Volunteering: A Gateway to Communities Project Report

The Volunteering: A Gateway to Communities Project is an initiative of the Office for Volunteers, supported by the Volunteer Ministerial Advisory Group and the Volunteer Partnership Action Committee, which has been exploring a major challenge that many community groups in South Australia are facing.

That is, how do we go about approaching people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds (e.g. migrants, refugees and international students) to participate in our volunteer programs, and to also help welcome them into the wider South Australian community.

Building on Surf Life Saving Australia’s successful model of engagement with CALD communities, the national ‘On the Same Wave’ program, the Volunteering: A Gateway to Communities initiative has been working with a special advisory group to look into these very complexities.

Members of this advisory group include Surf Life Saving; Red Cross; South Australian Fire and Emergency Services Commission (SAFECOM); Children, Youth and Women’s Health Service (CYWHS); and the City of Charles Sturt.

This report summarises the key learnings of this advisory group in engaging people from CALD communities.

Main findings

Getting ready on the inside

Consultation with the advisory group members indicated significant support for the concept of organisations “getting ready on the inside” before starting to engage people from CALD communities to participate in their volunteer programs.

Many members thought an important ‘first step’ to this process, was initially discussing the benefits of engaging CALD people internally within their organisation, and then gaining their organisation's support from the ‘top-down’ (e.g. from the CEO and Board to individual volunteers). Some of the benefits highlighted, for organisations engaging CALD people, included:

- New perspectives
- New skills
- Knowledge of and networks in new and emerging culturally diverse communities
- A wider pool of potential volunteers and future staff
- Improved community awareness of your organisation’s values, goals and services

Members also discussed the many benefits that can exist for people from CALD backgrounds who choose to volunteer with community organisations. Some examples they highlighted were:

- An increased understanding of available services
- Greater understanding of and adjustment to Australian society
- Improved English and communication skills
- Gaining skills, work experience, and local references
- New friendships and having fun
- Increased sense of acceptance and belonging in the wider community

A number of members added that, without this ‘buy-in’ or support from the organisation, opportunities for effectively engaging and building relationships with CALD communities may be potentially delayed or even lost.

The advisory group members also indicated that, in some instances, an internal cultural change may be needed in an organisation, in order to shift the mindsets of members and overcome any existing organisational barriers. They were unanimous in recommending cultural awareness training as a good starting point for initiating this process of internal cultural change.
Benefits they highlighted for organisations, participating in such training, included:

- A better understanding of the needs and views of the wider community
- Improved ability to recruit and support volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds
- Finding out practical examples of what is culturally appropriate and what is not
- Increasing confidence and overcoming fears about interacting with another culture, like ‘making a fool of oneself’, ‘embarrassing or offending someone’, ‘making a bad impression’, and ‘being rejected or lonely’
- Understanding that there are different stages of settlement for CALD people in a new country, from survival and establishment (accessing mainstream services such as health care, education support, childcare, English language tuition) to wishing to engage with their new wider community and potentially volunteering

This unanimous support led to the creation of a free online Cross-Cultural Training for Volunteer Involving Organisations training module for organisations and volunteers which is now available at www.ofv.sa.gov.au/Volunteering_Gateway.htm. The module includes two introductory cultural training workshops. ‘The Cultural Awareness in Volunteering’ workshop is for staff and volunteers within the organisation. The ‘Volunteering in Australia’ workshop is for individuals and communities who are recent arrivals to Australia.

Another recommendation from the advisory group members was for organisations to consider reviewing and adjusting their volunteer programs and internal processes for managing volunteers (e.g. recruitment, induction, retention and training) to meet the needs of volunteers from culturally diverse communities.

“Take a look at your induction, do you need to change it to make it more friendly. Think about how you can make it easier,” said one member. “We found that this also improved our general induction process - we now treat everyone like they are CALD, treat everyone so they feel very welcome and supported.”

Finding a champion(s) or employing a dedicated coordinator, whose role it is to promote the benefits of engaging CALD volunteers and recruiting them into the organisation, was also recommended by members. “Often managers were volunteers themselves with limited training in managing people and too much work to do internally already. A dedicated coordinator or “champion” for engaging CALD people is needed, whose role it is to make it happen.”

Summary strategies:

- Discuss the benefits internally within the organisation and gain support from the ‘top-down’ (i.e. from the CEO to individual staff and volunteers)
- Organise cultural awareness training for staff and volunteers
- Review and adapt internal policies, procedures, volunteer programs and orientation/training information, for inclusiveness, plain English and simplicity
- Find individual ‘champions’ and/or people responsible for actively leading the organisation (and its branches/clubs) in engaging new CALD volunteers in the future

Getting ready to volunteer

Conversely, there is also the perspective of people from CALD communities and their journey in ‘getting ready to volunteer’ to consider. In this regard, the advisory group members highlighted that there can be a number of challenges that can work to prevent CALD people from being able to volunteer. These have included people:

- Not knowing where to find out about volunteering opportunities
- Not understanding the processes involved in becoming a volunteer
- Having language and cultural barriers
- Feeling a lack of confidence in going it alone
- Feeling anxious or fearful about ‘making a fool of themselves’; embarrassing or offending someone; giving or getting the wrong information; becoming or appearing confused; being excluded, rejected or lonely
A number of the advisory group members also highlighted that the term ‘volunteering’ itself can sometimes seem like a foreign concept to many people from CALD backgrounds. That there is often no word for ‘volunteering’ in their cultures because helping your neighbour or community (or informal volunteering) is ‘something that is just done.’

City of Charles Sturt shared the story of one CALD volunteer, Mehari, who is a member of the ‘Friends of Cheltenham Community Centre’ - one of the community groups that help to guide the council’s service delivery in the City of Charles Sturt. He is also a leader in his Eritrean Community, and volunteered his time to be part of their Reference Group that lead to the establishment of their Settlement Project, funded by the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

During a conversation about volunteering with City of Charles Sturt staff, Mehari advised that he did not volunteer. Staff responded by reminding him that what he was doing (informally) within his own community, and the time he gave (formally) to the council, was exactly that: volunteering. He explained that he wasn’t a volunteer because he still didn’t feel like he belonged in Australia, even though he had lived here for more than 12 years.

To help overcome this sense of not belonging, as shared by Mehari, the advisory group realised that people from the CALD community needed the opportunity to undergo some preparation before they felt comfortable enough to volunteer outside of their CALD communities and in mainstream organisations. To this end, the ‘Volunteering in Australia’ training resource was developed. A first in Australia, this training resource has been developed as a ‘Train the Trainer’ resource, and involved the collaboration of the advisory group and as well as a group representing CALD communities, before it was finalised.

**Summary strategies:**

- Organise cultural awareness training for new CALD volunteers
- Help CALD volunteers to feel like they belong. For example, by organising social activities or perhaps a ‘mentor program’ or ‘buddy system’, to help them feel welcome in your organisation and the wider South Australian community

**Learn about local communities and start building relationships with them**

Some of the advisory group members who had experienced significant success in engaging CALD communities, such as Surf Life Saving and City of Charles Sturt, recommended that ‘getting out there’, raising community awareness and explaining ‘how we are relevant to you’, were all key to successfully building relationships with them. The advisory group also identified ‘being flexible in program delivery’ as being particularly important.

One advisory group member, CYWHS, encountered this when their organisation chose to run a pilot with two CALD volunteers. “Initially we looked at a volunteer program which could include the two volunteers at once. However, only one of the volunteers was interested in this volunteering opportunity. As a result, we promoted some different programs and placed the other volunteer in another of our general hospital volunteer programs.”

CYWHS advised that the pilot was successful, providing a catalyst for the organisation to review all of its volunteer programs and processes. It’s also now planning to encourage CALD communities to participate in all its volunteer programs.

Feedback was also positive from the volunteers who donated their time and skills once a week with the health service. When asked what they would say to someone else (e.g. a family member or friend) about volunteering, one of the volunteers said: “I will tell them to do volunteering. It is very good and I will encourage them to do it: a) you will make friends, b) you will gain new skills and c) you will get experience.” They also indicated they would continue volunteering in the future: “Yes because I like to learn different things and I like helping people with different problems.”
Some avenues the advisory group members recommended, for finding out where people from CALD communities are in your local community, were contacting community centres; local councils; community councils, reference groups, and committees; churches; and schools (including specialist English as a Second Language (ESL) schools).

The advisory group also recommended engaging community leaders to help you inform their members of your organisation, services and volunteering opportunities. Other tips for engaging CALD communities included communicating face-to-face. If communication is identified as a challenge, the group recommended keeping it simple. “Use basic language; repeat information often; use visual prompts, signs, and symbols; and organise interpreters where necessary. It’s also important to always double check for understanding,” said Surf Life Saving.

Members also recommended clearly expressing your organisation’s values (e.g. community safety, water safety, family health, healthy sport, helping vulnerable people, saving lives) and then seeking to match your organisation’s values, with those of the community and members (e.g. safety for family members; skills, work experience, a local reference for jobseekers; fun and new friends for young/isolated people).

Surf Life Saving highlighted that it is important to consider shared values when engaging others and to make sure that any discussion appeals to the audience’s needs as well as those of the organisation.

They used this approach when they recently attempted to engage the Afghan community where they originally encountered indifference and distrust. Many of the recent drowning incidents in South Australian waters involved people from communities where they were unfamiliar with beach conditions and water safety.

It was only when Surf Life Saving started talking about their organisational values of safety awareness; keeping people and their families and community safe at the beach; teaching life skills like resuscitation; and other aspects of the organisation, that the Afghans were able to see that Surf Life Saving’s values were linking with their own personal and community values of safety, education and fun.

City of Charles Sturt also supported this community engagement approach, highlighting that articulating to people from new and emerging communities just how their organisation’s values link with personal and community values, had worked successfully in their volunteering and settlement programs.

Surf Life Saving also highlighted that flexibility has been key to their successful ‘On the Same Wave’ program, which varies from simply providing community education information to more formal training to be a Surf Lifesaver. “Different groups have different challenges. Delivery of the program depends on the individual CALD person or community group and their identified requirements.”

In one such example, Surf Life Saving says that a secondary college for girls approached their organisation to teach a group of Afghani girls how to swim. With some cultural sensitivity around being uncovered in public, Surf Life Saving says they organised for an instructor to visit them weekly and take them to a closed pool session for swimming lessons. “As a result of building relationships with the Afghani girls and their families, three are now Surf Lifesavers on the beach and wearing burkinis.”

Many members were unanimous in their agreement that a ‘mentor program’ or ‘buddy system’ can be a great strategy for adjusting your programs for individuals from CALD communities who may need/like additional support or a friendly face to talk to and learn from.

The advisory group also indicated that volunteers from CALD communities can often be great champions, encouraging others in their communities to get involved. Surf Life Saving said: “Some of our CALD volunteers have gone on to do a leadership course, are studying, becoming pillars of the community and natural champions for the organisation.”

Summary strategies:

- ‘Get out there’ - find out where people from CALD communities are in your local community by contacting community centres; local councils; community councils, reference groups, and committees; churches; and schools (including specialist English as a Second Language (ESL) schools)
• Raise awareness - engage community leaders to help you inform their members of your organisation, services and volunteering opportunities. Explain ‘how we are relevant to you’

• Communicate face-to-face. If communication is a potential challenge, keep it simple. Use basic language; repeat information often; use visual prompts, signs, and symbols; and organise interpreters where necessary. It’s also important to always double check for understanding

• Clearly express your organisation’s values (e.g. community safety, water safety, family health, healthy sport, helping vulnerable people, saving lives)

• Seek to match your organisation’s values, with those of the community and members (e.g. safety for family members; skills, work experience, a local reference for jobseekers; fun and new friends for young/isolated people)

• Be prepared to be flexible in your delivery of existing volunteer programs or even creating a ‘new’ volunteer role, depending on the individual CALD person or community group and their identified requirements

Other strategies also recommended to community organisations by the advisory group included:

Advertise your programs and volunteering opportunities

Summary strategies:

• Use ethnic media: radio and newspapers
• Use volunteer matching services, such as ‘GoVolunteer’ (www.govolunteer.com.au) and volunteer resource centres across the State (www.ofv.sa.gov.au/Volunteer_resource_centres.htm)
• Network with councils, resource centres, and multicultural staff in other organisations to get ideas, promote opportunities and support volunteers and communities

Build cultural awareness into your recruitment process to make it easier for volunteers to get involved

Summary strategies:

• Clearly promote the benefits of volunteering
• Use plain language and express key terms: for example: ‘volunteering’ is another way of saying ‘helping your community’
• Introduce new volunteers to a ‘buddy’ or ‘mentor’ in the organisation – an existing volunteer who is a friendly face if they have a query or concern

Build cultural awareness into your workplace culture to ensure all volunteers feel they are accepted and belong

Summary strategies:

• Communicate your values and your inclusive policies and practices to all members
• Provide cultural awareness training and key information about local community groups
• Support CALD volunteers through mentoring, training and recognition
• Create opportunities for all volunteers to communicate, interact and have fun together
Key outcomes

Consultation with the advisory group of the Volunteering: A Gateway to Communities Project identified that engaging people from CALD communities to participate in our volunteer programs presents many exciting opportunities and challenges for the State Government and the volunteer sector to explore.

Further, it’s noted that this project only “scratches the surface”, presenting just some of the strategies that have worked for a small sample of South Australian organisations. There is still a great deal to be learned and shared about successful strategies for engaging people who have newly arrived and helping to welcome them into the wider South Australian community.

Direct outcomes of the project have included the creation of a new web page on the Office for Volunteers website at www.ofv.sa.gov.au/Volunteering_Gateway.htm, featuring:

- This ‘Volunteering: A Gateway to Communities Project’ report, giving some “food for thought” for organisations on the topic of engaging people from CALD communities
- A free online ‘Cross-Cultural Training for Volunteer Involving Organisations’ training module for organisations and volunteers, complete with PowerPoint slides and participant handouts. The module includes two introductory cultural training workshops:
  - ‘The Cultural Awareness in Volunteering’ workshop is for staff and volunteers within the organisation
  - The ‘Volunteering in Australia’ workshop is for individuals and communities who are recent arrivals to Australia
- A ‘Frequently asked questions (FAQ’s) on engaging culturally and linguistically diverse people’ fact sheet, providing community groups with the answers to some of the common questions asked about the challenge of engaging individuals from CALD communities
- ‘Tell us your story’ interview form, inviting organisations to share their experiences in engaging people from CALD communities. Selected stories will be featured in the Office for Volunteers The State of Volunteering Online e-newsletter
- Links to further information and resources for engaging CALD communities