

Workshop Presentation

Topic: Innovations and Good Practices in Volunteering

Opening doors: How to Bring about a Culturally Diverse Volunteer Force

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Introduction

The *Step into Voluntary Work* program has been developed and delivered in Victoria, Australia, by Judith Miralles and Associates and the Australian Multicultural Foundation over the past four years. It has two components. It aims to address the barriers that cause an imbalance in the representation of people from culturally diverse backgrounds in the voluntary sector.

The first component delivers accredited training to women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The second component is a series of skills development workshops targeting volunteer coordinators and managers on how to increase the diversity of volunteer program across organisations. The content includes how to recruit, train, support and mentor volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Working with volunteers

This component of the program seeks to demystify voluntary work and to support women from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who are eager to become involved in civic life but who also feel disinclined to make the first move on their own. Often, this reluctance to become involved in 'life outside the front door' is due to a lack of confidence in their English language skills and in their inability to meet the demands of the Australian workplace.

Almost two hundred women from many backgrounds have enrolled in the program. These are some of the countries of birth: Iran, China, Afghanistan, Sudan, Eritrea, Pakistan, Iraq, El Salvador, Argentina, Spain, Bosnia-Herzegovina, The Philippines, Vietnam...

It became clear when developing the program that *Step into voluntary work* would need to address the lack of confidence in a practical way. Whilst the primary intent of the program has been to support women who wish to become volunteers, a related objective is to provide accredited training. Consequently, the women who complete *Step into voluntary work* obtain a nationally endorsed qualification recognised by the community sector; valuable to those who later wish to go on to further training or seek work in the sector.

For many women participants, with post-secondary qualifications, the program is a way of ‘rediscovering’ their intellectual capacity despite English language difficulties. They are eager to take part in civic life and their initial apprehension about their lack of local knowledge and English language skills is counterbalanced by their strong desire to participate as citizens in Australian life.

This course helped us to overcome the lack of motivation that migrant women sometimes feel when they live in isolated areas of this country, although when we come to Australia we are already professionals with different types of degrees on our own rights and merits, so stepping forward to do this course has helped us to refresh our previous knowledge and to feel we have something to offer which is valuable. (Rosa Schirato - *Step into voluntary work* Morwell Course Graduate, 2003)

The program covers a number of key competencies, fundamental for successful engagement with the voluntary sector including the language – written and spoken – of the sector. A key difference between our program and other volunteer training programs is that it is very explicit about fundamental concepts such as confidentiality, *client support*, teamwork.....

We believe that if we are to open doors for the women who participate, we have to make sure that on completing the training program, they are able to confidently speak the language of community work. *Step into voluntary work* has to unlock the very specific philosophical, ethical and professional world of volunteering in Australia.

The training program that has been developed concentrates on the following:

- The language of the sector
- Fundamental principles underpinning voluntary work in Australia
- Communication skills for work in the sector

- Rights and responsibilities
- Roles and types of work

Working with organisations:

The second component targets organisations, both government and the not-for-profit sector. Training, organisational change management advice and mentoring are provided to bring about a whole-of-organisation approach to the recruitment, training and support of volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds.

This stage involves working with partner organisations including:

Parks Victoria; Red Cross Australia, Victoria; Melbourne Museum; Cancer Council, Victoria; and Volunteering Australia.

The program includes:

- Review of the organisation's current volunteer program
- Train the trainer workshops for staff
- Mentoring of those involved in the workshops to achieve outcomes identified in the training

So far almost 100 organisations have taken part in this part of the program and have gone on to implement policies to bring about a more culturally inclusive approach to volunteer recruitment.

Train the Trainer Program – 3 Days

The train the trainer program is divided into 3-day sessions and allows work to be completed between sessions. Topics covered include:

Recruitment and Promotion: How to recruit, Effective promotion

Inclusive Training: How to overcome obstacles, Different approaches to communication, Challenges and benefits of diverse views and values, how to train people with different English language skills

Support and mentoring: Fostering connections with other people from a language background other than English, Role models, buddies etc

Diversity Management: Research demographics, How to develop a promotional plan, How to design a training program, Strategies for a diverse volunteer workforce

The training program in particular, seeks to support an inclusive pedagogy so that volunteer trainers open the discussion in the classroom to a diversity of views and professional practices, not merely those they as professionals working in this field in Australia assume as *normal* and *universal*. Often professionals regard what they do as *normal*, see their beliefs as *universal truths*. And they see the behaviour of people from *other* cultures as the result of specific cultural beliefs and values; exotic at best, inferior or oppressive at worst.

By welcoming the views and practices of the course participants into the classroom, it is possible to gain new insights and increase the range of strategies available for working with clients in Australia's culturally diverse community. The principal objective is to ensure that everyone – volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds and volunteer trainers understand the culture-bound nature of all beliefs and practices, their own included. The class discussion seeks to create a level playing field where all beliefs and practices are critically assessed. At the same time, the approach seeks to give them the confidence to speak out and offer other alternative approaches, confident that their life experiences may sometimes give them unique and valuable insights.

Conclusions

The methodology used in the 'Step into voluntary work' program has international adaptability. In a world where cultural difference is sometimes a source of fear, this program stands as a powerful example of how cultural diversity can become a means of forging strong community connectedness and cohesion. In societies as diverse as Australia, it is also necessary to make sure that the volunteer sector reflects the community it is meant to serve.