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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMY AND GENDER AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY
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Submission Cover sheet

Inquiry into Unpaid Work

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SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO UNPAID WORK

BY

**ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY
CANBERRA/GOULBURN**

MAY 2024



St Vincent de Paul Society
CANBERRA/GOULBURN

good works

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INTRODUCTION

The St. Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn (the Society) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission as part of the Inquiry into unpaid work in the ACT. The Society in this submission seeks to share some of our insights on the impact of the many in our community who volunteer hours of unpaid service that form the backbone of the work we do to support those experiencing hardship in our community.

The Society is a member-based lay Catholic organisation that has been assisting people experiencing poverty and disadvantage in the region since 1895. We seek to shape a more just and compassionate society by working to address the causes of poverty and injustice, with a focus on prevention and early intervention.

As a registered charitable not-for-profit organisation, we operate in the Australian Capital Territory and surrounding southern and western regional areas of New South Wales. Volunteer members of the Society's conferences undertake visits to the homes of people experiencing disadvantage, including those at risk of homelessness. Members refer those at risk to our homelessness services, where specialist staff provide case management, support services, and referral to other agencies to help prevent people from becoming homeless.

Aspiring to our legacy of good works, volunteering remains at the very core of St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn with a diverse and dedicated workforce comprising over 500 members, 1500 volunteers and 240 plus employees who work side by side serving those experiencing hardship in our communities.

VOLUNTEERING AT ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY CANBERRA/GOULBURN

Impact of Volunteering¹

As a volunteer organisation, volunteer involvement contributes to and extends our capacity to meet the needs of those at risk of or experiencing homelessness or hardship. In the last 12 months, the value of support given to those who come to us for help through our team of volunteers is \$2.2 million. This is inclusive of the 37,788 instances of support provided through our Conferences; and 30,000 plus meals provided by our Blue Door Drop-in Centre²; 13,000 plus meals provided by our Roadhouse Drop-in Centre; provided 6,500 items of new clothing through our Thread Together programme³ and distributed 8,723 material items through our Night Patrol Vans.

With the work of our volunteers, who have supported us with over 230,000 hours of volunteer time, 3,000 tonnes of donations were sorted and diverted from landfills.

¹ St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn. [Impact Annual Report 2022-2023](#). Accessed May 15, 2024

² St. Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn, [The Blue Door Program](#). Accessed May 15, 2024

³ St. Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn, [Thread Together Programme](#) Accessed May 15, 2024

The impact of volunteering:

Thanks to the dedication, and tireless efforts of our network of volunteers and members, in a 12-month period they made a lasting difference in the lives of so many individuals and families across the region.



The Society supports various placements within its volunteering framework, creating meaningful opportunities for participation, connection, and personal/professional growth. In doing this, we provide opportunities for our companions and the broader community to carry out compulsory educational service learning (students required to volunteer as part of a course); mandated court orders including community service and fines (WDO Program⁴); internships; formal work experience/vocational placements and mandatory government programs.

The ability of the volunteering experience to have a two-way impact is not lost on us as an organisation. Our volunteers provide the much-needed support we need to deliver our good works to those experiencing hardship in our community. In giving back to the community through their service, as recounted by Matthew and Long, many volunteers experience a sense of worth, self-discovery and connection that has been beneficial to their own mental and social well-being.

Long, A volunteer with the Clemente Program

"I would say I have personally benefited by volunteering for Vinnies, in a way I would have never imagined.

Initially, I was in the middle of some life transitions, and I was just hoping to gain some general experience to support my social work studies in the future. However,

⁴ \$37.50 is deducted per hour of voluntary service from participants' overall fine.

volunteering in the Clemente Program has given me a solid experience of working in the university context, and I got to experience the supportive environment ACU is offering. I was able to reference my experience volunteering for the Clemente program, and that helped me to land casual employment with ACU.

I'd say ACU and the Clemente Program have offered a unique opportunity for both volunteers and participants. I, myself, as a volunteer, I felt like I was receiving the equal amount of support from the staff, and I have further advanced my skills while volunteering. It was a valuable experience, and I would recommend it. "

Matthew, A volunteer with Vinnies on Campus

I volunteer with Vinnies, through Vinnies on Campus and Vinnies youth programs to be on the front lines and directly help people in need. The greatest thing about Vinnies is that it enables me to directly assist people, which I find is a rewarding experience that greatly assists with my well-being.

Between commitments with work, study and extracurricular, the work we do enables me to relieve stress and feel positive about being able to help someone and make a small local difference. The program's flexible hours have also meant that I can volunteer when I can without feeling stressed or burdened to volunteer.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my experience as a volunteer, it is a great way to assist your wellbeing by focusing on assisting someone in need, and I would highly encourage everyone to give it a go."

Often, for many volunteers, the volunteering opportunity becomes an opportunity to socially connect as much as it is an opportunity to serve. This in part addresses the challenges of loneliness and social isolation within our communities. The experience of Brian Stacey, who is currently the President of the Society's Territory Council in Canberra/Goulburn affirms this.

Brian Stacey, Member (and Volunteer) of the Kambah Conference

"Volunteering has changed my life. I started volunteering with the Society in 2013, joining the great Kambah Conference and I have never regretted it for a second. It gave me the chance to escape the daily grind of my job in the Public Service. Because I had moved to different parts of Australia for my work, it had been difficult to keep friends and, in the Conference, I was able to do that, particularly by going to weekly meetings. From the start, I have also felt that my volunteering was having a positive impact on the lives of others even if it is small and difficult to measure."

The social and economic benefits of the volunteers' time is therefore not limited to only those who receive their support.

[Volunteer Stories: Impact and Well-being](#)

Volunteering enables innovation and social change, enhancing our ability to respond to community needs and challenges. The volunteering ecosystem is a critical part of Australian society, contributing to civil society and active participation in building strong, inclusive, and resilient communities. Anecdotally, unpaid work can encompass a wide range of activities, including volunteering, internships, and apprenticeships, offering valuable experiences and

opportunities for skill development. Below are some volunteer stories on how their involvement in the Society's work and how it has impacted them as individuals.

Fran Neuss' Volunteering Story

Fran's decision to volunteer as a Member of the Society was influenced by two people – her dad and a very close friend who recently passed away after over 50 years of service to the Society. She also felt blessed with her life and decided she wanted to give back to others who weren't as fortunate.

Fran's work allows her a good understanding of the needs of her community and the difference the Society makes. She has also gained a sense of purpose through helping her community and has learned many valuable skills. Her favourite parts of being a member are meeting new people, building relationships, and being able to better the lives of those around her.

Fran recalls her most memorable moment with the Society as a very hot day just before Christmas. It had been a long week packing Christmas hampers and she was feeling tired and a bit cranky. On her deliveries of Christmas hampers she stopped at one of her Conference's regular Companions' house and four little children (looking worse for wear like herself!) came bounding down the driveway saying, "Fran, you made it – we have been waiting all day for the Vinnies Reindeers to come". They were so excited to see her and the Christmas hampers with all the goodies.

Paula Bounds' Volunteering Story

Paula became a volunteer Member of the St Vincent de Paul Society as she was inspired by the works of her father who was a Vinnies volunteer. She also had prior experience working with our Night Patrol service in Sydney.

Being a volunteer has meant a great deal to her. It has opened her eyes to the poverty that some people in her community face. The work has also allowed her to live out her values by giving back and contributing to those in poverty.

Recently Paula took a call from a member of the community who requested assistance with food and transport. This individual had a disability, which left them with short-term memory loss. This made cooking food risky, as they could forget that different kitchen items such as the sink and the oven were in use.

Paula organised for a microwave to be delivered to this individual which would make a sound when food was finished being prepared. A simple solution had a life-changing impact and as a sign of gratitude, Paula and another Member of her Conference received a fridge magnet from the individual that said, 'I believe'. Paula lives this sentiment through her work with the Society.

Noel Bentley's Volunteering Story

Noel started his work with the Society to pursue his interest in providing spiritual support to the disadvantaged. His works led him to specialize in Prison Chaplaincy.

Being a volunteer of the Society has allowed Noel to help members of the community as well as other volunteers. This has strengthened Noel's faith in his church.

Noel's most memorable moment volunteering was when he became a Godparent to the children of an individual the Society was supporting. This individual spent 14 years in prison, three of which Noel worked as a Prison Chaplain. Noel's work with this person involved regular meetings and meditations.

To this day Noel and this individual still meet. In the present day, this individual is studying at university through the Society's Clemente program and working part-time.

What is evident in these volunteer stories is the quest to seek an opportunity to impact the lives of others through service. The social relationships and capital that are generated through participation in formal volunteering schemes need to be noted. Often, the host organization becomes a conduit, allowing for this service to be rendered to the vulnerable within our community and for the volunteers to establish social connections through these networks.

FUNDING THE VOLUNTEERING EXPERIENCE

To make the volunteering experience worthwhile, an effective administrative process needs to be put in place. This is to ensure that the volunteer, who is already offering a service out of goodwill, finds the experience enjoyable and is also able to be efficient in that process. It is important to highlight that, although volunteers are not rewarded financially for their services, there are inherent hidden costs borne by the host organisation. At the Society, we have been fortunate to work with volunteers whose unpaid service goes directly to support our fundraising efforts. It is the funds raised that enable us to deliver some of our frontline services.

Vinnies On Campus ANU Sleepout 2023: Volunteer awareness creation and fundraising

On 16 August 2023, over 70 students and staff from ANU experienced some of the realities of homelessness by participating in the Vinnies on Campus ANU Sleepout.

Together they raised over \$18,000 for their Vinnies on Campus (VOC) Home Visits Service. Home visitation is a service the ANU Conference runs for people in crisis in the suburbs around the University.

Volunteers support those in need with a visit to their homes as well as providing material aid, such as food vouchers, petrol vouchers, help with medical costs and other essentials. In addition to raising funds, this Sleepout aimed to raise awareness around the issues affecting young people in our community.

Sue's legacy of giving: 20+ years of volunteering

Sue is one of our wonderful volunteers at the Phillip Centre where she serves customers on Monday afternoons. Sue has been volunteering at Vinnies for 20 years, but she has been a Conference member for even longer!

Sue believes in giving back to the community, and that's her motivation to volunteer. As a Conference member, she knows the great work that Vinnies does, and that the money raised from the shop's sales goes to support these good works. She enjoys

meeting people, and connecting with other staff members and volunteers, knowing that everything the volunteers do helps Vinnie's support those in need.

The unpaid service that the volunteers give towards the work of the Society, in great part pays for the services we deliver through our frontline programs. It is also through this service that we establish the connection that informs the programs we deliver as an organisation. The service of the volunteers enables us to be abreast with the present and emerging needs of the community. It is crucial therefore that challenges that affect the volunteering experience are looked at and addressed on all fronts.

CHALLENGES WITH VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering enhances one's ability to develop skills, creates potential pathways to employment, and allows individuals to contribute to society, utilising their existing skills for the common good. It is important to note that unpaid work is generally performed by individuals seeking to gain experience, make friends build networks, or contribute to causes they believe in. However, numerous social-economic factors may deter people from volunteering today.

- **Financial Constraints:** Many individuals cannot afford to work without pay, especially those from lower-income backgrounds or facing financial hardships. The need to support themselves and their families financially takes precedence over volunteering opportunities; hence mandating participation can cause additional stress which in turn can negatively impact the workforce.
- **Time Constraints:** In today's fast-paced world, people are often juggling multiple responsibilities, including work, education, and caregiving. Despite employment status, finding the time to volunteer can be challenging, particularly for those with demanding schedules; hence mandating participation can cause additional stress which in turn can negatively impact the workforce.
- **Lack of Recognition:** Unpaid workers may feel undervalued and overlooked, especially if their contributions go unacknowledged. Without tangible incentives or recognition, the motivation to volunteer may diminish.
- **Limited Access and Opportunity:** Certain communities and individuals may face barriers to accessing volunteering opportunities due to factors such as location, transportation, or language barriers. This lack of accessibility can prevent individuals from engaging in unpaid work.
- **Professionalization of Volunteering:** Increasing the professionalization of volunteering, where certain skills, checks and qualifications are needed can exclude individuals who are unable to provide relevant documentation and/or meet organisational or government compliance.

In addressing these challenges, our Volunteer Services Team understands meaningful activity and community participation promotes a sense of belonging and general well-being.

VOLUNTEERING IN THE ACT

Volunteering Australia defines volunteering as time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain. The term therefore covers a wide diversity of activities in Australian society. Volunteering provides opportunities to be involved in activities reflecting participants' interests and skills.

Facts & Figures About Volunteering in the ACT

*The ACT Wellbeing Framework*⁵ has 12 Domains⁶ which reflects the key impact areas of the quality of life in the Territory.

- Volunteering is identified as a key indicator under the domains of Social Connection and Time. It is important to highlight the key role and impact that volunteers have in affecting the other domains of well-being.
- Under the Social Connection Domain, the levels of volunteering indicator report a decline in volunteering in the Territory since 2019. It states that in 2023, around 1 in 3 Canberrans (32%) reported volunteering in the last 12 months.

*The ACT State of The Environment 2023*⁷, prepared by the Office of Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment presents that:

- It would cost over \$21.5 million each year if the ACT's environmental volunteers were paid for the work they do.
- Environmental volunteering in the ACT saves over \$13 million per year in avoided healthcare costs.
- In 2023, the ACT environmental volunteer groups were estimated to bring in \$2.7 million as part of the Australian Government's Urban Rivers and Catchments Program

*ACT's 2023 State of Volunteering Survey (due to be published)*⁸

- Recent data collected as part of the ACT's 2023 State of Volunteering Survey has shown that for every \$1 invested in volunteering, \$5.40 is returned.

RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation 1: Investigate the Hidden Cost of Volunteerism: The ACT Government must investigate ways in which they can adequately support and financially recognise the hidden costs of being a host community partner organisation and in turn a volunteer within a host organisation.

Recommendation 2: Recognising Formal and Informal Volunteering in the Well-being Framework: With the decline in formal volunteering, it is important to recognise the role and

⁵ Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, [ACT Wellbeing Framework](#), ACT Government. Accessed May 15, 2024.

⁶ **12 Wellbeing Domains:** (1) Access and Connectivity; (2) Economy; (3) Education and Lifelong Learning; (4) Environment and Climate; (5) Governance and Institutions; (6) Health; (7) Housing and Home; (8) Identity and Belonging; (9) Living Standards; (10) Safety; (11) Social Connection and (12) Time.

⁷ Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, ACT. "[2023 State of the Environment Report](#)" ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, Canberra." Accessed on May 15, 2024

⁸ Volunteering ACT. [Submission: Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in the ACT](#). February 2024. Accessed on May 14, 2024

the rise in informal volunteering within the ACT. Recognising it as an indicator within the ACT Wellbeing Framework is a good starting point.

Recommendation 3: Prioritise the development and finalisation of an ACT Volunteering Strategy: Many community organisations within the ACT are only able to operate with the support of volunteers. This unpaid service forms a key backbone of the programs they deliver. An ACT Volunteering Strategy will provide a good anchor point in harnessing the full potential of volunteering in the sector and community at large.

Recommendation 4: Incentivising Volunteering: Data suggests formal volunteering through organisations has declined over the last decade with informal volunteering remaining steady⁹. This means individuals committing time to organisations have declined. The Society recommends the Government establish a mechanism where the number of hours an individual or cooperate organisation donates via volunteering could be accounted to them for a benefit. A tax incentive through a tax credit scheme could be explored and developed, to encourage more individual and corporate-level formal volunteering. This could be fully fleshed out in a Volunteering Strategy for the ACT.

ABOUT THE ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY CANBERRA / GOULBURN

The Society implements many programs that deliver services to a cross-section of the vulnerable population within the ACT, some of which are outlined below.

Street to Home Program supports people who are sleeping rough and/or experiencing long-term chronic homelessness through case management and assertive outreach. The program provided case management to 75 rough sleepers and outreach to 184 more in the last year.

Families and Youth Program provides outreach support services to families and young people in the ACT currently at risk of or experiencing homelessness to enable them to access and maintain safe, secure, independent, and affordable housing. The program supported 112 families throughout the year.

Samaritan House is a 13-bed facility in Canberra that provides crisis accommodation and support for men experiencing homelessness, working to break the cycle of chronic and acute homelessness. The service supported 79 men throughout the year.

Blue Door Program is a drop-in centre in the middle of Ainslie Village in Canberra. It provides support to those living in the village and beyond in the form of meals, emergency relief material aid, information, referrals, and support. The service had about 1,500 monthly drop-ins and provided some 34,000 free meals throughout the year.

Vinnies Roadhouse is a food engagement program that provides access to a hot meal, material aid, support and referrals. It provides a safe and welcoming environment for people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness, and people experiencing social isolation.

Night Patrol operates across Canberra and Queanbeyan every night of the year from its 2 vans and with the support of 300 volunteers. It provides food, material items such as jackets, sleeping bags and hygiene items, and most importantly, an opportunity to engage socially with companions who are

⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) [Volunteers](#), AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 14 May 2024.

experiencing homelessness and/or social isolation. It served 7,992 companions throughout the year and provided 5,212 material items.

Community Inclusion Program, which operates out of the Oaks Estate is designed to offer support for people living with psycho-social disabilities who are ineligible for National Disability Insurances Scheme (NDIS) funding. It is funded by an Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Grant from the Australian Federal Government. It exists to build innovative ways to increase the independence and social and community participation of people with a psychosocial disability who are ineligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme. It provides advocacy, support, information, referral case management and the development of activities in response to identified needs. The program supported 276 companions throughout the year.

Justice Housing Program provides accommodation options for individuals who otherwise would remain in detention due to a lack of suitable community-based accommodation. The program also provides accommodation support services to women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved with the criminal justice system, with a focus on trauma-informed, gender-informed and culturally safe practices. Funded by the ACT Government, the program is a core element of its Building Communities Not Prisons initiative, which seeks to address the lack of available and affordable housing for people released from custody.

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