

# 20 minutes with Volunteering Australia's Cary Pedicini

by PEGGY HAILSTONE



As a peak industry body, Volunteering Australia has a broad and diverse *raison d'être*. This includes research, policy, advocacy, advice, awareness raising, creation and maintenance of volunteer infrastructure, and ongoing support of the Go Volunteer website.

Conversation with Cary Pedicini highlights that 2010 is a formative year for Volunteering Australia as they play host to the 13th National Conference on Volunteering, assist in formulation of the National Volunteer Strategy, and advocate for a sector-led approach to volunteerism.

"The theme for this year's conference is discovery, examination, and initiation," says Cary Pedicini, Volunteering Australia's chief executive officer.

"It's about new ideas and innovative thinking around volunteering".

One of the conference debates, Cary says, will be around the definition of volunteering.

## What is volunteerism?

While initially it may sound somewhat pedestrian, volunteerism is an activity in an acute state of transition. This is evident in the many new forms of volunteering arising in recent years: corporate social responsibility programs which encourage workplace volunteering, businesses that offer paid days off for volunteer work, and workplace teams that cyclically front up to non-profits to assist with pre-determined projects.

"The definition has really been challenged recently with the rise of so many different forms of volunteer effort," Cary explains.

"And these things that are on the fringe just don't fit the formal definition of volunteering because people are in some way deriving material benefit or gain through their volunteer effort."

## Volunteering Australia's formal definition of volunteering

**Formal volunteering is an activity which takes place through not for profit organisations or projects and is undertaken:**

- to be of benefit to the community and the volunteer;
- of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion;
- for no financial payment; and
- in designated volunteer positions only.

Whether the benefit is debt reduction - as per Tony Abbott's proposed Higher Education Contribution Scheme pilot, or volunteering as part of a mutual obligation for benefits, the definition and role of volunteering is a hotly debated topic.

Confusion occurs because our contemporary understanding of volunteering is based on no financial compensation and on it being a voluntary activity. The Volunteering Australia (VA) definition is "through free will and without coercion".

## Is it really free will?

The question to be asked is: If it's a workplace requirement or a key performance indicator, is it really free will? Similarly, if you get a paid day off to volunteer, is it really voluntary? In the current environment the boundaries are less clear, and simultaneously significant changes are occurring in how and why Australians volunteer.

VA stays on top of these changes through research.

"One of our major annual pieces of work is a survey of volunteer issues," says Cary. "We survey volunteer-using organisation and volunteers. This gives us a handle on key issues and trends, and to what extent they're impacting organisations and individuals."

Importantly, for both VA and non-profit organisations, the data also acts as a very useful evidence-base for advising and advocating to government.

## The cost of volunteering

Cary points out that issues arising from this survey have included the cost of volunteering. Some real gains have been made from the survey, notably government recognition of the need to cover volunteer's out-of-pocket expenses such as fuel.

Volunteer management is another cost issue close to Cary's heart.

"It takes the same amount of effort to match a volunteer with the right opportunity, and then manage, reward, and recognise their work, as it does a paid worker. Potentially there's no difference, other than the remuneration."

While this is increasingly being recognised by organisations, at the same time it is increasingly difficult for them to resource volunteer management because it's a significant expense.

Cary cites the example of the "Life. Be In It" campaign which historically saw government-funded recreation officer positions located within local councils.

"Community recreation hasn't looked back since those days," he advises.

**"One of the sector's greatest concerns is the trend toward governments co-opting volunteering."**

## Volunteer management

He agrees that a similar model is needed for volunteer management. Ultimately it's in the interest of government because services performed by volunteers save governments from having to fund thousands of community services.

"It's one of the messages we're trying to push, and it's one of the most dynamic levers in terms of capacity building that you could apply," Cary says.

Cary is also an advocate for industry capacity building, evident in his membership of the Federal Government's National Volunteer Policy Advisory Group for the National Volunteering Strategy.

## National Volunteering Strategy

To be released later this year, the National Volunteering Strategy seeks to identify key barriers to volunteering, and develop and encourage appropriate policy responses to address these barriers.

Development of a cohesive policy framework is also geared toward supporting more strategic decision-making in relation to volunteering into the future.

The release of this strategy is set to coincide with the 10-year anniversary of the United Nations' International Year of Volunteers. It's about looking back to see where volunteering has come from, as well as looking forward to consciously identify where we want - and need - it to go.

"A fair bit of work has been done on the strategy over the last 18 months to develop a fairly high level set of operating principals. A lot of it is around how the different levels of government can work more cooperatively," Cary advises.

### For information about the National Volunteering Strategy

[www.socialinclusion.gov.au/Initiatives/Pages/Volunteering.aspx](http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/Initiatives/Pages/Volunteering.aspx)

### For information about the Productivity Commission's 2010 report on the Non-Profit Industry:

[www.pc.gov.au/projects/study/not-for-profit/report](http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/study/not-for-profit/report)

### For information about the 10th anniversary of the United Nation's International Year of Volunteers:

[www.iave.org/iyv10](http://www.iave.org/iyv10)

## Federal Government promises

Now that a Federal Government has been formed, a December release of the strategy is anticipated.

Cary also strongly supports the Gillard Government's pre-election promise of a new Office for the Non-Profit Sector situated within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

"I think some pick-up and follow-through of the Productivity Commission's recommendations would have a significant impact on volunteering and the not-for-profit sector.

"There is so much volunteer effort that's influenced by other government departments, and to really bring together and link all policy initiatives in a cohesive manner would be a fantastic achievement."

However, as much as government support is sought, and clear and direct communication lines need to be established, one of the sector's greatest concerns is the trend toward governments co-opting volunteering.

"Rather than being enablers and supporters of sector-led initiatives, there's an increasing trend of governments becoming players in the game," Cary argues.

"I think I speak for both the volunteering and non-profit sectors when I say that is not the role of government."



Cary Pedicini, CEO, Volunteering Australia

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