



weVolunteer

PILOT EVALUATION REPORT



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Executive Summary

Volunteering Victoria was funded by the Victorian Government in August 2020 to deliver a new initiative to help Victoria recover from the impacts of COVID-19. The initial funding was short-term to 30 June 2021 and the remit ambitious, but the weVolunteer project was quickly stood up in partnership with technology provider MyPass. A targeted review in November 2020, following the rapid start-up, refocused the project controls and messaging to clarify the role of weVolunteer in community recovery.

Over the 10 months of the pilot phase, weVolunteer has seen numbers of registered volunteers growing from less than 500 in the first month to over 2,200 by the end of June 2021. While many volunteer-involving organisations were struggling to source volunteers, the organisations were slower to embrace weVolunteer for a variety of reasons, including uncertainty of future funding of the project and hesitancy to embrace a new technology. Only 11 organisations had registered with weVolunteer in 2020, but 41 organisations had signed up by 30 June 2021.

The growing success of weVolunteer can be attributed to the additional wrap-around services provided by Volunteering Victoria.

- Additional funding for 13 Volunteer Support Organisations helped boost volunteer management capacity across Victoria.
- Piloted training programs to better prepare volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations for times of urgent need (e.g.: surges of volunteers in response to a disaster) were highly regarded, although funding restraints did limit numbers able to attend.
- Customer service and help desk support improved utilisation of the Volunteer Passport and helped organisations to get the most out of weVolunteer. This led to the conversion rate for organisations expressing interest moving on to registering on the platform, rising from 33% to 75%.
- User journey was improved, with feedback from Volunteer Support Organisations and volunteers, to better integrate the website and the MyPass portal. More upgrades to the weVolunteer platform are currently being undertaken by MyPass.
- Workshops, presentations and general marketing and awareness-raising is resulting in a steady increase in organisations joining weVolunteer.

During the evaluation process, Volunteering Victoria identified a number of challenges and future opportunities for the improvement of weVolunteer and its impact on communities needing volunteer assistance on their recovery journeys. These are canvassed in this report as a way to inform future policy and program decisions.

weVolunteer is growing to be a useful program for helping to source volunteers, providing surge capacity of volunteers, preparing volunteers and organisations for community recovery and providing better place-based responses to community need. Victorian Government support of weVolunteer has been essential, and welcome, and will continue to be as we work collectively to build resilient communities across the state.

Challenges

COVID-19 and Lockdown Disruptions ►

weVolunteer was launched at a very uncertain time as all states and territories were reviewing policy and budget settings to minimise the impacts of the pandemic. Even though weVolunteer was launched as part of a package to activate communities to support vulnerable Victorians during the coronavirus pandemic, the weVolunteer pilot has also itself been impacted due to the number of lockdowns, restrictions and other uncertainties. There have been 3 different lock downs totalling 11.1 weeks during the 10 months of the weVolunteer pilot from 29 August 2020 to 30 June 2021.

Research on the impacts of the pandemic on rates of volunteering demonstrate that the initial loss of volunteers in early 2020 has stubbornly persisted with many volunteers still not returning and is unlikely to change until there is more certainty around management of community transmission (eg improved vaccination rates and reduced restrictions) and a coordinated response by government and community sectors.

Volunteering Australia Research Briefing (May 2021):

“An estimated 2.3 million less Australians volunteered in the 12 months prior to April 2021 compared to late 2019. In April 2021, 24.2 per cent of Australians had done voluntary work in the previous 12 months, down from 36.0 per cent in late 2019.”

Volunteering Australia noted that “given the weak recovery in volunteering to date, there remains an important challenge ahead in reinvigorating volunteering. This will require further and sustained action by the volunteering sector and by governments.” VA also recommends research to understand the sectors most impacted.

COVID-19 Community Sector Impact Survey (July 2021):

“When we surveyed in 2020, 58% of organisations who rely on volunteers said they had experienced a drop in volunteer numbers as a result of the pandemic, with 43% reporting a significant drop in numbers. This year, the difficulties have become even more pronounced, with 64% of respondents reporting a drop in volunteers, though many are reporting less severe impacts than they did last year – in the latest survey 34% said they had experienced a significant decrease in volunteer numbers, compared with 43% last year. The vast majority (81%) of 2021 respondents said the pandemic had affected their ability to manage and recruit volunteers.”

Government Policy ►

weVolunteer was funded by the then Department of Health and Human Services (now Department of Families, Fairness and Housing) to establish a volunteering portal to activate and engage volunteers to support vulnerable Victorians during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Funded as part of the initial rapid response Budget, weVolunteer does not have a clearly identified role in government policy.

Whilst volunteer response was very good with 1,509 people registering to join weVolunteer in the first month of the pilot project, the uptake from volunteer-involving organisations was slow. Even organisations that registered were not sharing volunteer roles that needed to be filled. Customer service calls from the weVolunteer team identified many reasons including lack of resourcing at the VIO to manage volunteer recruitment, VIOs suspended volunteer run programs had not yet resumed, and reluctance to use a new platform that did not have guarantee of continued funding and operation.

Including weVolunteer in the upcoming Victorian Volunteering Strategy and providing funding certainty with up to 5 years of funding announced in the next Budget would help send a message to VIOs that government sees weVolunteer as an important tool in community recovery situations. In addition, the variation to Volunteering Victoria's funding noted that:

"In addition to supporting community activation, the establishment of the portal will position the State well ahead of the next bushfire season to harness the passion of people seeking to volunteer and supporting bushfire affected communities."

The weVolunteer pilot was again restricted by a lack of linkage to overarching policy. Some emergency management personnel were seeking the authorising environment and policy context for weVolunteer before they would engage with the pilot project. Strong relationships have been established with Emergency Management Victoria but weVolunteer would benefit as a program if it is identified as part of the community recovery programs and tools.

Funding ▶

Securing ongoing funding for weVolunteer has been a challenge, and one that impacts the ability to communicate and engage volunteer-involving organisations. Local Government in particular has articulated its concern at lack of funding certainty, and reluctance to include reference to weVolunteer in regional emergency management planning because of the uncertainty that it will continue. Numbers of local governments registered with weVolunteer has been quite limited, as a result.

Testing surge capacity ▶

weVolunteer has experienced steady growth as more VIOs register and recruit volunteers on the system. However, large scale system testing has not yet occurred. Patterns of volunteering behaviour show sudden surges in numbers of people wanting to volunteer following a disaster or other emergency, but a slower growth in need for volunteers to assist with recovery.

Managing volunteer expectations is an essential function of weVolunteer, which includes regular engagement with all volunteers and VIOs registered.

Following the initial boost in volunteer registrations at the establishment of weVolunteer, there has not yet been a largescale event that would lead to rapid increases in volunteer registrations and volunteer roles, so the capacity to handle a surge of enquiries has not yet been tested. weVolunteer

is developing a business continuity plan to reallocate resources from Volunteering Victoria in an emergency.

weVolunteer is being promoted to local government as a key tool for managing spontaneous volunteers, as it is essential to have one place for people to register to volunteer. Further work needs to be undertaken with Emergency Management Victoria and emergency management organisations and local government to ensure consistent messaging for spontaneous volunteers in an emergency.

Place-based volunteering ▶

Progressing the place-based volunteering model hit roadblocks that were outside of the control of the weVolunteer project team. Two groups were targeted to help collaboratively design and implement improved place-based responses to community recovery volunteering – Volunteer Support Organisations and Community Connectors funded under the Community Activation and Social Isolation (CASI) initiative.

weVolunteer established a pilot group with representatives from VSOs, with the intention of co-designing a place-based volunteering model as well as user-testing of the MyPass technology to inform the development plan. Shortly after establishment of the pilot group in late 2020, VSOs were advised that one of their major funding sources, the Australian Government Volunteer Management Activity – would cease on 30 June 2021 and a new model of funding would be designed and implemented by state and territory volunteering peak bodies. The uncertainty around the future of VSOs significantly disrupted plans to design a place-based volunteering model, which was to be co-designed with all VSOs. The weVolunteer project team concluded that it would be inappropriate to continue with plans for co-design under these circumstances, and instead pivoted to reach out to Community Connectors to continue discussions on place-based volunteering. Unfortunately, Community Connectors were difficult to engage and faced their own funding uncertainty.

The aim of designing a place-based volunteering model was put on hold and a new approach, centred more broadly around local government engagement, will be included in the weVolunteer program plan for 2021-22.

Conclusions

weVolunteer has grown to be a useful tool for supporting community recovery volunteering. Even with the restrictions of time and funding, within the space of 10 months, the weVolunteer pilot project was able to adapt to changing circumstances and respond to user and stakeholder feedback to further improve the project.

weVolunteer provides the technology to improve community recovery volunteering through the Volunteer Passport and portable credentialing of volunteers, sharing of volunteer roles to help VIOs needing more volunteers urgently, and keeping volunteers and VIOs engaged with training and resources.

However, weVolunteer is far more than just a platform. Its success lies with the human-to-human support services which are helping overcome fear of a new technology. The Volunteer Passport is growing in acceptance but it is likely to be years before it is widely accepted by VIOs.

weVolunteer has the potential to further evolve into an essential volunteering service in Victoria – one that can pivot to address the ever-changing needs of volunteering, volunteers and the organisations across the state that drive community recovery and community building.

weVolunteer has filled a service gap for volunteer involving organisations providing community recovery support and is highly valued by the volunteers and organisations currently utilising it, while gaining momentum and reputation through referrals.

The Victorian Government demonstrated a real understanding of the volunteering pressures facing Victorian communities by supporting Volunteering Victoria to provide this service. weVolunteer works and responds to so many volunteering pressure points.

The Volunteering Victoria and Victorian Government partnership has proved to be responsive and adaptive. Volunteering Victoria is ambitious for the continued success of weVolunteer and impact on community and volunteering across Victoria.