



Cheers to the volunteers

Across Australia, over 3.2 million volunteers give back to charities and non-profits each year, with millions more contributing through informal unpaid efforts. DARE puts the spotlight on this community, the vital work they do, and how you can get involved.

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THERE'S NO DOUBT ABOUT it, volunteering is a win-win activity. Giving back to others strengthens social bonds, fills resource gaps, fosters a sense of community and reduces isolation and loneliness – giving purpose and meaning to our lives. Becoming a regular volunteer also helps boost skill development and confidence, particularly for retirees looking to stay in touch or use their existing skill set.

“Volunteering is a way we can connect with our community,” says Mark Pearce, CEO of Volunteering Australia. “It’s about making a difference, and by giving your time and skills to help others you’ll see benefits to both your mental and physical health. Volunteering is a proven pathway to participation and social connectedness and provides a wealth of opportunities, including contributing to the social fabric of our society.”

Volunteering Australia’s latest research on mental health, published in

2023, finds that giving back improves psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, happiness and life satisfaction. “Across multiple studies, people who volunteered scored higher on these metrics than people who did not volunteer,” says Mark. “Volunteering is also associated with lower symptoms of depression and anxiety, and lower indicators of suicide

risk. The number of hours a person volunteers was also found to be significant, with those who contribute more than 100 hours a year experiencing stronger wellbeing benefits.”

St Vincent de Paul Society NSW volunteer recruit and engagement coordinator Chantelle Sharma says volunteering is particularly enriching for over 50s stepping back from full-time work. “As people transition from their careers, volunteering provides a sense of fulfillment and meaning by giving back to the community, supporting those in need, and making a tangible impact on people’s lives,” she says. “Beyond the emotional >

Left: Bev Debrincat, 70, runs The Habitat community nursery and food garden in Ryde, Sydney. Read her story on page 80.



rewards, it offers opportunities to learn new skills, stay mentally and physically active and build friendships, while staying connected and reducing social isolation, particularly in retirement.”

Vinnies provides volunteering opportunities that cater to over 50s who may be on grandparent duty, still working part-time, or juggling an active social life. “Many enjoy roles like volunteering in Vinnies shops, where they can engage socially while sorting donations and assisting customers, often with flexible hours,” says Chantelle. “We also offer volunteering in our community outreach programs, such as delivering food hampers or helping make food to go on our Vinnies Vans [outreach services], a direct way to support vulnerable people and make a tangible difference.

“Additionally, roles in fundraising and event support allow volunteers to contribute their organisational skills, while administrative positions offer a more office-based, behind-the-scenes option. For those with specialised skills, there are opportunities in areas like mental health support, financial literacy, and youth mentoring. Volunteers can also get involved in Vinnies’ advocacy

TOP CHOICES

Here are just a few Australian organisations that rely on volunteers:

Australian Red Cross: redcross.org.au/volunteer

OzHarvest: ozharvest.org/volunteer

Salvation Army: salvationarmy.org.au/get-involved/volunteer-with-us

Wesley Mission: wesleymission.org.au/get-involved/volunteer

Cancer Council: cancercouncil.com.au/get-involved/volunteer-with-us

Frontier Services Outback Links: frontierservices.org/outback-links

work, helping raise awareness about social justice issues.”

Non-profits like Vinnies rely heavily on the considerable contribution of volunteers across the country to make ends meet. In 2020, volunteers contributed 489.5 million hours of unpaid assistance, making up sizable workforces in sectors like sport and physical recreation (30% of volunteers), religious groups (23%) and education and training (18%), according to Volunteer Australia.

“As the cost-of-living crisis bites, volunteers are vital in supporting our communities and helping those who are struggling in the challenging economic climate,” says Mark. “The charitable sector engages 3.2 million volunteers, and more than half of Australia’s charities are run entirely by volunteers.”

Unfortunately, rates of volunteering have been steadily declining over the past five years, and there’s an urgent need for more unpaid workers to keep charities afloat. “Volunteers are the heart

CASE STUDY



“Volunteering is so rewarding”

BEV DEBRINCAT
Environmental volunteer

Long-time volunteer Bev Debrincat believes the benefits of giving back can be life-changing. “I changed career when I was in my 40s from computing to bushland management. Now, at 70, I run the Greater Sydney Landcare and Habitat Network, both as a volunteer,” she says.

Bev, who is chair of the non-profit environmental group Landcare in her area and executive director of the Habitat Network, which promotes native wildlife and plants, appreciates the flexibility and more relaxed nature

of unpaid work. “Volunteering is so rewarding as you don’t get hung up on pay rises and entitlements. If you want to take extended holidays or frequent holidays you can. And the Australian natural environment with its flora and fauna is amazing – get out there and be inspired. The more you do, the more you are able to do.”

Working with Landcare, which is an Australian-wide organisation, has provided Bev with so many benefits – both mental and physical. “All of my volunteer work focuses on the environment and it is so in need of our

of The Benevolent Society's work," says Cherie Damoulakis, service support coordinator for Australia's oldest charity. "Their tireless work each day helps us support more people in communities across Australia. All our volunteers have different strengths. We like to give them roles and responsibilities based on their skills and what they enjoy doing to best support our clients and day-to-day operations."

Whatever role you choose, you need the right mindset. "It's important to have a compassionate and non-judgemental attitude, as you may work with people from diverse backgrounds facing difficult circumstances," says Chantelle. "Volunteers should be patient, adaptable and flexible. Reliability and commitment are key and consistency in service delivery is essential."

"Strong communication skills, teamwork and a positive, solution-oriented mindset help volunteers navigate various roles and contribute effectively," she adds. "Additionally, a genuine desire to make a difference and a respect for diversity are crucial, as well as a willingness to learn and develop new skills."

GETTING INVOLVED

Reflecting on your own skills, passions and interests can be a good way to discover what you can offer as a volunteer. Whether it's craft know-how, gardening skills, cooking ability or even a medical background, there are thousands of ways to get involved.

"There is a diverse array of opportunities for people in Australia to volunteer within their community alongside something they're already passionate about," says Mark. "Getting involved in volunteering can be as simple as sharing your expertise and interests, helping out in your local community, or drawing on your lived experience to

"Volunteering offers opportunities to learn new skills, stay mentally and physically active and build friendships."

CHANTELLE SHARMA
St Vincent de Paul Society NSW

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support others. There really is a volunteer role for everyone."

GoVolunteer (govolunteer.com.au) is an initiative of Volunteering Australia – a national online portal that matches people with volunteering opportunities in their local areas. Browse over 10,000 volunteer roles in areas from arts and culture to humanitarian aid, animals and the environment, social justice, health and youth and education. "As well as the GoVolunteer website, contact your state and territory volunteering peak body or approach organisations in your local community," Mark suggests.

Seek Volunteer (volunteer.com.au/volunteering) also shares open volunteer roles, searchable by location and interest. Charities and organisations post regular callouts for opportunities like social support, aged care companionship, festival volunteers, charity store retail assistants, and more. "For the organisations they help, volunteers bring a wealth of skills and life experience that is invaluable," says Cherie. "They also bring fresh perspectives, which is incredibly valuable for improving efficiencies with support delivered to those in need." ●

care and attention. I still spend a lot of time on my computer and managing people, however the opportunity to get out and do physical work is much better for me healthwise. The people working at improving the environment through ecological restoration are all like-minded and I haven't yet found anyone that I don't get on with!

"I have so many favourite moments – seeing sites transform from weeds to natives, meeting great people also working to restore the natural environment, inspirational people bringing together people to look after

something special to them, people working together with a common goal, people sharing and caring."

Her advice to over 50s is to look for a volunteer role that shakes things up. "A new life is just starting. It's a time to try something different, keep learning, and improve your physical and mental fitness. This is a time to broaden your interests and outlook on the world and to think about the legacy we will all leave our grandchildren."

You don't have to be a green thumb to try out Landcare, says Bev. "Find groups near where you live and

apply to volunteer at a few of them just to try them out – you will find different people attend and the sites vary. You may find a site and a group that you feel more comfortable with – some do great morning teas! Or come along and plant some trees at different sites with Creating Canopies. At worst, you will have a fun day out and learn something new."

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Nature enthusiasts can check out the National Landcare Directory (landcareaustralia.org.au) to find your local environment groups.