

Volunteering Tasmania — Submission

The Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings

September 2021

About Volunteering Tasmania

Volunteering Tasmania (VT) is the peak body for volunteering in Tasmania. Our vision is to ensure the contribution of volunteering is understood, respected, and valued as a powerful driver of community prosperity and inclusion in Tasmania.

We connect and build an inclusive community that makes a difference through the impact of volunteering. We aim to represent the interests of all Tasmanians involved in volunteering through research, consultation, policy development and community relationships. Our membership totals 300 and includes over 190 organisations across the state. We represent the interests of our volunteer organisations and volunteers, and decision-makers, including government.

Volunteering is 'time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain'. As such, volunteering is an activity where individuals exercise agency and contribute willingly to maintaining their own health and wellbeing, as well as contribute significantly to the health and well-being of others.

Our Submission

We address the following questions about making institutions safe for children and child safety standards:

1. Are there systems, practices or cultures that continue to expose children to the risk of sexual abuse in Tasmanian Government institutions?
2. What more should the Tasmanian Government (and its agencies and officials) do to ensure the safety of children in government institutions, including in public schools, hospitals and youth detention centres?
3. Does the Child Safe framework proposed in the Child Safe Organisations Bill 2020 adopt the right principles, processes, scope and monitoring arrangements to keep children safe?
4. What challenges might your organisation face in providing services that comply with the Child Safe Framework? What resources, training and supports may be required to facilitate the implementation of Child Safe Standards?

We focus on the volunteer workforce as part of the role and responsibilities of the Tasmanian Government and its agencies and officials in protecting children from child sexual abuse and responding adequately and appropriately to reports and information about such abuse.

Background

The volunteer workforce plays a vital role in the services that support Tasmanian children. Volunteers support vulnerable families in our communities to get basic support like educational assistance, childcare, physical and emotional support, and social connection. Volunteers and volunteer organisations exist in every stage of a young person's life, supporting them, and their families from birth through to adulthood.

Around 297,000 Tasmanians volunteer each year, giving on average four hours a week. They do this formally through organisations (approximately 200,000 Tasmanians), and informally through helping their neighbours and taking action in and natural disasters. Volunteering contributes \$4 billion to the Tasmanian economy each year, and it gives people skills, confidence and social connections that help them into work.

There are around 35,000 volunteers in government funded organisations in the health and community services sector in Tasmania. According to the TasCOSS State of Tasmania's Community Service Sector Report 2015, nine in ten community sector organisations (88.9%) involved volunteers. Across the community services sector in Tasmania the ratio of volunteers to paid workers is around 3.5 to 1.

Half of Tasmania's formal volunteers (around 100,000 people) are in organisations that are either completely run by volunteers or have less than five staff.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse recommended that all institutions in Australia that engage in child-related work be required to implement child safe standards. This includes National Principle 7: Staff and volunteers are equipped with the

knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children and young people safe through ongoing education and training.

The National Principles are not mandatory and organisations that engage with children and young people must continue to meet existing child safe requirements in their state or territory. In Tasmania the guidelines for child safe organisations do not explicitly mention volunteers, however the Registration to Work with Vulnerable People does include volunteers. The draft Child Safe Organisations Bill 2020 includes ‘volunteer’ in the definition of ‘a person being engaged by an organisation or body’.

Issues

VT has consulted members of the volunteer sector and heard that organisations are not adequately resourced to provide the administration and training required to be child safe. Some organisations do not have child safe policies in place and the appropriate resources are difficult to find and not specific to the Tasmanian context. They cited national organisations, Child Wise and Moores as sources of information and training for child safe organisations, but they consider the processes to be expensive, lengthy and not always relevant.

There is concern among members that the level of responsibility required for maintaining a child safe organisation is greater than the capacity of staff. This particularly relates to the lack of expertise in dealing with personal trauma. Running child safe training in organisations can bring up past trauma for a number of staff and volunteers, adequate mechanisms need to be in place to support both the person impacted and the trainer.

Volunteers are also reporting frustration at the increasing level of ‘red tape’ and paperwork that is required for them to volunteer.

Volunteer organisations are facing growing pressures in an increasingly complex operating environment. They are having to change their business models and workplace practices to attract and retain a younger generation of volunteers that is seeking more flexibility, smaller commitments and technological solutions.

Volunteer organisations will be increasingly required to professionalise their supports of children as a result of systems reforms emerging from inquiries, such as the Royal Commissions into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and the Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, as well as this Commission of Inquiry, and the Tasmanian Child Safe Organisations Bill 2020.

Without appropriate systems and processes, Tasmania’s volunteer organisations may unknowingly find themselves vulnerable to predators who are seeking less regulated environments in which to operate. Small, volunteer-run and low-resourced organisations who may see the Registration to Work with Vulnerable People as the only requirement for operating a child safe organisation are particularly vulnerable.

It is our understanding that Registration to Work with Vulnerable People checks are conducted independently in each state and different criteria are applied for the criminal records that are included as part of the Registration to Work with Vulnerable People check.

There is also enormous variability between States about how regularly criminal records of people with current Registration to Work with Vulnerable People checks are processed through system and their records updated and notified.

Recommendations

VT's aim in making these recommendations is for best practice to be established for child safe volunteer organisations. Given the size of Tasmania's volunteer workforce, and the important role volunteers play in supporting children, it is vital that keeping children safe from harm is embedded as part of culture and practice.

We acknowledge the frustration experienced by volunteers in complying with regulations and training, but VT believes the safety of Tasmanian children must come first.

To achieve our aim VT supports the establishment of an **independent oversight body** as set out in Recommendation 61.0 of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. It is important that this body includes the volunteer workforce in its responsibilities of monitoring and enforcing child safe standards, assisting with compliance, and collecting, analysing and publishing data. We note that the Tasmanian Government has accepted this recommendation in principle, and we advocate for the inclusion of volunteers and volunteer organisations in all considerations.

VT supports the establishment of a **reportable conduct scheme** that incorporates the volunteer workforce. The approach could be similar to that of Worksafe Tasmania which not only has investigative and auditing functions, but also promotes workplace health and safety through guidance and education. Workplace health and safety offers a useful example for the establishment of child safe organisations across Tasmania.

VT recommends that the **legislation of Tasmania's Registration to Work with Vulnerable People check** is brought in line with other states such as NSW, whose system is more advanced and comprehensive.

VT also recommends a properly resourced **program of capacity building** to support volunteer organisations to comply with child safe principles and standards. It is essential that small and volunteer run organisations receive the resources and support they need to implement child safe standards, and for monitoring, compliance, record keeping and training of volunteers. The availability of free up-to-date advice, templates, policies and others resources will be necessary to ensure these organisations are child safe. There also need to be information/support more readily available for people making and receiving disclosures, particularly for volunteer-run organisations.

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