

MEDIA RELEASE

Tuesday 3 May, 2016



\$12 million Budget Night Cut to *Strengthening Communities* Program Set to Weaken Volunteering

Volunteer Support Organisations will need to brace for the disastrous impact of a dramatic cut to the Department of Social Services *Strengthening Communities* program in tonight's Federal Budget, with funding for the program set to shrink from \$40.5 million to \$28.4 million over the next four years, says Volunteering Australia.

Over \$8 million of that cut will take place in the first year, with *Strengthening Communities* funding set to fall to \$32 million in 2016-17, in a surprise move that comes as a complete shock to the volunteering sector.

The *Strengthening Communities* program funds a range of programs including the Volunteer Management grants program and the Volunteer Innovation and Collaboration grants. These programs were funded at a total of just \$6.4 million in the 2015-16 Budget.

It also funds the Volunteer Grants program, which provides funding of up to \$5000 to support infrastructure and volunteer expenses. In 2015-16 the total allocation for that program was \$20 million.

"Over recent months, Volunteering Australia has been unable to get a straight answer from Minister for Social Services Christian Porter about the future of Federal funding for volunteer management, and it seems tonight that our fears have been realised through a \$12 million cut to the program that was designed to support volunteering and civic participation, which is so essential to Australia's social and economic wellbeing" said Brett Williamson OAM, CEO of Volunteering Australia.

"Volunteer-involving organisations have been rightfully concerned following a Department of Social Services grants restructure that saw other organisations funded on three- to five- year grants but volunteer management programs left out in the cold on uncertain twelve- to eighteen-month funding programs" said Brett Williamson OAM, CEO of Volunteering Australia.

"The DSS grants restructure, *A New Way of Working*, promised to provide greater certainty for service providers through longer-term funding agreements but if anything, the volunteering sector has been beset with more uncertainty as a result of this restructure and tonight's Budget only exacerbates that" said Mr Williamson.

The Budget announces a "redesign" of the *Strengthening Communities* grants program, to be funded through existing resources, with the program set to be renamed *Strong and Resilient Communities* grants. Organisations currently receiving funding under the *Strengthening Communities* were unaware of this redesign plan prior to tonight's Budget announcement.

It is not clear to what extent the cut to funding for the *Strengthening Communities/Strong and Resilient Communities* program is connected to the announced redesign.

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“At this stage we have no idea what the *Strengthening Communities* redesign means for the volunteering sector and we will actively pursue further information around this proposed redesign through the Department of Social Services and Minister Porter” said Mr Williamson.

The Department of Social Services has as yet been unable to respond to questions about which specific *Strengthening Communities* programs would be affected by the \$12 million cut.

“It has not gone unnoticed that the cut to the *Strengthening Communities* program in 2016-17, at \$8 million, is so close to the total 2015-16 Budget expenditure on the Volunteer Management grants program, at \$6.4 million” Mr Williamson said.

“Volunteering plays a critical role in Australian society, and in Australia’s economy. Dr Lisel O’Dwyer of Flinders University has estimated the annual economic contribution of volunteering in Australia at \$290 billion” Mr Williamson said.

“Any federal investment in volunteering is an investment that delivers enormous benefit to our society, to our economy, and as the title of the funding program suggests, delivers a stronger and more resilient Australian community – the Federal Government must commit to continue its funding for volunteer management” said Mr Williamson.

“Volunteering Australia is concerned that this cut represents the Federal Government’s intention to get out of the business of funding volunteering altogether, and this would come as a terrible loss not just to the volunteering community, but to Australian society” Mr Williamson said.

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