

16 October 2008

COMMITTEES

Family, Community, Housing and Youth Committee Report

Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (10.49 a.m.) — It is a great privilege to be able to stand up in this place and speak in support of the discussion paper that has been tabled by the committee, The value of volunteering. I take the opportunity to congratulate the committee on their good work. I am not a member of this committee but I can see from the outcomes of their deliberations, and particularly the work that they have done in organising a round table discussion, that they have done a great deal to advance the interests of volunteers so far as decision making in this place is concerned.

As someone who spent nine years in the Penrith City Council as a councillor and on two occasions served as the Mayor of the City of Penrith, I had the opportunity and great privilege of meeting many volunteers and volunteer organisations within my community. I must say that meeting those volunteers, hearing the stories that they have to share and meeting the people that they have helped have always been sources of inspiration to me. I acknowledge the efforts of all of the volunteers. I became the mayor in my first term just shortly after the Olympics were held in Sydney. Penrith, as one of the venues that had hosted events for the Olympic Games, had a very large group of local people involved in contributing to the Olympics as volunteers. Shortly after that, 2001 became the International Year of the Volunteer. I had the privilege as the mayor of the city of hosting a series of civic receptions to acknowledge the good work of volunteers in our community. Without question, I rank that as being one of the most satisfying things that occurred in the time that I served on the council. I take my hat off and acknowledge today the efforts of all volunteers for building social capital, contributing to our community and making the Penrith city the great place that it is today.

I would like to comment specifically on some of the items that have been outlined in the discussion paper—in particular, the issue of training. This is something that has been raised time and time again with me by local volunteer groups. It is emerging as a significant issue. It is connected in some ways to the increased administrative and legislative complexity that is associated with conducting the ordinary business of volunteers, but it is a separate proposition and one that I wish to speak to. The report articulates the need for a greater degree of uniformity in the way in which volunteer accreditation and training is undertaken, perhaps with a view towards leading to a system of accreditation that allows the seamless transition of volunteers from one volunteer organisation to another. That is something that should be commended.

Recently, in September, I had the opportunity in my electorate to attend a volunteer training project which was hosted by the Nepean Community College. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the outstanding work of the principal of the college, Mr Eric Wright, who has been doing a tremendous job with that organisation over many years and is a great local citizen. The project emerged out of the strong relationship that had been developed between Great Community Transport and the Nepean Community College. The project's vision is to underpin the training of volunteers locally with nationally recognised units of competency. The impetus for this particular project followed a tragic incident

involving a volunteer, where the volunteer had an accident involving a client with the service that they were volunteering for. I will speak more specifically about that incident a little bit later. This raised a range of quality compliance and of course recognition issues, both from an insurance and a regulatory perspective. The need was identified to generate an organic program that would underpin current volunteer training efforts with recognised training rather than enforcing a top-down accreditation and compliance approach. A focus group was held with a group of agencies whose core business is delivered by volunteers.

I want to acknowledge those participating agencies. I do not have sufficient time to acknowledge each and every one of the volunteers associated with these organisations but, collectively, I acknowledge their efforts and pay tribute to the great work that they do in our local community. The participating agencies on the day included: Nepean Migrant Access; Nepean Food Services; the Benevolent Society; the Cancer Council; Great Community Transport; Penrith City Council, particularly the volunteers used by its library; and the Nepean Volunteer Service and the various projects that are under its auspices. I will come back and talk about the Nepean Volunteer Service in a moment.

One of the outcomes of the project was agreement amongst the stakeholders that the Nepean Community College should make an application to be granted a licence from Volunteering Australia to deliver certificates I, II and III in active volunteering, which will provide the underpinning units of competency for the delivery of a locally based volunteer training course. I was very pleased to have attended and participated on that occasion and I congratulate all of the stakeholders for the enthusiasm with which they came together and initiated that process.

I said earlier that I wanted to say a few words specifically about the Nepean Volunteer Services. I acknowledge in particular that 2008 represents the 20th anniversary since its incorporation. It is a tremendous local organisation. As I said, it has been servicing the local community for two decades and has been doing so with great distinction. I acknowledge the staff, the volunteers and the members of the management committee, specifically the chairperson, Ann Ash; vice-chair, Kevin Forbes; the secretary, Peter Wilson; the treasurer, Alan Carter; the public officer and management committee member, John Ewan; other committee members, Kevin Finlayson, a great local citizen; David Arnett and David Taylor; and the services staff member, Tami Ross, who looks after accounts and administration.

The Nepean Volunteer Services run a number of significant projects that rely upon both state and federal funding. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the efforts of all of the volunteers associated with these services, but some of the paid staff as well—Kim Vlotman, the coordinator; Robin Mooring, associated with the Nepean neighbour aid service; Helen Woolfenden, from the Community Visitors Scheme; Antoinette Abdelseed and Margaret Elder from the HACC volunteer training; and also Laurel Raddatz and Trish Boyd who are from the Volunteer Referral Service.

I note that the discussion paper engages in a fairly detailed discussion of the need to develop mechanisms for the linking of volunteers and potential volunteers with organisations in need of volunteers. I think the report describes them as volunteer-using organisations, or VUOs. I am pleased to report to the House that the Volunteer Referral Service, which is in fact a New South Wales state government funded program, is very much delivering that specific service to volunteers and volunteer-using organisations within our local community. Laurel Raddatz and Trish Boyd are at the helm; they do a great job. They are funded by the Department of Community Services. They essentially interview and

recommend volunteers for community work in more than 80 not-for-profit organisations throughout the Western Sydney region.

One of the great things about this service is that it is not a simple database where volunteers can assess whether or not there is an opportunity to go and assist a particular organisation. This particular process involves someone sitting down and discussing with the potential volunteer their attributes and qualities and where they can make a contribution. As a result of that, the success rate of maintaining volunteers in the organisations that they are sent out to participate in has been very high.

I congratulate the service on the good work that they have been doing. On average, they refer more than 250 volunteers a year. The age range of volunteers is in their 20s through to retirees well into their 60s and beyond. They refer volunteers to great local organisations like the Museum of Fire, Barnardo's at Cranebrook, Edinglassie Lodge, the Governor Phillip Nursing Home, Great Community Transport, Nepean Food Services and the North St Mary's Neighbourhood Centre—just to name a few. They do a tremendous job and I acknowledge their efforts in linking volunteers with volunteer user organisations.

I said earlier that I wanted to say a few words in relation to increased administrative and legislative complexity. Clearly that is an increased burden on the not-for-profit sector. But what I would like to comment on more specifically is some of the legal implications that community groups are facing. There was an insurance crisis in this country not all that long ago and that led to massive increases in premiums, and that is something the not-for-profit sector had to confront. I think they did a good job by and large in coming to terms with that. In addition to that there are the criminal history record checks and, more and more so, the working with children checks which are obviously required and legitimate but impose a significant compliance and administrative burden on these organisations.

I want to read from some correspondence that I received from Helen Walker, who is the Manager of Great Community Transport. I take this opportunity to congratulate Helen. She is a great local resident and a great advocate of the region. Helen recently received the Woman of the West Award for her contribution to community services across the region of Western Sydney. I acknowledge her efforts. In advocating on behalf of her group, Great Community Transport, she alluded to a case that raises some of the real concerns that are expressed within this discussion paper in relation to legal obligations and requirements that arise for volunteers. She sets out in this email the events of 'a dreadful accident', as she describes it, that occurred in April this year and involved the death of a client. One of the volunteer drivers of the service had been charged with a criminal offence—that is, negligent driving causing death. This matter involved the volunteer pleading not guilty. The insurance did not cover any defence of this volunteer because there was a criminal matter involved. Notwithstanding that, support from a pro bono lawyer had been secured and that assisted. But now that the matter is going to court it involves the briefing of counsel. This person, who had been volunteering their time, through an incident that occurred on their watch and resulted in the very dreadful death of a client, now has to manage their own legal liability and exposure through the court system. That involves them having to incur costs and expenses in defending their case before the courts.

Clearly I do not wish to comment on the rights or wrongs of the charges. That is a matter for the courts. But it does raise the issue of exposure of volunteers. The organisation was insured but in this case that insurance did not provide the degree of protection necessary for assistance to this volunteer. What does that mean? What sort of message is that sending ultimately to our volunteers, who contribute their

time often at their expense? Indeed, generally it is at their expense. It is their time, and potentially they could be facing a situation such as this. It is a very difficult problem that we have to confront. I think it is something that requires a coordinated response between the states and the federal government. But in the end if volunteers are exposed to this extent then I think it would be reasonable to conclude that cases such as this will discourage some people from volunteering their services, and that would be a great shame. That is an issue that I wish to bring to the attention of the House.

In concluding I would like to once again reaffirm my absolute congratulations to all of the volunteers within our community for the great work that they do. We do not pay them and, frankly, I do not think we could ever afford to pay them, such is the magnitude of the contribution that they make. There are so many outstanding groups within my local community. They are a continued source of inspiration to me. I acknowledge their efforts and I ask them to keep doing the great work that they are doing contributing to our community.