

“Achieving things. Doing stuff. Making things happen.”

People aged 75 years and over
reflect on volunteering.



Reimagining Volunteering Part 2 Project Report
prepared for Office for Ageing Well

June 2023

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Prepared by ACH Group

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1. Executive Summary

The Reimagining Volunteering (Phase 2) Project was designed to contribute to our understanding of the volunteering experiences of people aged 75 years or over. In particular it was to understand better the barriers and enablers to continue or take-up volunteer roles, including issues posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The project aimed to engage with diverse older volunteer groups including (but not limited to):

- those who have currently ceased/paused volunteering as a result of COVID-19 and may be concerned about re-engaging; and
- older people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and other diverse backgrounds.

The Project was supported by Office for Ageing Well, SA Health. It was undertaken by ACH Group in partnership with Office for Ageing Well, the South Australian Department of Human Services, Volunteering SA/NT, Southern Volunteering SA, Northern Volunteering SA and Multicultural Communities Council of SA.

Ten people, recruited with support from the organisational partners, participated in in-depth interviews, which were recorded and analysed using qualitative research methods.

The main findings of the project indicate that people who volunteer as older adults have often volunteered all their lives. Volunteering provides personal, organisational, and societal benefits. These are enhanced when organisations match volunteers' skill sets to potential roles and can demonstrate that the volunteers' work is useful and meaningful to the goals and purpose of the organisation. Conversely, the benefits are eroded when organisations fail to respect or value volunteers' contributions and are inflexible in their approach to the way volunteers work.

COVID-19 changed how, but did not stop, the participants from volunteering.

The Project recommendations are:

For potential volunteers

- Consider what you have to / want to offer and look for opportunities that match your interests.

For organisations

Actions organisations can take to work together with people over 75 years who want to volunteer:

- Engage volunteers as participants and contributors to the organisation consistent with the paid workforce:
 - Review policies and procedures for volunteer management
 - Include volunteers in social activities
 - Invite volunteer feedback on strategy and policy
- Be open to the contribution that older people can make by adopting an abilities focus rather than a deficit focus
- Match skills to organisational need, rather than creating roles that are based on assumptions about the preferences and capabilities of older people
- Expand the roles that can be done by volunteers to take account of the skills, knowledge and expertise that are available in the older community
- Ensure contributions are recognised in ways that have meaning to the volunteers
- Address barriers to participation.

2. Introduction and background

In 2021, the Reimagining Volunteering (Phase 1) Project provided new insights into the volunteering experiences of older people in South Australia (Windsor et al., 2021). While these insights have made an important contribution to the existing knowledge, the Phase 1 Project found there was more to learn about the volunteering experiences of older people, particularly people aged 75 years and over.

Based on this finding, the Project recommended:

“Recommendation 4: Using targeted qualitative research approaches to gain a better understanding of the experiences of diverse older volunteer groups including:

- (a) those who have currently paused volunteering as a result of COVID-19 and may be concerned about re-engaging, and
- (b) older people from CALD and other diverse backgrounds.” (Windsor et al., 2021. pp. 38)

In response to this Recommendation, and to provide continuity to the Phase 1 Project, Office for Ageing Well, SA Health commissioned ACH Group to implement Recommendation 4 through the Reimagining Volunteering (Phase 2) Project.

This Report details the Phase 2 Project’s findings and recommendations.

3. Purpose and objectives

The purpose of the Project was to explore the nuances of the experiences of volunteers aged 75 years or over in the 'COVID-19 era' in South Australia, including older people who ceased volunteering during the pandemic and older people from CALD and other diverse backgrounds.

The objectives of the Project were:

1. Bringing to the surface the voice of older people about volunteering in South Australia through qualitative research.
2. Engaging with older volunteer groups including (but not limited to) those who have ceased/paused volunteering as a result of COVID-19 and older people from CALD and other diverse backgrounds.
3. Better understanding of what the barriers and enablers for people aged 75 years or over to continue or take up volunteer roles, with particular attention to formal volunteering and the issues posed by the pandemic.
4. Documenting the role and the experiences of people aged 75 years or over who volunteer or have recently ceased to volunteer.
5. Identifying the potential to inform future research, policy and practice about volunteering in South Australia.

The Phase 1 Project was facilitated by, and benefited from, the development of stronger cross-sectoral networks between the ageing sector, and through a multi-sectoral partnership that brought together a variety of stakeholders:

- Office for Ageing Well
- Department of Human Services (responsible for the SA Volunteering Strategy)
- Volunteering SA/NT
- Multicultural Communities Council of SA and local multicultural organisations
- Northern Volunteering SA
- Southern Volunteering SA
- Older people from a diverse range of backgrounds/experiences

This partnership continued into the Phase 2 Project, with the organisational members forming a Stakeholder Group to support the Project. Group members promoted the project through their existing networks and provided feedback on research activities, including reviewing the final Report.

The Project was conducted between 1 May 2022 and 31 July 2023. It was led initially by Dr Edoardo Rosso (Service Design Manager: Research & Innovation, ACH Group), with Dr Nicky Baker (Research Development Manager, ACH Group) taking over the governance role in January 2023. Helen Radoslovich from Helen Radoslovich Consulting (the Consultant) undertook the research and report writing activities between October 2022 and June 2023. ACH Group was responsible for governance of the Project and its outcomes.

All research in Australia involving humans is reviewed by a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The ethical aspects of this research project were approved by the Southern Adelaide Clinical Human Research Ethics Committee (#130.22).

4. Method

4.1 Literature Review

A literature review had been conducted for the Phase 1 Project and an updated review of literature was completed to identify any additional relevant literature since 2021. The National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033, released in December 2022, identified that nearly 25% of people aged 75 years or over were less likely to indicate an intention to commence or recommence volunteering in the near future (Winterton et al., 2020 cited in Volunteering Australia, 2023 pp. 63).

The updated literature reinforces the benefits of volunteering for older people generally enhancing psychosocial, health and wellbeing through a sense of connection and purpose, using skills, and life satisfaction (Aged Care Guide, 2022; Jongenelis et al., 2021; Jongenelis et al., 2022a; Jongenelis et al., 2022b; McDermott, 2021). Factors that were associated with higher levels of psychological health came from being involved in volunteering that was meaningful to them; provides recognition and appreciation for their contribution; provides social and mental intensity, including opportunities for growth; and believing that others benefited from their volunteering efforts (Same et al., 2020; Jongenelis et al., 2021).

Based on this evidence, encouraging or even prescribing volunteering as an intervention aimed at increasing wellbeing has been recommended by researchers (Filges et al., 2020; Jongenelis et al., 2021)

Volunteering is changing, with a move towards more flexible, episodic and technology-based roles (Volunteering Australia, 2022). Some concerns have been identified suggesting that older people may be left behind with this shift (Aged Care Guide, 2022). Windsor et al. (2021) reported the need for organisations to identify and develop flexible volunteering opportunities that match the skills, interests and abilities of older people.

Overall, the latest literature reinforces existing knowledge about the volunteering experiences of older people, without extending our knowledge of the volunteering experiences of people over the age of 75 years.

4.2 Volunteer Interviews

The Project aimed to conduct ten in-depth interviews with people aged 75 years or over to understand their experiences of volunteering, including the barriers and enablers to continue or take-up volunteer roles, and issues posed by the pandemic.

The Project was promoted through the social media, websites and newsletters of the Stakeholder Group members with an invitation to contact ACH Group or the Consultant for more information and to establish eligibility. Specific inclusion criteria for participation were:

- adults aged 75 years or over
- currently volunteering or have recently ceased/paused volunteering
- no cognitive impairments
- able to hold a conversation in English.

Interested participants were sent an Invitation Letter and a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form to consider. If they were still interested and provided consent, the Consultant made contact to arrange a suitable time and location for the interview.

At the interview, the Consultant confirmed consent with the participant and provided them with a countersigned copy of the consent form. The Consultant also reiterated that participation was voluntary and that participants could choose not to answer any question, provide more information/ reflection about any topic, and interrupt their participation at any time and for any reason.

Recruitment took place between January and March 2023, with participants recruited on a rolling basis. Twelve people expressed interest, with two ineligible as they were aged under 75 years. Ten people consented to participate in the interviews, which were conducted during February and March 2023.

The interviews were conducted using an Interview Guide for prompts and allowing the participants to explore the topics as much or as little as they wished. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed later. The interview data was discussed by the steering group and then analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The feedback was incorporated into the final Report, which will be provided to those participants who indicated they would like to receive a copy.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 Participants

The participants, aged between 75 to 85 years, included people from diverse backgrounds and a range of professional and business backgrounds (Table 1 Participant Characteristics). No participants had ceased volunteering altogether.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Gender
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 7 women• 3 men
Location
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 8 metro• 1 peri-urban• 1 rural
Age
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 75 to 80 years – 5• 80 plus years – 5
Diversity
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 3 participants from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds• 2 participants identified as LGBTIQ+
Work backgrounds
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• University academic• Small/Medium business owner• Consultant• Teacher• Education administration manager / officer• Pastor• Dance / fitness instructor• Marketing / public relations manager• Fund raising manager• Railway inspector• Public servant

5.2 Thematic Analysis

In this section, the themes emerging from the interviews are presented and discussed. Where possible, direct quotes from participants provide the theme title.

5.2.1 “Volunteering is who we are.”

All participants had volunteered at different times during their life.

(P5) So that’s kind of my background and so I could hardly be her daughter and not volunteer... Volunteering and service to friends and communities is who we are, just what we do!

For some, volunteering was a lifetime activity. Several participants reflected on their parents’ commitment to volunteering and how that has affected their own attitude to volunteering.

Others started volunteering as a way of supporting their children’s participation in schools, sports and other activities. Their experiences led to further volunteering opportunities, particularly for those with connections to specific communities, such as those based on culture, faith, or identity.

(P9) I’ve always been interested in volunteering – I volunteered at the school when the kids were at school, that sort of thing – reading, art. I just enjoyed sharing my skills, I suppose.

For others, there were periods when they did not volunteer due to paid work commitments, although they took on additional roles in addition to their usual work during that time, such as representative roles for their profession or within their workplace.

Overall, the participants have been and still are engaged in a wide range of volunteering activities representing untold hours of contribution to the community (Table 2 Participant Volunteering Experiences).

Table 2: Participant Volunteering Experience

Current Volunteering roles	Previous volunteering roles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aged care visiting – one on one • Board / Advisory Committee roles • Community services manager • Volunteer manager • Marketing, brand development, publicity, public relations • Fund raising – supporting activities; managing functions • Training - designing training materials / programs • Conference presentations • Group facilitation including strategic planning • Grant writing • Advocacy and political activism • Running fitness classes • Running dance classes • Supporting drama and dance for people with disabilities • Church based activities • Emergency relief services • Providing holiday accommodation for people living with disabilities • Working in charity shops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boards / Advisory Committees roles • Volunteer manager • Red Cross volunteer • Business development manager • School administrator • Community club administration • Sport club administration • Marketing, including brand development, publicity, public relations • Running a crèche • History tour guide • Lifestyle programs in aged care • Advocacy • Sports coaching • Pastoral care worker • Guide dog support person for children • Dancing group for children • Multiple fund-raising activities with community and non-government organisations • Community radio • Army Reserve

Several times, participants would start the interview by identifying one of their current volunteering roles. As the interview progressed, they would identify other activities or roles that were volunteering roles that they had forgotten about or had not identified as volunteering. For example:

- A participant led the development of an independent school and, in its early days, was the administrator for the school.
- A participant was a fitness instructor at a local gym which had to close during COVID-19. As a community service, they offered fitness classes, at no cost, to their existing clients in a local park. Their motivation was to provide an ongoing service to the clients, although the class attracted other participants over time. The classes transferred back to their usual classes at the gym once it reopened.

(P1 & P2) It's hard to say no to people. We are doing it in an official capacity now. But probably unofficially we'll continue.

Participants identified a difference between informal and formal volunteering:

"Informal volunteering" – activities without a formal structure, at least initially, and where they stepped in to meet a need they had identified.

"Formal volunteering" – activities with a specified role description, usually within an organisation, with some degree of supervision and process around it.

Informal volunteering was noted particularly by those participants who identified as members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities; faith communities; or where they felt there was an individual or community need that they could meet.

5.2.2 "Who wants to sit around after you're retired and do nothing?"

Participants identified other reasons for volunteering in addition to their lifetime interest in volunteering. All participants talked about their desire to keep using the skills, knowledge and experience that they had developed and used over their lifespan. They were clear that they still had much to offer that would benefit others. Participants were keen to be of use and share their abilities with others.

(P6) I always thought before I retired that I wouldn't be doing Meals on Wheels. I would be using my work skills in areas where they are not affordable.

The desire to contribute and be involved was articulated as "Achieving things. Doing stuff. Making things happen." (P10). They talked about the pleasure they gained from the opportunities to be involved and the outcomes they achieved. They described how people benefited from their contribution or the value added to the organisations with which they worked e.g., assisting the workplace to achieve their goals.

Volunteering was important to the participants in terms of providing a sense of purpose – of feeling needed, useful and relevant.

(P3) Partly, it gives me a reason for living. I mean, who wants to sit around after you're retired and do nothing?... I knew I had expertise, and I knew some people could use that, and I enjoyed giving it... and it made me feel useful... I notice people die because they don't have a reason to live. And so, the volunteering, where I knew I was doing something worthwhile and helping people, gave me a real reason for living.

All participants reflected on volunteering in relation to health and life changes that they were experiencing. Some of the changes included retirement from the paid workforce, awareness of being in the latter stages of their life, changing health, or life-changing events such as the death of a partner.

Participants identified that volunteering helped them to keep active. Likewise, volunteering was a source of connection to causes, matters of importance, or people such as incorporated staff, other volunteers and community members. Participants commented positively on interactions with paid staff, the camaraderie that developed in their work teams, and the sense of working together.

At the same time, the participants valued the opportunities that volunteering provided to learn and to be challenged. For example, one participant took the opportunity to become proficient in her community language, both orally and written. Other participants were asked to work on projects that stretched their skills. As one participant explained: "I'm never too old to learn" (P6).

(P4) As you get older, you're aware that you're changing. You're aware physically that you're changing but also mentally too. There are some little signs that you need to keep this active and ... that you could easily deteriorate, so you need to maintain... intentionally do things to strengthen your health and wellbeing.

5.2.3 "What matters to people..."

Participants talked about factors that are most important to them when considering volunteering choices or the organisations with which they might work.

Skills recognition

A clear message from all participants was that they are ready and able to volunteer in all sorts of roles, including those that need higher order skills. As one participant said:

(P10) Stop being ageist at the start. Stop thinking age matters. Make it clear that volunteering is for all ages.

Participants gave examples of how organisations failed to recognise abilities or made assumptions about what volunteers could do.

(P9) When I was doing work for (organisation)... I felt they could have used my skills a lot more, but I didn't mind going there and they were all lovely people... I guess I'm a bit precious, but I've got all these life skills that are still relevant today. I mean, they had me filling hampers and baskets with gifts and wrapping things and going through card lists for Christmas and stuff like that, whereas I could see that the Marketing Department had done these flyers and so many things were wrong with it, and I had to stop myself from saying "This is wrong, it should be that."

Participants identified that they wanted the staff and organisation with whom they volunteer to demonstrate that they valued volunteers' skills, ideas and work. How this was demonstrated could take many forms, for example:

- Opportunities to provide feedback and input into the work they were doing and more broadly within the organisation
- Taking time to listen, either in day-to-day interactions or through more formal actions
- Acknowledgement that the job they were doing is important to the organisation
- Doing roles that were appropriate to their skills, knowledge and experience, and which are clearly defined
- Understanding that they were giving their time, which is valuable, and that this time should be used effectively and efficiently
- Being flexible in how they work, to fit with their skills and personal circumstances
- Appreciation for, and recognition of, the work that they do
- Support to perform their roles well.

(P6) One thing is to be regularly consulting with the volunteer group. All the sorts of questions... about 'What works? What's not working? Why are you doing it? How would you like to be recognised? Have you got ideas you want to share with us?'

I think, like actual paid work, what matters to people is the culture of the organisation and for them to be able to see how their bit fits.

In terms of formal recognition, participants identified that different people and groups like to be recognised in different ways. Organisations should ask how their volunteers would like to be recognised and be flexible to accommodate different requests. Regardless of the approach taken, though, there must be a recognition that what they are doing is useful and valued.

Suggestions for recognition included:

- A name badge with the emblem of the organisation (some like this, some do not)
- Presenting their work to the board or other significant organisational group
- Free tickets to something e.g., football, shows, events
- Annual dinner or recognition event
- Being included in staff lunches
- Provide challenges – to do something extra, new or outside their comfort zone.

(P3) People have to feel as if they are appreciated and what they are doing is worthwhile ...and anybody who is in charge of volunteers has to be able to give people jobs they can do satisfactorily, and then show that that job and they, as people, are appreciated. I think that's absolutely critical.

Support was seen both as recognition and a valuable part of being a member of the team. It included:

- Regularly meetings or get-togethers with the volunteering group so they can share with staff and each other
- Practical support such as reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses
- Training in areas directly related to their work e.g., dementia, understanding the ageing process, responding to people impacted by trauma, people skills
- Newsletters or other communication to stay connected to each other and the organisation.

All participants reflected on how volunteering made them feel, including being happy, appreciated, valued, proud and good about themselves. When asked about what motivated them to volunteer, one participant said:

(P6) Limelight. I love people to say, "That's magical! That's amazing! How did you get that out of us?" I've always been motivated by that.

5.2.4 Frustrations

Volunteering was not without its challenges and frustrations. Participants also identified experiences that reduced their ability to offer as much to the organisation as they would like, or impacted on the way they could use their skills.

Lack of authority

The relationships that the volunteers had with the organisation or with management staff presented both an opportunity and a challenge. This was particularly the case for volunteers with prior experience as managers or in positions of authority. For example, they recognised that there was limited scope to impact organisational policy or procedures.

(P6) Well, you don't have any authority, which is a strength and a weakness really because what it enables me to do is be motivated to deliver the goods, be brilliant, look clever, whatever it is... So not having any authority... that motivates me to present something that people find irresistible.

And there is a question... you come into an organisation... having been a senior operator and you know how to do things; it is a bit of bind sometimes to have less experienced people... determining the agendas. It is a strange position to be in when you're used to being a consultant being paid to sort out their problems.

(P10) I think it is juggling your relationship with an organisation when you've got paid staff and volunteers – to what extent are (volunteers) independent operators and to what extent are they faux staff? And I think that creates a bit of tension sometimes, because as a volunteer you're not in a position to modify policy in the same way that staff might be able to.

“Too heavy with bureaucracy”

While understanding the need for transparency and oversight, participants nevertheless found some of the demands of some government requirements frustrating. This included:

- how funding could be taken away or is limited (e.g., defunding services impacting on volunteers who have to fill the gap)
- the need to keep up with constant changes in rules and guidelines
- restrictive guidelines or practices (e.g., need for government approval of marketing activities impacting on timelines)
- the time impact on volunteers for completion of paperwork and/or documentation
- government requirements with which volunteers feel uncomfortable (e.g., requesting client contributions)
- regulatory requirements (e.g., police checks, training).

Similarly, where volunteers had previous management experience, it was challenging to have their skills and knowledge overlooked, and frustrating to work with people who were less experienced. The challenge presented to participants was to manage the situation by working within scope or by finding alternative roles.

(P1) It seems to be too heavy with bureaucracy. ...It's not just going visiting, it's everything else that goes with it – training, accountability...

We're supposed to ask for a client contribution. But if we go to visit someone in their home, it's not our custom to say, "Can you give me \$5 now?"

We can't do that. It's not in our personal characters to do that... It makes them feel uncomfortable.

Strict rules versus a code of conduct

Several participants expressed frustration with rules that did not seem to make sense to them or were not explained adequately.

(P6) Strict rules versus a code of conduct. For example, when you go into a situation, "You have to address people formally by Mr or Mrs" versus what feels right to do.

(P7) "You can go in there and do this, but you can't do that", even though you might be perfectly capable to do it. And even though it might be more important to do it there and then.

5.2.5 "The biggest disappointment."

Participants identified situations that prompted them to leave a volunteering situation. The common feature in these situations was that staff or other volunteers failed, from the perspective of the participants, to recognise, value or effectively use the volunteers' skills, knowledge, and experience.

(P9) Sometimes I think you're taken for granted. I know what's needed because I was doing the job and it was just weird... and I was so pissed off for the whole weekend. And I said to my daughter "I can't believe this", and I penned a resignation letter... the whole works. They don't know my skills or how to use my skills.

One participant had been volunteering in a specific area for some time. When the organisation decided to recruit a fulltime paid staff person to undertake this role, the manager did not inform the volunteer beforehand, and did not involve them in the design of the new role or on the interview panel. In fact, the organisation involved another volunteer who knew nothing about the area. While the participant supported the change, the way the process was handled caused a lot of distress.

Trust is an important element of the relationship between staff and volunteers. This includes respect for the volunteer's continuing relationships with previous workplaces or industry, and acknowledgement of the current volunteer workplace benefiting from those relationships.

(P9) I spoke to the woman at (the major company) some months later and said, "I hope somebody thanked you for that" and she said "no". So that was something that pissed me off and so when (a life event intervened), I left.

Volunteers can feel disenfranchised or unappreciated when any suggestions are ignored by a paid staff member.

(P7) But the biggest disappointment was I had read or had heard or seen somewhere that people with dementia can suffer from 'sundowner's syndrome' and I thought, "I'm the girl for the job!" ...I said to this person, 'Maybe I could come around when the sun is going down and maybe help?', but this person said, "There's no such thing as sundowner's syndrome."

I came home and I cried. I thought I couldn't argue because I'm not qualified in aged care...

None of my ideas were accepted because I'm a volunteer and I don't think volunteers are respected enough. I don't think they're appreciated enough.

5.2.6 “Rethink the notion of volunteering”

When asked how organisations could recruit and/or retain older volunteers, two major themes emerged – focus on existing skills; and emphasise the “why”.

“What are the skills?”

As previously discussed, all the participants sought roles where they could use their skills. Rather than pre-defining roles based on assumptions about the preferences and capabilities of older people, participants saw the potential for a more flexible approach, where the priority was to identify the skills required for the role, before volunteers with those identified skills were matched to the role. Further, role clarity and creative thinking were needed in how to undertake roles. This approach was used by Volunteering SA/NT and considered by participants as a positive experience.

(P10) Maybe rethink the notion of volunteering where organisations set up the role. “We want X and Y done. If you want to volunteer, you have to do it this way”. Instead say, “What are the skills-based and logistics-based attributes that we need to get this outcome? Being able to say, “This is my skill set, this is my availability, and these are some of the restrictions.”

A skills-based approach can create opportunities for older people who are often overlooked as volunteers. A participant, who volunteered by visiting people living in care homes, gave examples of listening skills which were seen as essential. For example, relationships were built by asking for some advice on recipes and baking techniques from one of the residents and being interested in learning morse code from a care home resident

who had worked in the Signals Directorate during World War II. The residents and volunteers in these examples each learned from the other and enjoyed the transfer of knowledge.

When participants had been recruited to a volunteer role by word of mouth or being tapped on the shoulder by a friend or acquaintance, they were confident that their skills would match the required volunteer work.

(P9) Well somebody else found it for me. I suppose because my friend was asked to volunteer and she said, “You don’t want me; you want my friend.” So, she got me involved because I didn’t know anything about it.

While some flexibility was desirable, participants preferred to keep those roles rather than have additional tasks added, especially without consultation.

(P7) I only did one on one. That’s all I volunteered for. And I was always asked to do paperwork and I was asked to do surveys and I said “no.”

**I said, “I’m sure you have all this information that was filled in when they came in and you don’t need me to do it again. And the more time I spend filling in the form, I’m wasting someone else’s time. There might be someone else who would like a visit.”
Wasting time on form filling!**

“Because it matters.”

Participants were also motivated by the ‘why’. “Why do you need me to do this? What are your goals? Does this role and your organisational goals match my own values?”

In terms of marketing, participants suggested that there could be more publicity about the benefits of volunteering – health, being connected, being acknowledge – and that volunteering is worthwhile.

(P6) Have the blurb about what this is about, to be able to say how the work fits in with bigger things, to be able to share success stories and why it matters.

Most people are interested in “so what” because it matters.

5.2.7 COVID-19 – “Basically it was a big pain” or “soldier on.”

COVID-19 changed but did not stop the participants from volunteering. All participants indicated that they did not stop volunteering during COVID-19. For some, the impact was limited as they were able to adapt the way they worked e.g., more online and remote working rather than face to face. Some came up with alternatives, such as the fitness class in the park previously mentioned. For some, volunteering increased, for example, stepping up to arrange social outings for people living with intellectual disability when the paid services ceased these activities, doing more radio announcements, particularly with COVID-19 messages.

There were some reductions in activity, particularly one on one aged care visiting and the holiday accommodation for people living with disabilities. Aged care volunteers expressed some frustrations around the restrictions in aged care and how these were implemented or communicated.

(P4) No, I never stopped. And similarly with church and stuff like that, never stopped. We had to distance ourselves from one another and all of that sort of jazz, but we soldiered on... Basically it was a big pain. As a volunteer your time is important and what it did was to add time on to what was normally a visiting hour with the client. You had to go and do your mask and get a test. It just eroded the disposable time to spend with people and it was such a pain.

(P7) COVID sort of restricted it because the people who I wanted to speak to in lifestyle – paid workers – when COVID hit, a lot of them were getting sick. Residents weren’t allowed out of their rooms, there was no one there to sort of run anything. It all changed. Staff weren’t there, so we couldn’t do anything much... It was very hard, but I understand, and I understood the mask and the shield and the COVID test. You had to do it, but that was a change.

5.2.8 “I’ll always be doing something.”

All the participants intended to keep volunteering, either continuing in their current roles or scaling back what they would do. Changes in participants’ health or challenges with bureaucracy were identified as the main reasons for reducing or changing current volunteering.

(P9) I'm capable. I enjoy the work and while I can, I will.

I mean, my daughter says, "You'll never stop working, you'll always be doing something". And I'd hope I'll always be doing something. What form that might be, I don't know.

(P1) We're getting tired, I've got to be honest. It's just too many changes. To be honest, because of the way...all the hours and the paperwork. It's not the actual visiting, it's the responsibility of always documenting and ...doing the requirements of the agreement, keeping up with all the changes of the agreement.

(P10) Don't know really. I think as long as my health hangs out, I anticipate that I will always want to be involved...

At some point I'm going to lose my capacity to drive (due to existing health conditions). I can continue to drive now but I'm aware that I'm time limited and that will impact on going to meetings and doing things.

Health changes were most likely to stop volunteering altogether:

(P8) I think the only thing I don't like is that I don't have quite enough energy... When you're young and things come in when you're not expecting it, you just expand automatically. Now it's really hard to not just let the physical exhaustion deter me. ... It's a sort of annoyance in a way because I used to be able to rely on the fact that I could keep going forever and I suppose I'm a little bit scared. I don't want to use that as an excuse to withdraw. So, I work out every time, am I going to risk collapsing and melting on the floor, rather than saying "oh no..."

Rather than focus on these health-related changes as barriers, participants proposed focusing on strategies to overcome what they described as logistics barriers.

Some changes are less easy to address, for example, changes in the relational elements of volunteering. Friendships and social connections are an integral part to the volunteering experience. When these change, it can impact on the how the volunteers feel about their role.

(P3) It's hard to get enthusiastic. Age comes into it. And when (other volunteers) ...I used to chat (with), and relate to, and compare things after, and bounce ideas off, died, I missed that terribly. I missed that social interaction, so I lost my enthusiasm.

5.3 Discussion

These ten participants see themselves as skilled, experienced and knowledgeable people, who use their talents to make a difference for other individuals and organisations. There is ample evidence in their stories to justify this self-belief.

Their stories of past and present volunteering provide insights to their motivations for volunteering and what organisations and workplaces can learn about volunteering for people aged 75 years and older.

Both Filges et al. (2020) and Jongenelis et al. (2021) identify the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering and suggest that volunteering is a healthy ageing intervention. While participants in this study agree with the health benefits of volunteering and that these benefits are a reason to keep volunteering, they do not identify themselves as people who need an "intervention". Their desire to volunteer is self-generated.

5.3.1 Intrinsic Motivation

The participants demonstrate high levels of intrinsic motivation to be involved in volunteering. To quote one participant, they want to "achieve things, do stuff and make things happen". They believe that what they have to offer is of value to organisations and the broader community. When making this offer of time, experience and expertise, they express different motivations, including:

- **Reciprocity** giving back for life and experiences that they have been fortunate enough to receive
- **Equity** giving freely to groups or organisations that might otherwise not have access
- **Advocacy** using their expertise to give a voice to people or groups who may otherwise not be heard.

Participants also see the personal benefits they can achieve through volunteering, which falls into two categories. Firstly, volunteering can be a way to use skills, knowledge and expertise gained over their lifespan. Secondly,

participants value the benefits gained from volunteering in terms of health, wellbeing, connectedness, a sense of purpose, and being recognised for their skills. Paraphrasing a participant, volunteering gives the "opportunity to be in the limelight".

In this way, they are like all volunteers, whose motivations are predominantly personal satisfaction and to do something worthwhile; to help others and their communities; social contact; to use their skills and experience; and to stay active (Volunteering Australia, 2022 pp. 67).

5.3.2 Extrinsic Motivation

Participants in this study identify how organisations can recognise their contributions. At the core of these suggestions are:

- **Respect for their skills, knowledge and expertise** in roles that provide relevance and meaning
- **Valuing the work they undertake**, regardless of their position. This includes why the volunteer work is important and how it contributes to the work of the organisation
- **Right to be heard**, be provided with opportunities to put forward their views and have those views respected
- **Autonomy and control**, linked to respect, where they have input into decisions about the work they are doing, within reasonable boundaries.

5.3.3 Volunteering for life

In this study, all participants have a lifetime of volunteering experiences and are not intending to stop in the near future. Most are still actively seeking further opportunities, or opportunities are finding them. They indicate that volunteering is for all ages.

The challenges to this intention are primarily health, wellbeing and support for changing needs. Some participants also identify a desire to step back from some roles or change/modify how and when they volunteer. This includes succession planning in their current roles or taking on less intensive roles, while still using their skills.

Participants also indicate that they are not prepared to volunteer for organisations with values that do not align with their own, or where they feel that their work is not valued. In these situations, they look elsewhere for opportunities.

5.3.4 COVID-19

While this group did not stop volunteering during COVID-19, the literature suggests that older people in general did stop when faced with situations where the volunteering opportunities were suspended or where health might be compromised. Windsor et al. (2021) found that older people who continued to volunteer during COVID-19 were:

- highly satisfied with their volunteering experience and the support they received from the organisations with whom they worked
- experienced a strong alignment with the organisation's goals and the volunteering role.

The participants in this study also have this experience, to a degree.

For people 75 years and older, this could be interpreted as COVID-19 advancing health and wellbeing factors in decision-making about volunteering i.e., they stopped volunteering if the types of roles or organisational support were not enabled for them to continue.

5.3.5 When organisations get it wrong

The participants identify that ageism, often in the form of underestimating capabilities, leads to organisations creating roles that do not allow use of skills, knowledge and expertise. While some participants are happy to engage in these roles, they can be frustrated when they know they could be doing more. Ageism is also seen as a factor in the work environment, including the behaviour and attitudes from staff, other volunteers or organisational practices. Ageism makes these volunteers feel undervalued or disrespected by not being listened to or recognised for their contribution.

Participants are motivated by a connection to the goals of the organisation and to making a difference. They are likely to discontinue volunteering or decline to take on roles when organisations poorly articulate the connection between what the volunteer is asked to do and how it contributes to the goals of the activity. Continuing this theme, when an organisation demonstrates a misalignment of values, either internally with actions not matching values, or with the volunteers' personal values, the participants are likely to leave.

Participants also value engagement within the broader work environment, such as having opportunities to contribute to what work is done, how it is done and having input into strategies or policies. They understand that there needs to be boundaries based on role definitions and accountabilities. Nevertheless, they find frustrating the lack of authority, with no or limited input into the broader work context.

Connected to the lack of direction is a sense of frustration with rules. This impacts how volunteers carry out roles that are not explained or justified. This is often expressed as a belief that volunteering is too over-governed and limits what they could do.

The participants indicate that they are quite willing to leave organisations when they are not valued or respected. Some, in fact, have done this.

5.3.6 Limitations

All the participants are lifelong volunteers or have a life experience of active, voluntary involvement with activities, causes, groups or organisations outside of work. They are all motivated to be active as they age and are keen to talk about their volunteering experiences. Therefore, the findings do not incorporate the perspectives of people who have not had this life experience of volunteering, who only started volunteering later in life, or who have chosen to cease volunteering either as a result of COVID-19 or other reasons.

5.4 Conclusion

It is clear from this study that there are people aged 75 years and older who want to use their skills, knowledge and expertise in volunteer roles. This represents a significant human resource with many possibilities for adding value to organisations.

The findings are supported by the literature in terms of what older people value about volunteering, including providing meaning, providing recognition and appreciation for their contribution, providing social and mental intensity including opportunities for growth, and believing that others benefit from their volunteering efforts.

Rather than designing volunteering activities based on helping people overcome perceived deficits such as social isolation or health/wellbeing challenges associated with ageing, the focus should be on designing opportunities that match volunteers' abilities. Further, it is important to articulate how volunteer contributions will benefit the cause, the organisation or the people supported by volunteering. In terms of promoting volunteering, the focus should be on what older people have to contribute and how, in return, they may gain health and wellbeing benefits.

Identifying these opportunities will be achieved by focusing on enablers and overcoming barriers:

(a) Enablers:

- Creating roles where older people can use their skills, knowledge and expertise
- Connecting volunteer work to the goals of the organisation – the “why”
- Seeking out and valuing volunteers' input and feedback on their own experience of volunteering and on the work of the organisation
- Effective and meaningful recognition, based on feedback from the volunteers about how they want this to happen.

(b) Overcoming barriers:

- Ageism
- Restrictive rules
- Logistics such as transport
- Location such as living in a care home
- Addressing health concerns
- Lack of flexibility.

In conclusion, the way of the future for harnessing the motivation and attributes (skills, knowledge, expertise and experience) of volunteers aged 75 years and older lies in providing opportunities, removing barriers, and respecting and valuing their contribution.

6 Recommendations

For potential volunteers:

Think about what you have to/want to offer and look for opportunities that match your interests.

For organisations:

- Engage volunteers as participants and contributors to the organisation consistent with the paid workforce
 - Review policies and procedures for volunteer management
 - Include volunteers in social activities
 - Invite volunteer feedback on strategy and policy
- Be open to the contribution that older people can make by adopting an abilities focus rather than a deficit focus
- Match skills to organisational need, rather than creating roles that are based on assumptions about the preferences and capabilities of older people
- Expand the roles that can be done by volunteers to take account of the skills, knowledge and expertise that are available in the older community
- Ensure contributions are recognised in ways that have meaning to the volunteers
- Address barriers to participation.

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