

10th National Conference on Volunteering
Volunteering ~ evolution, devolution or revolution?
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**Paper session: The Role of Government in Supporting Volunteering: A Shift
in Thinking?**

Government and Community Partnerships

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Harvard Professor Robert Putnam once told the New York Times that, “politicians know perfectly well that people are worried about their communities. They know that if they could come up with some coherent response, there is a market for that politically” (Uchitelle, 2000).

This paper will give our views, as public servants, on why Governments are involved in volunteering, how the South Australian Government has responded, and why the Partnership between the State Government of South Australia and the Volunteer Sector is working.

Why are Governments involved in volunteering?

Volunteering has been an integral part of society in all its forms. Since the formation of elected government there has been a strong link between democracy and volunteering – as even the act of voting is a volunteer effort in most countries.

It was Government who initiated the International Year of Volunteers when Japan moved that the year be endorsed by the United Nations in 1997 (Smith, 2004). Governments throughout the world provided funds and infrastructure for IYV, which is considered one of the most successful international years ever held.

IYV produced two key documents that effect volunteers in Australia – the *Global Agenda for Action to Strengthen Volunteering* produced by the International Association for Volunteer Effort (2001) and *A National Agenda on Volunteering* published by Volunteering Australia (2001).

Both documents call for strong involvement by Government to assist volunteering through areas such policy and legislation, recognition, networks, promotion and participation. The lists are quite extensive, and just some are outlined below.

The Global Agenda suggests that Governments should:

- Design legal frameworks to support volunteering
- Include economic value in GDP

- Form dedicated units within administrations to coordinate policy and establish dedicated budget lines
- Fund research
- Provide legal protection
- Review legislation to enhance volunteering
- Create resource and support centres
- Facilitate cooperation between business and the Volunteer Sector
- Create regional coordinating committees
- Support youth organisations
- Help connect different sectors
- Encourage schools to engage volunteers
- Develop effective channels of communication and consultation
- Explore ways of involving the media to promote volunteering
- Collect data
- Accredite volunteering
- Offer tax incentives
- Establish policies that include volunteers in decision making
- Provide resources for training
- Include volunteering in government hiring criteria

In addition to the above, the *National Agenda on Volunteering* asks Government to:

- Include volunteering in the national Census
- Ensure that volunteers have legal status and are afforded protection through legislation and public policy
- Include volunteer protection in Occupational Health and Safety, and Equal Opportunity Acts
- Consult with Volunteer Sector prior to implementing policy and legislation that has an impact on volunteering
- Provide access to affordable public liability insurance
- Initiate travel concessions
- Address out-of-pocket expense concerns
- Fund volunteer training
- Implement a uniform and affordable criminal history checking system

Both documents call on Government, Business and the Volunteer Sector to work together to achieve these outcomes for our volunteers.

Justin Davis Smith, the Director of the Institute for Volunteering Research in the United Kingdom, wrote that Governments should support volunteering through recognition, policy, legislation, funding and promotion (Davis Smith, 2000). He wrote that 'by shifting the focus away from service to others and emphasising the person benefits of volunteering, it is possible to show volunteering as a powerful resource acquisition strategy for people suffering from economic and social disadvantage'. To achieve this, Smith suggested several strategies for Government to assist volunteering, which include:

- Establish dedicated units and budget lines within government for coordinating policy and communication with the volunteer sector
- Promote volunteering within the public sector
- Carry-out or fund research
- Work with the media to promote volunteering
- Recognise the contribution of volunteers through award systems
- Organise high-profile events or 'days' to publicise the work of volunteers
- Develop specific programs to encourage youth volunteering
- Review legislation to enhance volunteering and minimise the negative impact on volunteering
- Develop public/private partnerships

Response by Governments

As you can see, the above is a pretty large list for Government to implement – especially if the actions are to be achieved in partnership with the volunteer sector.

The United Kingdom was the first Government to initiate a partnership with its Volunteer Sector. Around the same time of the declaration of IYV, an announcement was made in 1996 by the incoming Labor Government that the Government would enter into a 'Compact' between Government and the voluntary sector (Plowden, 2003). The Compact was publicly launched in November 1998 and included a shared vision, shared principles and undertakings by both sides which would promote and support volunteering.

Other Governments followed their lead including Canada, Scotland, and some Australian States including South Australia, Western Australia and the ACT.

The United States, through the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, created the Corporation for National and Community Service which administers a range of volunteering programs such as *AmeriCorps*, *Learn and Serve America*, the *Senior Corps* and *Freedom Corps*. In 2002 the US President asked American citizens to commit two years of their life to voluntary service (Regan, 2004).

Also in 2002, the New Zealand Government Policy on Volunteering was launched with the aim to *rebuild and strengthen its relationships with community and voluntary organisations* (New Zealand Government, 2002).

South Australia

In 1999 the South Australian Government hosted a Volunteer Summit and Forum to listen to the concerns of the Volunteer Sector. Recommendations that came from the summit included the appointment of a Minister for Volunteers and a dedicated unit within Government to support and promote volunteering (Volunteering SA, 1999).

In response to these recommendations, a Minister responsible for Volunteers was appointed in 2000 and the Government's Office for Volunteers established in 2001.

Following the state election in 2002, the new Premier Mike Rann announced that he would take on the role of Minister for Volunteers in South Australia and made a commitment to develop a 'Compact' with the Volunteer Sector.

The Premier also appointed a Parliamentary Secretary, Jennifer Rankine MP, to steer the development of the Compact and ensure strong support for the Volunteer Sector through his portfolio.

A Compact Development Taskforce and a State Volunteer Reference Group, whose membership encompassed key stakeholders from across the Volunteer Sector, was appointed and was made responsible for steering the 'compact' or partnership development process.

The Volunteer Community engaged significantly in this process and extensive feedback was received that expressed the community's desire for the Government and the Volunteer Sector to work together more effectively. There was also a strong belief that this was not only desirable, but also possible.

The Government also played a vital role in the development process. A Cross Agency Working Party for Volunteering was established, with senior level representation from every Government department. The purpose of the Working Party was to work with the Taskforce in negotiating the commitments in the partnership document by consulting with their agencies, thereby ensuring that the commitments to action were realistic and achievable.

The partnership document - *Advancing the Community Together: A Partnership between the Volunteer Sector and the South Australian Government* – was launched on Volunteers Day in May 2003 and signed by the Premier and 29 representatives from the Volunteer Sector. This signified not only the culmination of the 12 month consultation period but also, and probably more importantly, the beginning of the implementation phase.

The Volunteer Ministerial Advisory Group (VMAG), with 29 representatives from across the Volunteer Community, has been given the responsibility of driving the implementation process. Each VMAG member is involved in a working party charged with establishing priorities and timeframes for the Partnership commitments for the Volunteer Sector. Through the Cross Agency Working Party, the Advisory Group also recommends to Government priority actions for implementation.

As well as responding to these recommendations, the major challenge for the Government is to effect the necessary cultural change within government agencies that will ensure that volunteers and volunteering are appropriately considered and consulted in any future policy or legislation development.

Why the Partnership working, its lessons and challenges.

In just nine months of implementation, South Australia's volunteer partnership is showing great promise. Its major strength is its strong support from high levels of

Government, support from the grass roots volunteer community and inclusive volunteer sector representation through VMAG.

It works because the commitments being implemented mean something to the grass-roots volunteer. Volunteers now have a direct voice to the highest level of government and can influence change on important issues that affect them – like insurance, protection of volunteer committee members and the cost of police checks.

Volunteer sector representatives now meet personally with the Premier and have open access to his Parliamentary Secretary on a regular basis. The volunteer sector determines the priorities for action and monitors their progress.

The signed Partnership agreement means that volunteers can cite commitments – signed by the Premier - to protect their interests. Government Ministers, and their departments, must now consult with the volunteer sector before introducing any legislation or policy that effects them.

Already in South Australia several pieces of legislation are being worked on to address concerns raised by the volunteer sector, including areas that regulate not-for-profit associations, the recreation sector and tort reform.

A key lesson learned from the UK Compact experience is that Government has to be engaged to affect change for the Volunteer Sector (Carrington, 2002). That is why the Premier is our Minister and we have an active Parliamentary Secretary. It is also why we have an Office for Volunteers located within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet to support the volunteer partnership implementation across government. Volunteering has also been nominated as a key target area in the State's recently released Strategic Plan (Government of South Australia, 2004).

Our next challenge is to influence the Cross Agency Working Party for Volunteering and sell the volunteering message across Government. This working party has already has signed off on policy that will:

- encourage public servants to volunteer in the community,
- assure that all Government departments report on volunteering policy in annual reports,
- include volunteering as a desirable characteristic in job specifications; and
- report on volunteer partnership implementation in chief executive performance agreements.

Experience in South Australia has shown that when there is commitment from both Government and the Volunteer Community, partnerships can be a lot more than a political exercise with brochures and reports sitting on shelves.

Implementation of our partnership is neither top-down nor bottom-up. Roles of Government and the Volunteer Sector are complimentary as neither can solve the problems that our volunteers face in isolation. We cannot meet future challenges without working together in partnership.

Our message to the volunteer sector is to use your partnership as a leverage for positive change, and that means taking it off *your* bookshelves. Talk to government leaders, their advisers and bureaucrats. Present creative ideas in short proposals and be clear with your viewpoints while listening to theirs.

Our message to Governments is to recognise the diversity of the Volunteer Sector and allow for inclusive representation. Explain how Government works and understand the specific needs of the Volunteer Sector such as the time they need for consultation, the necessity to use plain English and their resource limitations.

Also, remember that legislation and policy that effects volunteering can be hidden in many areas of Government and officers responsible for those areas need to be educated in their responsibility to the Volunteer Sector.

For example, in South Australia the Associations Incorporation Act (1985) is administered by the Office of Consumer and Business Affairs, a small unit in the large Justice portfolio. Grant agreements are regulated by two departments of Government, Treasury and the Attorney General's Department. To affect major change, or to avoid negative outcomes for volunteers, all areas of Government need to be made aware of the effect that their policies have on volunteering - and that is a major challenge for Government.

In looking back at what was asked of Governments following IYV, South Australia's report card looks good. Our Government, with valuable assistance from the Volunteer Sector, has:

- Formed a dedicated unit to coordinate policy
- Established a formal channel of communication and consultation with the Volunteer Sector
- Implemented a system to review Government Legislation and policy that effects volunteering
- Funded research
- Provided legal protection
- Funded volunteer resource centres
- Facilitated a business mentoring program
- Enabled schools to recognise community based learning
- Involved the media in promoting volunteering
- Provided funding for volunteer training
- Included volunteers in OHS&W and Equal Opportunity legislation
- Promoted volunteering by public servants
- Introduced Premier's certificates to recognise volunteers
- Initiated a State Volunteers Day

In summary, we recognise that Government is the community's representative – and that the Volunteer Sector also represents this community. It is important that we work together in order to support a strong and vibrant volunteer community - so that we can *advance the community together* in partnership.

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