, being named Senior Australian of the Year 2022, this incredible honour has afforded me the opportunity of being a part of our community in a different way to what I could have possibly ever imagined

when I put my hand up to volunteer some fifty years ago.

As I was growing up, it was often said that Australia's wealth was riding on the sheep's back, but I believe we can now say that our nation enjoys great strength and wealth through the contribution given by many thousands by volunteers as they provide service before self to their communities.

So, with this year of challenge and change faced by many senior Australians I have the privilege to support all Australians including our marvellous seniors that would like to step up, stand up and step forward into the world of volunteering and to enjoy and experience the opportunities that come to you. There are so many areas in which one can be involved as we contribute to our community.

No, it's never really easy to step forward but the rewards, the special moments that provide personal growth and awareness are yours to treasure and are waiting for you to enjoy and share. The challenge of learning new skills came my way as I ventured into the world of computers through volunteering to support ACT Health during the recent COVID crisis as a contact tracer. I invite all Australians to step up and look at volunteering in your community.

Expressing gratitude, I've learned, is a way of allowing yourself the moment to say a heartfelt thanks. To those

family members who keep the home fires burning, who do the shopping and make the bed just for you, who tirelessly keep reminding you for the fourth time that you have appointments or to take your medications on time, to those who make it possible for you to knock on that door of opportunity, I say a huge

thank you. One never really knows how grateful someone is until it is expressed.

Thank you for this opportunity to be with you all through this portal of our report. May you enjoy good health, enjoy your family time and continue being the wonderful senior that you are.

Bless you all.

*Val Dempsey*

*2022 Senior Australian of the Year*



*Val Dempsey with National Seniors CEO John McCallum*

## INTRODUCTION: OLDER AUSTRALIANS AND VOLUNTEER WORK

Australian volunteers contribute to their communities and assist individuals in critically important ways. Some organisations are highly dependent on the work of volunteers and may not exist without them. Yet the full extent of volunteers' contributions is generally unrecognised by Australian society at large. This is especially so within statistics about national productivity and the economy because the work is unpaid. This invisibility is an injustice to the people who participate in volunteering and thus provide crucial services to Australia.

Volunteering is an activity many older Australians engage in. A 2019 snapshot estimated 25-29% of Australians over 55 volunteer (AIHW, 2021). Current numbers show people aged 55 and over make up a substantial 29% of all volunteers (Volunteering Australia, 2021). And they work hard: Australian Bureau of Statistics numbers from 2006 showed people aged 65 to 84 contributed nearly double the number of volunteer hours each week compared to the average (EPSA, 2011).

While unpaid, this work contributes significantly to the economy. A 2014 estimate of the social and economic value of volunteering annually for Australia was \$290 billion (Flinders University, 2014). At 29% of this figure, we might estimate that volunteer activity by people aged 55+ contributes in the order of \$84 billion to the nation

each year. That figure is three and half times the \$23.6 billion the Government spent on aged care during 2020-21.

This short report highlights older Australians' volunteer activities and their views on volunteering. It is long past time that the national spotlight was placed on seniors' volunteer labour. The recent National Seniors report *Who Cares? Older Australians Do* showed the nation just how much unpaid caring work older Australians do for family members and friends (Maccora et al., 2020). This report continues that tradition but broadens the scope to all volunteer work rather than placing a specific focus on caring.

The report is based on results of a survey National Seniors Australia conducted with thousands of older Australians in February 2022. We asked survey participants to estimate the number of hours per week they engaged in volunteer work and gave them an opportunity to write free text comments about volunteering. From their answers we now know more about the amount of volunteering older Australians do and the kinds of volunteer work they engage in. We also better understand their reasons for volunteering and, in some cases, for not volunteering.

The results show just how much older Australians care about their communities and the invaluable contribution they make to all our lives, whether we are aware of it or not. ●

## ABOUT THE SURVEY

National Seniors is a member-based not-for-profit research and advocacy organisation committed to representing and promoting the views, values and beliefs of Australians aged 50 and over. Every year since 2012 – except 2020 when focused on COVID research – National Seniors has conducted a survey of older Australians’ behaviours and views across a range of topics relevant to lifestyle, health and wellbeing called the National Seniors Social Survey, or NSSS. The 10th such survey (NSSS-10) was conducted in February 2022.

Anyone aged 50 years or over and living in Australia was eligible to participate in the NSSS-10. Invitations to participate were distributed to older Australians via the National Seniors membership database and online networks, and further distribution to other Australian seniors was encouraged. In total, 3938 people participated in the NSSS-10 after we excluded blank and duplicate submissions.

As for previous National Seniors Social Surveys, we asked participants numerous substantive questions on topics of interest plus a range of demographic questions. As part of a module on post-retirement work, the NSSS-10 asked participants: *“How many hours a week do you take part in volunteer work (including any travel time)?”* with a range of set responses to choose between for their answer. They were then invited to write free text comments with the prompt, *“Please tell us more about volunteering if you would like to.”*

The module also asked about participants’ work and retirement status and asked retirees if they had re-entered paid work since retiring. Other modules asked about quality-of-life measures, feelings about community, and attitudes to ageing. Links between participants’ answers to those questions and their volunteering activity are explored in this report.

### Analysis methods

The software package Stata v16 was used for all quantitative analysis. We analysed text comments using the thematic analysis framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006), identifying themes via inductive analysis guided by a critical realist approach that aimed for accuracy and objectivity in interpreting participants’ views. The researchers acknowledge the influence of their pre-existing knowledge and understandings on identified themes. Quotes from survey participants were selected to illustrate the variety and prevalence of ideas expressed. When possible, we reproduced quotes verbatim, occasionally omitting or altering parts for clarity or anonymity (indicated with square brackets []). Minor typos were corrected for readability (no brackets). All other phrasing idiosyncrasies were retained. See our companion report on post-retirement work for methods details (Orthia et al., 2022).

## OVERVIEW: OLDER AUSTRALIANS' VOLUNTEER PATTERNS

When asked the question “How many hours a week do you take part in volunteer work (including any travel time)?”, 3655 NSSS-10 participants answered (93% of the sample).

Fully half (50%) said they volunteered some time. Within that, 27% volunteered 5 or fewer hours per week, 12% volunteered 5-10 hours, 9% volunteered 10-20 hours, and 2% volunteered 20 hours or more weekly (Figure 1). The 50% statistic represents a much larger proportion of people volunteering than was reported in the 2019 snapshot mentioned in the Introduction, which estimated 25-29% of Australians aged 55+ volunteer.

We tested for statistically significant differences in volunteer hours between people who are permanently retired and everyone else. Previous research documented Australian workers' high levels of intention to volunteer after retiring (EPSA, 2011), presumably because they felt they would have time to do so then. But our numbers only differed slightly between the two groups, so for our sample retirement status was not a major determinant of volunteering activity.

In fact, among retirees, those who had re-entered the paid workforce after retirement were significantly more likely to engage in volunteering than others. We also found that seniors who volunteer are more likely than non-volunteers to feel satisfied with how they spend their time, to harbour positive feelings about ageing, and to believe their community offers a good quality of life. We might conclude from this that volunteering is associated with an optimistic outlook on life and a general inclination towards active community engagement.

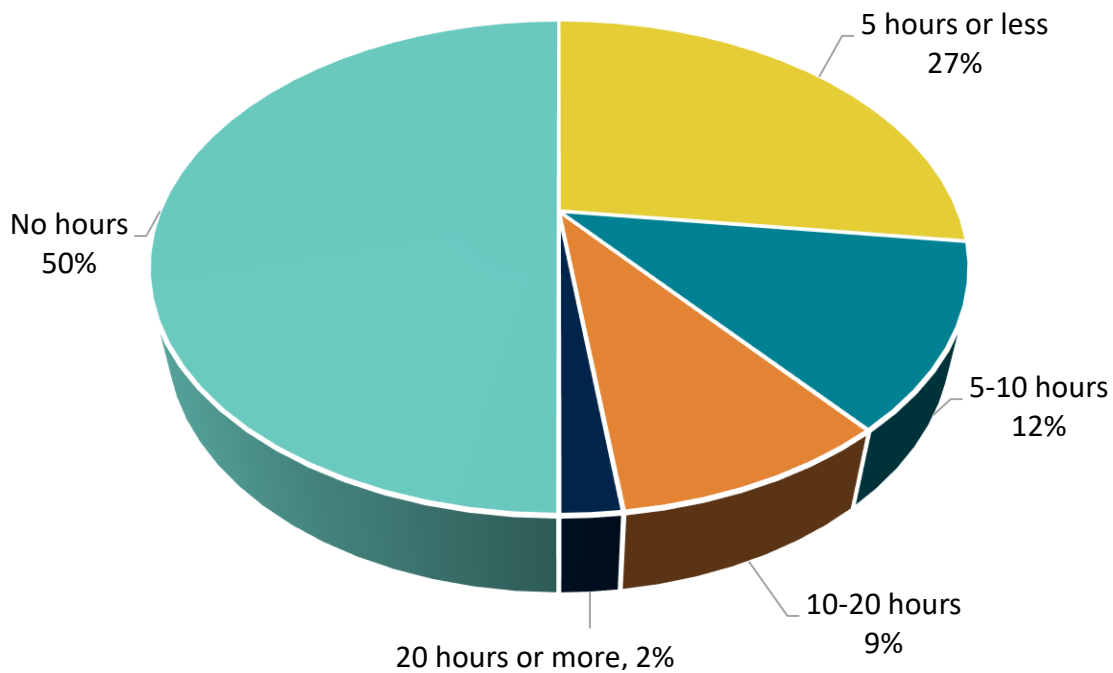


Figure 1 Number of hours participants volunteer per week (n=3655).



## OLDER AUSTRALIANS' COMMENTS ABOUT VOLUNTEERING

We invited NSSS-10 participants to comment further on volunteering if they wished to, using an open text box. Almost 1300 people wrote a comment about volunteering (36% of the 3655 respondents). Sixty-seven simply commented that they would like to volunteer, or used to volunteer, or similar. Excluding them, 1233 people commented on the kinds of volunteer work they do (923 comments) and/or the reasons they do or do not volunteer (518 comments). We review these comments below.

### What activities do senior volunteers do?

Commenters mentioned a great range of volunteer activities when thinking about the organisations, individuals and purposes they work for in a volunteer capacity. The 923 comments of this sort mentioned these activities:

- Supporting organisations that help groups of people in need including elderly people, children, survivors of domestic violence, homeless people, people with disabilities of various kinds, people with mental ill health or who are in crisis, veterans, people in financial need, people who live remotely, migrants, asylum seekers, new mothers, prisoners and ex-prisoners.
- Doing volunteer work with organisations that serve a cause beyond helping disadvantaged people, such as helping animals, protecting and sustaining the environment, fixing broken items and more.
- Volunteering at institutions such as community centres, schools, universities, TAFEs, libraries, aged care facilities, hospitals, churches and other religious institutions, museums, galleries, heritage locales, theatres and science centres.
- Volunteering for an identity-based community the respondent belongs to that is related to their age, religion, sexuality, gender, culture, nationality, profession, disability or health condition.
- Volunteering for clubs and societies, sport-based groups, arts and culture-based groups or health and wellbeing support groups.
- Doing volunteer work that serves a local community in some capacity including local activism, work for local councils, tourism information, neighbourhood watch programs, and serving on residential strata committees.
- Fulfilling an official community function such as being a Justice of the Peace or a Voluntary Assisted Dying witness.
- Supporting government services such as emergency services and courts.
- Engaging in volunteer work overseas or supporting people outside Australia.
- Ad hoc assisting individuals when they need help, such as friends, neighbours, and community members, rather than volunteering with a particular organisation or service.
- Caring for a family member including parents, partners, children and grandchildren, or caring for a friend or flatmate.

Some people wrote about the types of work they perform rather than the purpose of their volunteer work or the organisations and individuals they help. The list of tasks is long and includes: serving on committees, doing care work, doing trades work, doing office work, caretaking and cleaning, administration and management, bookkeeping, advocacy, working in op shops or on stalls, knitting and crocheting, fundraising, mentoring, teaching, creative work, performance, IT support, research, transport and distribution, catering and food service, literacy, language help, form-filling assistance, grant writing, first aid, counselling, pastoral care, giving expert advice, driving instruction, disaster management, event organisation, writing, document production, and animal care.

### More than a hobby: Knitting and crocheting are work

A lot of volunteer activities older people participate in are undervalued within the community and some are stereotyped as old-fashioned hobbies. Knitting and crocheting are foremost among these, but comments demonstrate their value as work:



*"I volunteer for the QCWA. Sometimes these hours are increased depending on what is asked for. We assist with the Domestic Violence when asked, we have been asked to knit/crochet vests to fit orphan lambs during lambing season and the same vests were knitted for the penguins which were covered with an oil slick until they recovered. So we have competitions each year with the other states to keep our skills up. We knit/crochet bears, dolls etc for the hospital/doctors to give to traumatized patients etc."*

*"I am knitting items for charity so not exactly volunteering at an organisation but knitting items at home, after work, to donate to a charitable organisation"*

*"I make crocheted rugs for a charity that gives them to homeless, aged care and palliative care. I do this at home and deliver them to the charity every couple of months."*

*"I look after two groups of ladies who make wraps (blankets) for the needy, both in Australia and overseas, by knitting and/or crocheting squares which are then sewn together."*

*"it's part of one of my hobbies of spinning and weaving we make blankets, beanies gloves etc for the homeless. I also crochet baby shawls for the still birth association."*

Many people mentioned more than one volunteer activity they participate in now or did in the past. Some seemed to do an immense amount of volunteering, for example:

*"I am a very active single 73 year old with no family and I like to be occupied so: I used to help at the Migrant Resource Centre in the resettlement program but then no migrants arrived due to Covid. I am a member of Rotary and I have been helping 2 hours a day each week at the super state run vaccination clinics since vaccinations were approved several months ago. I love dogs and am a member of the Auxiliary for the Dogs' Homes of [State], plus I am Treasurer of 2 Dog Walking Associations and am a trained Delta Dog Safe presenter and take a large fluffy toy dog into schools to teach children how not to approach dogs. I am also a trained Story Dog Presenter and take my own English Cocker Spaniel, [name], into a school one morning a week, so she can listen to children read, thereby helping children gain confidence in reading aloud."*

*"I am the Chair of three different organisations and this gives me satisfaction of what I am doing. My partner and I also volunteer at different Festivals in our area - Golden Horseshoes Parade over Easter and Celtic Festival in November. As part of the LGBTQIA+ communities we also volunteer on committees and at Mardi Gras/Pride Festivals across Victoria and southern NSW. There is never any lack of things we could volunteer in!"*

*"Wore myself out raising a family on my own on a single parent pension, volunteering at school - in the classroom, excursions, my children's sports, including acting as taxi to other people's children, who had two cars sitting in the driveway when I delivered their keen but neglected children home after their footy games, working, caring for older family members, volunteering in aged care home etc, etc, etc. Am now enjoying my retirement where I can stay home if I want to."*

*"I have been for 20 years extremely active in my community in Women's groups; Arts & Cultural groups; setting up and developing these to a level of sustainability. Likewise an early literacy program in the local area, with which I still maintain contact & participate at the planning and fundraising level. There comes a time when the body refuses to comply with demands of the mind."*

*"I volunteered with Adult Literacy, English as a Second Language, and tutored primary aged students in a school. These were cancelled due to Covid, and have not opened up again. I tutored an adult in the TAFE system, and volunteered for various University research projects. These too have dried up, were postponed or cancelled."*

*"I used to go to a local centre 5 times a week & spend time talking to a diverse range of people. We would interact over a cuppa or a small lunch. The people who attended were the elderly, the disabled, the homeless etc. I stopped going for 2 reasons, the impact of COVID but more importantly the fact that I brought my brother to live with me in July 2020. I need time to cater for his ongoing needs."*

Some participants had started up facilities and programs to meet specific needs:

*“I saw a need in the community for an organisation to provide information and education to people living with dementia and their family carer. I started up a small not for profit organisation to provide this for our local community. Otherwise this is only available to people if they phone the National Dementia Helpline and wait for ages or if they look on the internet for information. People need to speak to people face-to-face so the not for profit organisation i run is very successful.”*

*“After I retired from the Education Department, I set up a library/resource centre at [university building] and maintained it working with academics, students and peace centre volunteers for almost 25 years. When the Centre moved to a brand new building, I was forced to disband the centre and so I gave away all resources to other universities, students, community libraries, East Timor Dili uni library and the state's rare book library.”*

Compared to the 2019 snapshot numbers which showed Australians most commonly volunteer for sports and recreation organisations and groups, our survey participants seemed to volunteer more for welfare, education and cultural groups and purposes.

### Problems trying to document volunteer work

Ambiguities in what counts as ‘volunteering’ led to some seemingly contradictory comments about what activities volunteers do. While some participants said their volunteer work involved caring for a family member, friend or flatmate, over 60 people said they do not have time to volunteer more hours than they currently do, or at all, because they have caring responsibilities. In other words, some counted caring work in their volunteer hours and others did not. Further to this, some of those who preferred to volunteer their time on an ad hoc and individual basis rather than volunteering for an organisation or group expressed uncertainty as to whether that kind of activity counted as volunteering.

Comments also revealed the difficulties some people faced when attempting to estimate the amount of time per week they spend volunteering. For some people volunteering activity varies or is seasonal or sporadic, with intense periods of many hours or days interspersed with periods of none. For other people, the amount of time they spend volunteering is impossible to estimate because it is a constant embedded in their lives rather than constituting a distinct period of their day or week. Most pertinently, some carers care for loved ones 24/7.

All these comments suggest the numbers in Figure 1 are an underrepresentation of the volunteer hours worked by survey participants. ●

## WHY DO OLDER AUSTRALIANS VOLUNTEER OR NOT VOLUNTEER?

Those who commented on reasons why they do or do not volunteer offered diverse, sometimes contrasting perspectives on volunteering. Just over 100 people offered reasons they do volunteer (or have in the past or would like to), while over 400 people gave reasons they do not volunteer more or at all.

### Reasons for volunteering

The most expressed reason for volunteering, mentioned by 50 commenters, was that they find it rewarding to make a contribution and help people. As one person put it, *“I make a difference in this world with what I do.”*

Two other major reasons participants gave for volunteering were social opportunities and staying active. Positive experiences of these kinds included the chance to *“form relationships with people or cultures that you would not otherwise encounter”* and that it *“Helps keep people fit and engaged in society.”*

In addition, many enjoy the work itself. *“To maintain my zest for living”* was how one person phrased it. Others said, *“It is a wonderful activity and I thoroughly enjoy every minute of it”* and *“All of these things are labours of love and bring great joy and satisfaction.”*

Volunteers also mentioned gaining routine, learning new things and self-improvement, using existing skills, and developing their sense of belonging as benefits of volunteering.

Money was a motive for a few, who were obliged to volunteer to receive Centrelink benefits through the Work for the Dole program, though some volunteered extra hours beyond this obligation.

A few people said they volunteer simply because there is work that needs to be done that cannot or will not be done by governments or others:

*“There is a big need for volunteers in many areas. There is still the attitude that people should be paid for work. It is not that simple. If the people who do voluntary work had to get paid the work would not get done as it would be unaffordable.”*

*“The only way most things get done in the bush is for us to help do the extra work needed by ourselves, thus we have to rely on the dedicated and loyal teams of volunteers who are all invested in a vital and thriving future of the bush for the next generations and beyond.”*

Some commenters said they volunteer because others do not:

*“Have held many positions at local bowls club because other retirees seem to retire from life in general and won't volunteer for anything.”*

*“Less and less people are volunteering. This is putting an increased burden on older ones.”*

Finally, many volunteers passionately expressed positive sentiments about volunteering and their desire to see more people do it:

*“There is no reward like having a farmer give you a hug and literally cry on your shoulder while saying ‘Thank you so much’. I am still keen to support my local community.”*

*“Volunteering is an amazing experience I have volunteered for almost 50 years. You can MAKE A DIFFERENCE.”*

*“Education about the benefits of volunteering should be provided to the general community on a regular basis so as to enlist younger generations. I believe it would diminish the amount of mental health demands put on our system.”*

## Reasons for not volunteering

Commenters offered numerous reasons why they do not volunteer more or at all.

The most mentioned reason for not volunteering was COVID-19 risks and closures that make volunteering dangerous or that foreclosed opportunities (115 comments). *“Covid has put a dampener on volunteering”* as one person put it. Some people commented that they normally volunteer more but COVID has curbed their volunteer activity. Consistent with this, the reported volunteering rate of 50% in the NSSS-10 was higher than the 37% rate reported in the 9th National Seniors Social Survey (NSSS-9) conducted in February-March 2021, when COVID restrictions were tighter. Some of this difference will be due to chance but COVID likely played a role. All this suggests the numbers could be still higher than those in Figure 1 if not for COVID.

Around 80 people said their health problems or disabilities prevented them from volunteering even if they wanted to. *“I did a lot of volunteer work previously until my body broke”* was an experience reflected in many comments from people who were physically unable to work anymore, volunteer or otherwise. Fatigue, chronic pain, mobility issues, sensory limitations and mental ill health were all part of this picture.

Some survey respondents were still in paid work or recently retired (48 comments) or had other commitments that prohibited volunteering because of a lack of time or an inability to commit to regular hours. As one wrote, *“I would consider volunteer work so long as it did not tie me down too much.”* Another said, *“We have given countless hours of volunteer work. Now we rest.”*

Caring responsibilities was another prominent reason commonly given for not volunteering or not volunteering more (67 comments). As discussed above, there was some uncertainty within the sample as to whether caring work counted as volunteering, and further uncertainty for carers when trying to calculate the hours they spent caring when it was a constant in their lives.

Some people said they didn't volunteer because they had been unable to find a suitable opportunity, has lost their volunteer position because an organisation or program folded, or that relocating had disrupted their volunteering plans. A few said they would like to volunteer but cannot because they do not have transport options to facilitate it. A very small number commented that they were simply not interested in volunteering.

All of the above factors curb volunteering efforts in understandable and largely non-controversial ways. But three kinds of reason people gave for not volunteering are less straightforward and worth granting separate focus to because they invite action from host organisations, governments and community members. They are the bureaucratic barriers to volunteering in Australia, the undesirable attitudes that can be present within host organisations, and the ethics of doing valuable labour for free.

### Red tape when volunteering

First, 11 commenters said they had been excluded or discouraged from volunteering by new bureaucratic requirements and in some cases a large amount of red tape. Comments included:

*"I understand workplace Health and Safety regulations do no longer provide cover if volunteer is aged over 80 years. I was informed of this when volunteering at [location] Art Gallery"*

*"The paperwork that volunteers have to fill out to volunteer and keep updating especially with Department of Human Services is a big disincentive to people volunteering."*

*"I was doing one morning a week with Meals on Wheels until several years ago when volunteers were required to get police clearance etc"*

*"Health and safety requirements have organisations treating volunteers the same [as] paid [employees]. I had one organisation insist that I attend fire drills in their administration building despite not actually spending any of my volunteer time in that building."*

*"Volunteering is difficult in Australia. So many hoops to jump through."*

## Issues with host organisations

In addition, 18 survey participants mentioned leaving volunteering activities because they were dissatisfied for various reasons, including the political dynamics of an organisation, ageist attitudes – whether against older or younger people – or the general difficulties of working with other people:

*“yes did do a fair bit with local RSL but since new leadership and pricing increases at club found myself not available for the local rsl fund raising, sausage sizzles, gardening, golf days. They have lost their way and only think dollars not members, None now”*

*“I used to volunteer but stereotyping of the capabilities of an older person really got to me.”*

*“Lack of acceptance of newcomers to the area. Dominance by individuals who have been in the system for a long time. Local Senior Citizens Club.”*

*“Tried volunteering but met with toxic situation in organisation. A bit shattered by the experience [and] will wait a while before attempting to volunteer again”*

*“Many organizations local Shire council and traders association are not interested in older persons ideas or skills in volunteering. Sure you can join up. But the committees are predominately 25 to 30 yr old age groups who think your ideas are old fashioned and ghost you at meetings.”*

*“Volunteering is rewarding however you have to remember you can't please everyone all the time. It is surprising how much criticism you get.”*

*“I did offer my services to an organisation and was invited to attend a meeting as an observer. I did not take up their offer as sadly every suggestion the young people submitted was rejected by the staid older fraternity.”*

*“Would not mind mentoring but it's too complex with people attitudes and you're just introducing issues you don't really need.”*



## Volunteer vs paid positions

Finally, 25 people commented on the exploitation of volunteers and the sometimes-tricky relationship between volunteering and paid work. In some cases, survey participants refused to do volunteering if it took away work that other people needed. In other cases, participants had lost their volunteer positions because the roles were transformed into paid jobs. Some former volunteers also discussed leaving a position when they felt used or exploited by their host organisation because they were unpaid. A few people commented on the need for organisations, bosses and paid colleagues to better appreciate volunteers:

*“unwillingness to do paid jobs as a volunteer. I will volunteer as long as I am not taking a paid job away from someone. Union delegate.”*

*“I used to volunteer till I found that the state government relied on it for free labour while giving nothing back. So then I told them where to go.”*

*“I have found that because I have great grant writing skills people leave all the work associated with this to me. So I feel I have been taken advantage of and when I do stand up for myself they think I am cross old difficult cow! I refuse to volunteer now for work that should be paid.”*

*“If volunteers [are] required to help people or things, then the government isn't doing its job and serving the community properly. The funding should come from the taxes we pay and people should be employed to do those jobs.”*

*“I have worked in jobs where volunteers were used and abused - do not want that to happen to me.”*

*“Volunteers are more difficult for an employer to manage though because the nature of the relationship is not employer and employee, and I think that while retirees doing volunteer work is good for retirees and good for work places, there needs to be thought given to how to make volunteer work look more attractive to both parties.”*

*“I regard volunteering as unpaid work and retirees are being exploited”*

*“I volunteered about 15-20 hrs a week up to age 67 but began to realise that older people taking all the volunteer jobs sometimes cuts out the younger people who need the work as part of their job search requirements. That began to worry me.”*

## DISCUSSION

### Valuing volunteering

Volunteering can be difficult to quantify but its value is immeasurable. The work volunteers do can enrich lives, change lives and save lives.

This research project demonstrates the many and varied activities older Australians participate in as volunteers. They do it without remuneration, because they enjoy it or because it is needed. They offer the labour of their bodies and minds, eyes and ears, hands and hearts to causes that move them, to the best of their abilities.

Older people’s volunteer contributions to their communities and to the nation must be recognised. Intergenerational reports and other documents that express concern over the increasing costs of aged care with population ageing tend to characterise older people as a burden on society. Yet this is far from true: their contributions are many and include volunteer labour, unpaid caring work and providing ad hoc favours or assistance to diverse community members. As researchers Phillip Taylor and Warwick Smith have argued, new economic models must be developed that include volunteering and caring “to give a truer indication of the nation’s productive capacity” (Taylor and Smith, 2017, p. 28).

The reasons NSSS-10 participants gave for engaging in volunteer work had considerable overlap with the reasons why people are motivated to enter paid work after retirement, which we

report in National Seniors’ companion report on post-retirement work (Orthia et al., 2022). In order of prevalence among the comments we received, the reasons for volunteering include contributing to society, enjoying the work, socialising and meeting new people, staying active and healthy, meeting an important need, gaining a routine, learning new things and self-improvement, putting existing skills to good use, developing their sense of belonging, and money (obligation to volunteer to receive Centrelink benefits). This list is very similar to the list of motivations for doing paid work, though the order of priority differs. For example, money is by far the foremost reason for retirees wanting to re-enter the paid workforce, but for obvious reasons is bottom of the list of reasons for volunteering.

The similarity of these lists demonstrates the extent to which older Australians remain actively engaged with their community in deeply meaningful ways. It suggests Australians should reformulate how we think of older volunteers. Stereotypes of older people can too easily lead many of us to dismiss their contributions. The reality is, older Australians are an integral part of the fabric of our society and our economy. They should not need to volunteer to be valued in this way, but their volunteer efforts are tangible evidence of their importance to Australia.

## Tackling obstacles to volunteering

The survey results also illustrate some of the reasons older Australians cannot or will not volunteer. Some reasons are personal, either choices freely made, or decisions forced by factors such as declining health or the pandemic. But others are more the responsibility of host organisations, governments and society at large, warranting action.

While some official checks are needed, organisations might reconsider their bureaucratic processes to avoid unnecessarily burdening volunteers. In addition, bullying and ageism within organisations are never acceptable. Agencies who set age limits to WHS coverage irrespective of a person’s health or ability should also be aware that this is ageism and reconsider it.

Tensions and ethical quandaries arising from asking volunteers to do work that

should perhaps be paid is an issue that organisations must grapple with. It is also something that broader Australian society should discuss and debate. Changing our attitudes and economic models to place more value on older volunteers’ work might be a pathway to clearer ethical choices in that space.

Putting more resources into marginalised communities will also be needed. As some of the participants noted, volunteers are essential for getting things done in rural and remote areas. Yet this should not be the case and would not be if rural and remote communities were better resourced.

Tackling all these issues could make older people’s volunteering experiences more positive and may encourage more people to get involved in volunteering.

## Are the real numbers higher or lower than our survey suggests?

The comments revealed ambiguities in the meaning of ‘volunteering’ that suggest caution be exercised when interpreting the hours people said they volunteer each week (Figure 1). As noted above, some people did not count caring for a loved one or doing ad hoc favours for individuals as volunteering, so underreported their hours of unpaid labour. Others found it difficult to estimate the number of hours they volunteered because it was irregular or constant. And COVID has changed older Australians’ volunteering patterns in several ways. The numbers in Figure 1 may be an underestimate for all these reasons.

Since not everyone who answered the “*How many hours...*” question wrote a comment, we cannot be sure how much these ambiguities muddy the numbers. However, they are likely partly responsible for the discrepancy between our numbers and the 2019 snapshot. The snapshot defined volunteering as providing unpaid help to an organisation or group in Australia (AIHW, 2021). It defined ad hoc volunteer activity and assisting individuals as ‘informal volunteering’, and unpaid work for people within a household as ‘informal caring’, and it calculated the figures for these kinds of volunteer work separately.

On the other hand, the numbers may be an overestimate when extrapolated to the whole population of older Australians. People who are National Seniors members may be more likely to volunteer than their non-member peers. Volunteering one's time and paying membership to an advocacy and research organisation are both examples of community engagement so

may attract some of the same people. As we noted in our overview of results, our analyses showed that volunteers were statistically more likely than non-volunteers to have an optimistic outlook on life and a general inclination towards active community engagement. People with these traits may be more likely to join National Seniors too.

## Conclusions

Past generations have valued volunteers as the backbone of their communities. But in an era when increasing proportions of the adult population engage in formalised paid work, volunteers are pushed farther to the margins of the Australian consciousness.

This is likely connected to the sense of invisibility experienced by many older people. It may also be a manifestation of ageism, considering 29% of volunteers are over 55 and one quarter to half of all older Australians engage in volunteer labour. These invisible workers contribute so much for so little in monetary terms. Australians must refocus our vision so that we see them and their contributions. A great deal of what we value in Australian society depends on it. ●

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