

## Education and Health Standing Committee

### **Inquiry into mental illness in fly-in, fly-out workers**

 <p>The logo for Volunteering WA features a stylized red 'W' composed of three curved segments above the text 'volunteeringWA' in a red, lowercase, sans-serif font.</p>	<p>Volunteering WA aims to build strong, connected communities through volunteering and provides a range of resources, services and support so that people in WA are aware of and understand the nature and scope of volunteer activity.</p> <p>Traci Gamblin Senior Manager Development Volunteering WA traci@volunteeringwa.org.au (08) 9482 4333 0417 186 588</p>
 <p>The logo for Useful Inc features a stylized orange 'U' shape above the text 'USEFUL' in a bold, orange, uppercase, sans-serif font.</p>	<p>Useful Inc exists to make doing good as mainstream as cheeseburgers and breathing. Through our online platform Big Help Mob we facilitate people to connect episodic volunteering events.</p> <p>David Perich Director of All-Things-Business Useful Inc <a href="mailto:david.perich@useful.org.au">david.perich@useful.org.au</a> 0408 520 184</p>

Volunteering WA and Useful Inc would like to thank the Education and Health Standing Committee for the opportunity to submit to this inquiry. We present in this submission a case for volunteering as a powerful tool for improving FIFO workers' mental health and well-being.

We establish the evidence base for volunteering and encourage FIFO employers to develop structured opportunities for their staff to connect back to the community through volunteering.

## **Introduction**

Volunteering WA and Useful Inc do not have any specialist expertise in the mental health of FIFO workers; our interest in this area grew organically from the feedback we received from current FIFO workers who volunteer, a passion for our community and for the welfare of these individuals.

Research suggests that there are many mental health benefits from volunteer participation. Our on-the-ground experience with FIFO workers reinforces this.

The purpose of this submission is to highlight:

1. The evidence for volunteering as a powerful strategy to combat mental health and wellness challenges.
2. The opportunity for the Western Australian State Government and FIFO employers to contribute to volunteering initiatives that support their FIFO workers.

## **The Evidence For Volunteering**

A recent international systematic review (Jenkinsen et al. 2013) explored the impact of formal volunteering on physical and mental health. The review analysed forty papers exploring the impact of volunteering on depression, life satisfaction, well-being and morality. Volunteering was associated with a number of benefits, including greater well-being, reduced stress, and more physical activity (all demonstrated in experimental studies) and increased longevity, improved mental health, greater quality of life, and higher satisfaction with life (demonstrated in other types of studies).

It is difficult to confirm a causal link, but there have been several pieces of research that establish a strong correlation between volunteering and improvement in indicators of mental well-being.

- A large survey conducted by United Health Group (2013) found that employees who had volunteered in the last 12 months, 78% felt less stressed at work as a result of volunteering.
- A University of Texas (Musick, Wilson 2003) study found that prolonged exposure to volunteering lowers depression levels in older and younger people. The authors suggest this is because volunteer work 'improves access to social and psychological resources, which are known to counter negative moods such as depression and anxiety.
- A 2005 (Post 2005) academic summary of existing research on altruism concludes that on the whole, 'a strong correlation exists between the well-being, happiness, health, and longevity of people who are emotionally and behaviorally compassionate'.

- A 2009 study by the Corporate Citizenship Consultancy explored how corporate volunteering can help employees develop their skills. Participants identified an increase in their self-confidence, sense of well-being, an awareness of wider social issues and an understanding of and empathy with others.

On balance, the weight of evidence suggests that volunteering activity produces positive impacts on volunteers' mental health and wellbeing. We believe the research suggests three broad reasons for the connection:

- Volunteering is a form of social activity and participation in the broader community. Studies on the links between volunteering and mental illness generally show that participation is an important factor in generating positive mental well-being.
- Volunteering is a form of "helping" behaviour and can be identified as a self-validating experience; people feel good about themselves.
- By fostering a sense of trust in others, volunteering and involvement with a broader network can encourage volunteers to better identify if they need help and be more accepting of help if they need it.

## The Stories

The research on volunteering benefits underlines what Useful Inc. and Volunteering WA know at the core of our organisations. We could share volumes of stories about the powerful impact and transformations of individuals through volunteering. We selected a few highlights from the Volunteering WA archive and a recent Foundation for Young Australians impact study on Useful Inc's Big Help Mob Program.

These quotes show the powerful impact volunteering can have on well-being and pro-social networks of individuals:

*"I'd been interested in volunteering but most organisations needed a regular commitment. A friend mentioned Big Help Mob and it worked perfectly because I could help out if I had a spare day when back in Perth but didn't have to plan it too far ahead." - Big Help Mob Volunteer & FIFO Worker)*

*"I've struggled with mental health due to feeling different to the world, like I was alone. BHM has helped reduce my thoughts of suicide by making me feel part of a group who wants to better the world." (BHM volunteer, survey)*

*"One of the things that I think this did more than anything else was like give me a support network which allowed me to feel comfortable to try things that I might not have done before." (BHM volunteer, Untern group)*

*“Helping others makes me feel really happy. It puts a smile on my face because I feel worthwhile and useful.”* (Volunteering WA ‘Step into Volunteering’ participant)

*“I thought I had problems, until, through my volunteering, I saw how some other people live. I feel grateful every day that I have the life I have.”* (Volunteering WA ‘Step into Volunteering’ participant)

*“My volunteering role keeps me mentally healthy and physically active. I love it!”* (Volunteering WA ‘Step into Volunteering’ participant)

## **The Opportunity**

Useful Inc and Volunteering WA have highlighted the potential for volunteering to be a powerful tool for connecting the FIFO workforce back to community to improve mental health and well-being.

There is an opportunity to better support the health and well-being of FIFO workers not only through currently available mental health services and other support, but through social inclusion programs such as volunteering.

Volunteering WA works with many mining and oil & gas companies offering extensive employee volunteering programs. We’ve found that organised volunteering days often only occur with head office staff. Organising FIFO workers to participate in a volunteer day is more challenging because of rostering and remoteness.

This leaves FIFO workers to seek involvement in volunteering individually, which means that many FIFO workers do not take up the opportunity. Feedback from our own FIFO volunteers indicates an aversion to spending their own time off work organising volunteering opportunities.

Employer or industry supported, structured volunteering initiatives eliminates some of the barriers for individuals to volunteering would prove extremely valuable. Encouraging volunteering on rostered days off could be an effective social inclusion measure, and both Useful and Volunteering WA are well placed to provide these volunteer opportunities to FIFO workers.

We call on the inquiry to recommend that FIFO employers increase the number of structured employee volunteering programs as a mental health and well-being activity. Volunteering WA and Useful Inc can provide further information or evidence at the request of the inquiry.

## References

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