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Interchange Incorporated welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) on the Annual Price Review. We make this submission to highlight the important contribution volunteers make to the lives of people with disability and their families, and in supporting the objectives of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

We want to draw to the attention of the NDIA the critical need to consider as part of the annual price review financial support for the infrastructure needed to enable the safe and sustainable provision of volunteer-supported activities. In the current policy environment, which includes transitions from state to commonwealth responsibilities, and from block-funding to individualised funding arrangements across the disability sector, volunteer-supported programs across Australia are at risk of scale back, if not closure in some parts of the country. As a consequence, the many people with disability and their families which rely on volunteer-supported assistance are experiencing concern about the safety and sustainability of their current and future arrangements.

The submission draws on research evidence, including evidence from government sources and research recently commissioned by ourselves in partnership with the Victorian Department of Health & Human Services, conducted by the University of Melbourne.

### **About Interchange Incorporated and why we have an interest in making a submission**

Interchange Incorporated is a member-based organisation that supports a network of disability service providers across Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia: <https://www.interchange.org.au/>. Our network members are comprised of organisations that coordinate volunteer-supported activities; offering support and opportunities to individuals with disability and their families, together with public spirited volunteers.

Interchange Incorporated's vision is to be part of a community that shares the responsibility for the wellbeing of all, celebrates and promotes difference and strives for inclusiveness. Our mission is to build inclusive communities and to develop responsive services which enhance choice, control and the quality of life for individuals and families living with disability.

Our network members currently engage 1,584 Volunteers, delivering 150,862 hours of support to 2,277 individual clients per annum. In 2017, our Victorian network member organisations collectively managed \$3.3M from the state government for Volunteer Coordination activities. There is a growing demand for volunteers to be involved in the lives of people with disability and their families, with nearly 1000 people in Victoria alone on waiting lists to be matched with a volunteer.

Across Australia, Interchange and its member organisations engage with volunteers to support people with disability to access information, to increase their knowledge, skills and confidence to participate in the social and economic life of the community, and to help build their capacity to achieve their goals outside of specialist and / or paid services. Interchange is about building and leveraging personal relationships and the natural supports that make a difference in people's lives.

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Interchange's support to network members is facilitated through the:

- provision of information to people with disability and their families to support access to volunteer-supported opportunities
- provision of support and resources to organisations that support and enable volunteering
- facilitation of networking and partnering opportunities among organisations, to foster quality and efficiency in the delivery of volunteer-supported activities
- attraction and engagement of volunteers to assist in meeting the needs of people with a disability and their families
- provision of training and development opportunities for volunteers, to foster the quality and safety of volunteer-supported activities
- advocating for sector growth and improvement

## **What we know about volunteers and volunteer-supported activities in Australia**

Volunteers, and what constitutes volunteering can be understood number of ways. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has defined a volunteer as 'someone who, in the previous 12 months, willingly gave unpaid help, in the form of time, service or skills, through an organisation or group' (ABS 2014), or 'someone who has spent time doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group' (ABS, 2017) . Volunteering Australia has defined volunteering to involve 'time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain' (Volunteering Australia, 2015).

According to the ABS 2016 census data, an estimated 3.6 million Australians aged 15 years and older participated in formal volunteering activities. This translates to about 20% of the population, 15 years and older, contributing to their community as volunteers. Of these people, at least 2.1 million people provided voluntary support to someone with a disability, long-term illness or problems related to old age, and notably 1.3 million Australians provided volunteer support to a child other than their own.

In 2014, Australian volunteers each contributed on average 128 hours of unpaid work in voluntary activities, totalling 743 million hours of volunteer work across Australia (ABS, 2016). Furthermore, estimates of the economic value of volunteering to the economy range between \$17.3 billion (ABS, 2015) and \$29.3 billion (Flinders University, 2014).

While not all volunteer activity is necessarily directed towards people with disability and their families, what is evident is that volunteering represents a sizeable and socially significant resource in our community. Australians want to be involved in volunteering and Australians from all walks of life value the support provided through volunteer-supported activities.

In a soon to be published study commissioned by Interchange (with support of DHHS Victoria) and conducted by the University of Melbourne (McVilly, Dodevska, & Newton, 2019) , some 152- individual disability-specific volunteer-supported programmes were identified across Victoria alone.

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- The majority of respondents (68%) represented organisations that were registered disability providers with the Victorian DHHS
  - Most respondents (78%) reported that their organisation had run some type of volunteer-supported service within the past five years
  - Almost all respondents (94%) reported that their organisation currently ran one or more volunteer-supported service program(s)
  - Organisations mostly (79%) provided volunteer-supported service programs for both people with and without a disability
  - Most respondents (76%) indicated that their organisation offered between one and ten volunteer-supported service programs

Volunteer-supported activities were many and varied. The University of Melbourne study, taking into account a systematic review of both peer-reviewed literature and grey literature, together with the results of data collected across Victoria (including by means of on-line surveys and interviews with organisations and volunteers), was able to classify volunteer-supported activities according to one of seven models:

1. Social support and community participation models
  - 1.1. Social-support and activity programs
  - 1.2. Social support and skills development programs
  - 1.3. Social support only programs
  - 1.4. Peer support programs
2. Supported activity models
3. Skills development models
  - 3.1. Life skills programs
  - 3.2. Recreational skills programs
  - 3.3. Employment skills programs
4. Out of home support models
5. Practical support models
6. Organisational support models
  - 6.1. Administration
  - 6.2. Community awareness and capacity building
  - 6.3. Fundraising
7. Advocacy Model

Notably most organisations in the study (66%) reported that funding for their volunteer-supported service programs came from government funding, in excess of a third (37%) of which was explicitly Home and Community Care (HACC) funding.

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Approaching half of the respondents (49%) felt it was somewhat to extremely likely that their organisation would need to expand their volunteer program(s) within the next five years to meet growing requests for support. Here though they expressed grave concerns with respect to their capacity to sustain services, let alone expand services in the current policy and funding environment, which included transitions from state to commonwealth responsibilities, and from block-funding to individualised funding arrangements.

The University of Melbourne study found that volunteers have a critical role to play in increasing and enriching the relationships available to people with disability. In particular, volunteers support and facilitate access for people with disability and their families to information, assist people with disability and their families to increase their knowledge, skills and confidence to participate in the social and economic life of the community, and help build the capacity of people with disability to achieve their goals outside of specialist and / or paid services.

Furthermore, the University of Melbourne study found that the work and contribution of volunteers is distinct from that of paid staff, and that the contribution of volunteers neither replaces the role of paid staff, nor can their role be substituted by the work of paid staff. For many people with disability, the majority of people involved in their lives are immediate family members and paid support staff or other professionals. Volunteers provide what most people take for granted – a genuine friend, with shared interests and unconditional support to achieve one’s life goals in the context of ‘an ordinary life’.

The University of Melbourne study revealed, compared to paid staff, volunteers were seen as more likely to: develop meaningful relationships with program participants, bring specialised knowledge, skills and experience to programs that closely aligned with the interests, aspirations and goals of people with disability, expand program capacity, bring enthusiasm, fun and innovation, increase community connections for the program participant, and be genuinely committed to their role. The perceived benefits of volunteer-supported programs for people with disabilities and their families were genuine friendship, increased community participation, empowerment through shared experience and information sharing, respite and support for families, empowerment through making a meaningful contribution to society, increased confidence and motivation, protection of rights and welfare, increased engagement with mainstream programs and community support, increased skills, and raised awareness and increased inclusivity within mainstream community.

In the University of Melbourne study, all volunteer-supported program outcomes were mapped against the ILC outcomes framework. Subsequently, all volunteer-supported outcomes were found to map against one or more of the ILC outcomes. However, while the activities and outcomes supported by volunteers clearly align with the outcomes articulated in the ILC framework, the associated funding mechanisms to support their operations were not immediately apparent.

## **What the NDIA Pricing Review needs to consider**

What is particularly relevant to the NDIA Pricing Review is that while volunteer-supported activities by definition are the result of ‘time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain’ (Volunteering Australia, 2015), there remains a cost to enabling this substantial contribution to the lives of people with disability and their families, and to the Australian economy.

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What is urgently needed is the surety going forward of support for the organisational infrastructure required to enable volunteers to be recruited, trained, matched and supported to work with people with disability and their families in ways that are safe and sustainable, and which promote choice, control and quality of life for people with disability.

With the cessation of block funding to community organisations, volunteer programs and consequently volunteer-supported activities for people with disability are at high risk of being scaled back, or in some instances their cessation. For example, there is currently no pricing mechanism to account for activities that are typically undertaken by Volunteer Coordinators; a pivotal role to facilitate the initiation and maintenance of volunteer relationships. Volunteer Coordinators play an integral role to initiate and support volunteers, to ensure people with disability access supports that are safe, are of high quality, and which promote choice, control, social and economic participation. Many of the issues addressed by Volunteer Coordinators are those issues that are of concern to the National Quality and Safeguards Commission (Department of Social Security, 2016).

There is currently only one support line item, for the purposes of capacity building support, in the NDIS price guide that could possibly enable a scheme participant to access volunteer support. This item could feasibly be used by a scheme participant to purchase supports from providers to establish 'volunteer assistance within the participants home or community to develop skills'. For example, assistance in attending appointments, shopping, bill paying, taking part in social activities and maintain contact with others – Life transition planning, including mentoring, peer support and individual skill development'.

However, the extent to which this line item is widely understood and used by people with disability and their NDIS planners to secure volunteer-supported activities remains in question. Furthermore, the extent to which this item could feasibly support the infrastructure needed to facilitate the volunteer relationship to undertake these activities remains questionable. Many organisations facilitating volunteer-supported activities consider the item unfit for purpose with respect to the essential infrastructure required to ensure the provision of safe supports, and supports provided to the quality expected by people with disability and their families.

Furthermore, the recent study conducted by the University of Melbourne revealed that generally services facilitating volunteer-supported activities were only able to evaluate their programs through periodic (and relatively simplistic) feedback from program participants, family members, and the volunteers providing support. Many services reported that their programs are not formally evaluated. Very few had the resources to collect enough data to conduct comprehensive outcome-focused evaluations, and only a few had been able to commission independent evaluations of their programs.

It is evident that if volunteer-supported activities are to be provided in a safe way and to the standards expected by people with disability and their families, and they are to be held accountable to the standards expected by the community as reflected in, for example, the ILC framework, organisations providing these services require a substantial injection of infrastructure support. In other jurisdictions the capacity of organisations to conduct such auditing, and subsequently document the outcomes and evaluate the impact of volunteering, particular with respect to its impact and economic value to the community, has been identified as a policy imperative (Gaskin, 2011).

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## What we recommend as the way forward

Based on the evidence currently available, including our research recently conducted in Victoria, we recommend:

- That NDIA / NDIS policy explicitly acknowledge the social and economic benefits associated with the work undertaken by volunteers in the disability sector. In particular, acknowledging that volunteer supports facilitate access to information, assist people with disability and their families to increase their knowledge, skills and confidence to participate in the social and economic life of the community, and help build the capacity of people with disability to achieve their goals outside of specialist and / or paid services. Importantly, it should be acknowledged that volunteers have a critical role to play in increasing and enriching the relationships available to people with disability and furthering their community engagement and inclusion.
- That NDIA / NDIS policy explicitly acknowledge that the work and contribution of volunteers is distinct from that of paid staff; and that the contribution of volunteers neither replaces the role of paid staff, nor can their role be substituted by the work of paid staff.
- That NDIA / NDIS funding mechanisms make provision to support the work of volunteers; by supporting the infrastructure needed to enable volunteers to be recruited, trained, matched and supported to work with people with disability and their families in ways that are safe and sustainable, and which promote choice, control and quality of life for people with disability. Importantly, that such funding is made available as a matter of urgency in the short-term to ensure continuity in the provision of volunteer-supported activities as organisations transition from current state-based block-funding arrangements.
- That the NDIS pricing schedule include explicit guidance (for people with disability and their families, together with those assisting them in the planning process) on how items might be used to leverage volunteer-supported activities.
- That mechanisms such as the NDIS individualised planning system allow for the inclusion of goals and associated funding (including in core supports) that will enable people with disability to engage with a volunteer to assist them to pursue their goals, including leveraging and extending specialist paid supports.
- That procedures and guidelines governing the NDIS individualised planning system, while remaining focused on the aspirations, goals, choice and control of the participant with disability, acknowledge how many people with disability live in the context of a family; and support the role of a volunteer to assist a family unit more broadly, and in so doing support the quality of life of the participant with disability.

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To inform policy and support the development of funding and other mechanisms we recommend that:

- The NDIA commission a national study investigating the landscape and impact of volunteer-supported services across Australia. The recent University of Melbourne study, conducted in Victoria, could provide a starting point for such an investigation.
- That an investigation into the landscape and impact of volunteer-supported services across Australia consider the economic impact of volunteering, and calculate the difference between the monetary investment into a volunteering program and the value of the work carried out by volunteers, thus establishing the 'value' of volunteer-supported activities in the context of an NDIS insurance / investment model.
- That a future investigation includes trialling different funding arrangements to cover ongoing costs of volunteer management and collecting data on the outcomes of participants that use such services, to better evaluate the costs and benefits of volunteer organisations providing scheme supports over the longer term.

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