

MEDIA RELEASE

NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

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Attention: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors



Research calls for better volunteer management

New University of Tasmania research has found that organisations using volunteers often under-resource the management and support of their volunteers, especially in rural areas.

Launching her research on International Volunteers Day, Dr Christine Stirling, of the University Department of Rural Health, said that the ‘helping’ nature of volunteer labour allowed the cost of supporting and involving volunteers to be overlooked or underestimated.

In addition, volunteers lack power with organisations, often struggling to have their collective interests and needs met.

“This problem can be compounded in rural areas because volunteers are less visible than those in urban centres,” Dr Stirling said.

“While volunteering may meet many individual interests, as a group volunteers are unable to make changes in organisations. This means we cannot assume that volunteering equals vocal citizens because the location of volunteering, the type of volunteering and the type of organisation can all water down ‘citizen power’.”

Dr Stirling’s recently-completed PhD studies studied the management of volunteers, looking specifically at Australian and New Zealand ambulance volunteers to understand how they could be better incorporated into service organisations.

She found that across Australia, 5000 ambulance volunteers and many ‘first responders’ are the heroes of the ambulance services.

“These services help Australians who are far from main health facilities or who live in areas with small populations,” Dr Stirling said.

“On International Volunteers Day, it is important to not only honour volunteers but also take a hard look at how volunteers fit within organisations.

“Organisations that manage volunteers well treat volunteers as valued staff with quality induction and training provided along with suitable reimbursement and recognition.

“And volunteers will be visible in the organisation budgets and management structures, not just in the promotional materials. We cannot assume that volunteers can influence services from within organisations, and services need to make sure that volunteers can speak collectively.”

The study found that managers and policy makers who want to improve volunteer retention should:

- Help volunteers get together more often;
- Include volunteers in organisational decision making;
- Budget for the full cost of volunteer support;
- Make sure that volunteers have clear job descriptions;
- Provide *quality* training;
- Make sure volunteers are not ‘out of pocket’ by adequate reimbursement of expenses;
- Recognise and value volunteers’ contributions to the organisation;
- Provide incentives to encourage and thank volunteers for their work.

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