Rural Volunteer Community Transport Drivers: The Need for Greater Participation in the Policy Process

Margaret Anderson Ms  
*University of New England*

Yoni Luxford Dr  
*University of New England*

Linda Turner Associate Professor  
*University of New England*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://epubs.scu.edu.au/jesp](http://epubs.scu.edu.au/jesp)

Recommended Citation

Rural Volunteer Community Transport Drivers: The Need for Greater Participation in the Policy Process

Abstract
Volunteers form the backbone of rural community transport services. They deliver a range of services including driving transport-disadvantaged clients to essential health and social care appointments. While trips for social care are usually local, trips for health appointments often involve long distances, long days, and out of pocket expenses for the drivers. In these situations volunteers and their passengers are exposed to increased levels of risk. Governments at all levels consider volunteer involvement as civic participation or social capital, yet little is known about the experiences of rural volunteer community transport drivers or local policy that governs their work. This paper describes a study that conducted an analysis of policy documents related to volunteer activity in four community transport organisations in rural NSW. The study explored variations in policies, whether volunteer drivers had participated in their development or revision, and whether the government models of the service agency was related to volunteer policy.

Key findings include: that operational policies lack consistency across the services; that the role of volunteer drivers varies across services located in the same region; that participation of volunteers in either developing or reviewing local policies that govern their work was evident in the policies of only one of the four services; and that governance models do not appear to be related to volunteer participation.

Keywords
rural, policy, volunteers, community transport

This article is available in Journal of Economic and Social Policy: http://epubs.scu.edu.au/jesp/vol14/iss3/5
Introduction

Volunteers form the backbone of rural community transport services. They deliver a range of services including driving transport-disadvantaged clients to essential health and social care appointments. While trips for social care are usually local, trips for health appointments often involve long distances, long days, and out of pocket expenses for the drivers. In these situations volunteers and their passengers are exposed to increased levels of risk. Governments at all levels consider volunteer involvement as civic participation or social capital, yet little is known about the experiences of rural volunteer community transport drivers or local policy that governs their work. This paper describes a study that conducted an analysis of policy documents of four community transport organisations in rural NSW with a particular focus on policies that address safe work practices for volunteer drivers.

Background

Volunteering is a fundamental building block of civil society and has a strong tradition in rural and regional Australia. The extent to which individuals and communities are expected to participate in, and to contribute through volunteerism and self-help by all levels of government is explicit in the social policy platforms they put forth (Herbert-Cheshire, 2000).

Civic participation or volunteering also makes a significant contribution to the social capital of communities (Edwards, 2004). While social capital remains a somewhat abstract concept, its effects are potentially important for public policy. Putnam (1993, p.13) says that social capital refers to “features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital.”

On the other hand research suggests that volunteers’ pleasure and level of dedication are a consequence of their perceived benefits. Giving something back and being helpful are the most commonly identified motivations for volunteering (Bussell and Forbes, 2002; Wymer, Riecken and Yavas, 1996). It is a form of productive ageing (Burr, Caro and Moorhead, 2002). It is a personal decision based on fairly stable factors and belief systems, as well as on the circumstances
of individual lives (Warburton, 1999, in Zappalà 2000, p.3). The inclination to volunteer appears to be a long-term characteristic, based on internal motivation rather than an effect of the political climate of the day. Being involved in the social life of the local community, according to Baum (2002) improves health and acts as a buffer to poorer health as age increases.

However an informed understanding of associated risks is essential; otherwise the capacity for people to volunteer without incurring negative consequences to their health and economic wellbeing may be undermined. Further, anecdotal evidence shows that the level of dedication wanes as volunteers perceived benefits sour into perceived burdens. A necessary question for volunteers to ask is: ‘what is the cost to me in volunteering’? Burr, Caro and Moorhead (2002) contend that when perceived burdens outweigh perceived benefits; civic participation may no longer contribute to healthy and productive ageing. Any definition of a volunteer must contain the following essential elements: it is uncourted help offered either informally or formally; it provides a service to the community; is done of one’s own free will and without monetary reward (Noble, 1991; Stebbins and Graham, 2004). Using volunteers is often a pragmatic decision and implies cost savings in delivering human services to the community. However there are cost implications to services that employ volunteers. For example, they must undergo screening processes, be trained in organisational procedures/policies and be reimbursed for out of pocket expenses (Community Transport Organisation, 2007).

Volunteer management is costly. If public policy assumes the ‘voluntary sector’ follows a business strategy that reduces ‘transaction costs’ by funding community based services that primarily use volunteers; then public policy criteria needs to be revisited. Davis (2003 in Smyth, Reddel and Jones, 2005, p.83) suggests that the “complexity of responding to economic and social changes combined with shifting values and expectations require Australian governments to find the policy coherence and institutional capacity to take a long term approach to political problems.”

The success of government and organisational policies to promote and extend volunteering depends to a large degree on the factors that motivate people to volunteer. The Stronger Families and Community Strategy 2004-2009 expressed a renewed Federal Government interest in building community capacity to address local issues; especially in disadvantaged areas. Zappalà (2000, p.5) makes an
astute observation when she cautions that, “increasing the extent of volunteering may not be susceptible to macro-level policy changes or influences.” This suggests that policy making has some inherent difficulties for governments, particularly in delivering services to rural communities.

Although governments actively encourage volunteerism, there has been little research that explores policy at a local level for the way it addresses the actual working conditions of volunteers or their participation in the policy process of the organisations they work for in rural New South Wales. Research tends to focus on what services are missing in rural communities, not what is being offered, or on the experience of those who volunteer, or on how to enhance and retain their participation. In addition, community based organisations that employ volunteers are being asked by government to use them more effectively, to be more accountable to the communities they serve, and the bodies that fund them. Anderson (2004b) proposed that the use of volunteers in the delivery of community transport services is passé. This raises questions such as; are local communities being burdened with the responsibility to resolve more local problems with fewer resources? Is government public policy out of step with local needs in rural Australia? Are volunteers being expected by government to deliver direct services that it does not want to fund or provide? How engaged are volunteers in the development of policy that guides their work in rural community services?

Volunteering is about power, change, resources and participation; all issues of political significance (Sheard, 1988 in Noble, 1991). The use of community transport volunteer drivers has emerged as a key element in the delivery of health related transport (Sherwood and Lewis, 2000; Volunteering Australia, 2006). So what is community transport and how do volunteers contribute to broader social outcomes?

**Community Transport**

Community transport services are provided through non-government organisations (NGOs). They are funded by governments to alleviate challenges faced by transport-disadvantaged groups including isolated families, the frail aged, younger people with disabilities, and their carers. In this way, community
transport enables transport disadvantaged people to access shopping, education, medical care, social services, recreation and social contact, where regular private or public transport systems are not considered practical or appropriate (NSW Government, 2006). Services are provided by volunteers and paid staff using safe modern cars (their own insured vehicles or service supplied) including wheelchair access.

Business partnerships are also established with local private bus operators, and taxi operators with taxi voucher subsidy schemes. Services in the New England region are funded as volunteer agencies under the Home and Community Care (HACC) program. While services are not means tested, funding criteria restricts availability and requires co-payment by clients. The main target groups in the New England region are people who are frail and aged, or those with disabilities and their carers. Two types of governance structures prevail: incorporated bodies with a management committee, or bodies under the auspice of local government authorities with an advisory committee.

The regulatory framework for the community transport industry is provided through Transport NSW. In addition, the HACC National Service Standards and Guidelines (1999) provide services with a common reference point for internal quality measures. The standards focus on service quality and consumer outcomes in seven key areas: access to services; information and consultation; efficient and effective management; coordinated, planned and reliable service delivery; privacy, confidentiality and access to personal information; complaints and disputes; and advocacy (Department of Health and Ageing, 1998). Each objective has consumer outcomes that specify a number of policies and procedures required to provide quality services.

Community Transport services were originally established to support local transport disadvantaged people to access local services. However, the rationalisation of health and medical specialist services has impacted significantly upon rural health consumers, who are now often required to travel long distances to access specialist appointments, diagnostic technologies and treatment. Many consumers are denied access, particularly those requiring frequent treatments for renal dialysis or cancer therapies as funding does not extend to accommodate such frequent and intensive health transport needs without compromising other key areas of the community transport service (Anderson, 2004a). The increased need
for health transportation has placed an increased responsibility not only on the community transport services to administer this additional role, but also on volunteer drivers who are asked to assume a responsibility that was previously provided by ambulance personnel. This shift has also seen increasing numbers of high-need passengers who require skilled personal care during transportation to access appropriate health and medical treatments. The rate of demand has grown disproportionately to the level of funding provided to services. A particularly worrying consequence of this move is that the knowledge and skill set required of the driver has also increased. But, how much professional development and complex personal care management for clients with high-care needs is it appropriate for a volunteer from the community to assume?

Denmark, Hurni and Cooper’s (2007) *Study of the Role of Community Transport in the Provision of Health Related Transport in NSW* is the most comprehensive study to date. It was jointly funded by Community Transport Organisation NSW, the Cancer Council of NSW, and the NSW Council of Social Services. Such collaboration demonstrates the level of concern and commitment across agencies to investigate this problem. A key finding was that “some patients are travelling very long distances to access health facilities. Perhaps the most disturbing finding is the significant number of patients who have to travel long journeys to regular therapy treatment” (Denmark et al., 2007, p.38). Denmark et al. (2007) also found that “rural groups relied on volunteer drivers much more than urban groups which means that volunteers are providing many long distance health related transport trips in rural areas. The heavy dependence on volunteers in some services may not be sustainable in the long term” (p. 38).

The level of dependence on rural volunteers using their own cars, in an economic climate of increasing prices for insurance, petrol and vehicle maintenance, raises the question: are there adequate incentives for volunteer drivers to use their own cars when they assume personal and financial risk in delivering health related transport in rural NSW? According to NSW Health (2005) almost one quarter of people living in rural areas will face difficulty in accessing health care. Given the ageing of the population, the lack of public transport infrastructure and the relocation of specialist health services, increased demands are placed on community transport programs to respond to the needs of transport disadvantaged rural people. The identification of the re-emergence of spatial disadvantage in rural areas has generated a perceived need for partnerships between local and state...
governments and non-government stakeholders (Walsh, 2001). Volunteers in this socio-political milieu are expected to use their own comprehensively insured car and assume the full financial risk if they have an accident in the course of providing an essential service to the community. They are also increasingly expected to provide personal care for which they have not been trained. Anderson (2004a) argued against this creeping cost shift from government to volunteer by saying that funding body expectation based upon the ability to deliver a reliable service upon volunteer labour is passé.

The shifting trends in the demands for community transport provided motivation for an empirical study that focused on understanding more about the local policy context of volunteer drivers and the conditions in which their civic participation is generated, maintained and evaluated. The preparation and execution of policy that inform these issues is usually in the hands of the board of governance. This study’s focus was to identify volunteer contribution or participation in policy formulation and review across services in the New England region. An examination of the policy related to volunteer drivers’ activity is considered. Given the level of risk associated with driving in rural areas this study was also interested in identifying policy that fostered sustainable and safe work practices for volunteer drivers.

The Role of Documents

Documents are language-based communications that articulate the shared understanding of an organisation. Given the socially constructed nature of such communication, explicit and implicit references can convey a large amount of meaning that can be incongruous when considered out of context. Policy documents create a contextualized understanding of the workplace and can provide insight into the business activity of an organisation.

It is pragmatic that organisations maintain a document review process as policies are informed by legislative changes and are ‘living’ documents. The policy implementer needs to make policy directives from government operational. Making policies translate into workplace practices is not always realised, however.
Policy work at all levels embodies relations of power. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p.75), note that, “The peripheral effects of power affect individuals understanding of their social world and how things work within it.” Empowering volunteers to participate in the policy process transforms them from passively accepting ‘volunteering’ conditions to actively participating in determining what those conditions will be. Policy becomes the major mode of discourse in community services, and the relationship of the stakeholders to the policy process becomes fundamental in influencing their behaviour, safety and sustainability. Volunteering for community services is an ethical enterprise and engagement between key stakeholders should be reflected in the policy documents and processes of the services.

In the example of community transport, volunteer drivers reflect on-road conditions and the driving landscape, and how best to navigate the environment in their everyday roles. Their feedback becomes a very useful risk management strategy as it flags hazardous road conditions that may cause problems for other drivers. How volunteers are involved in informing the decision-making process becomes an important consideration. It is argued that to validate the volunteer driver’s importance, they need to be engaged as a partner in the formulation, implementation and review of both policy and work practice. Anderson and Luxford’s (2008) policy review research clearly recommends the importance of establishing a democratic dialogue in the development of organisational policy development. This raises the importance of ethical considerations in organisational behaviour.

The following anecdotal exemplar shows the importance of focusing on ensuring consistency in local policies that govern the work practices of volunteer community transport drivers:

Mr Jones is 87 years of age. He needs to travel from Wee Waa to Tamworth Rural Referral Hospital for day surgery. It is a three-hour drive of some 213 kilometres. He needs to be at admissions by 7.00 am. Bill is the volunteer driver. He gets up at 3.00 am and collects Mr Jones at 3.30 am. They arrive on time. Mr Jones undergoes the procedure. He has complications and is required to be stabilised for four hours longer than expected. During this time Bill patiently waits at the transit lounge. Mr. Jones is discharged at 4.05 pm. On the way home Bill hits a kangaroo at 5.25 pm. His car has minor damages, but is drivable. They
do not arrive home until 9.05 pm. Bill had to stop twice to provide personal care to Mr Jones as there was no carer to assist him. Bill is 79 years old. The driver’s age is irrelevant to hitting of the kangaroo. The time of day is the problem. Dusk is well known as the most common time for drivers to encounter kangaroos on the road.

Of particular concern in this exemplar are: the length of day for both the driver and the client (18 hours), the expectation of providing personal care in transit, safety in driving at known risk times, and the financial costs incurred by Bill’s encounter with the kangaroo. Under current NSW community transport policy the individual driver assumes financial responsibility for every accident incurred while driving their own car on the job; volunteers pay the excess on their own insurance (in the vicinity of $300-$500) and cover the cost increases to their insurance incurred in changes to their no-claim bonus over the ensuing years. Volunteers are reimbursed at a kilometre rate in line with the Australian Taxation Office rebates. Whether this adequately covers Bill’s expenses incurred through the accident is a moot point. Is it fair to expect a volunteer to carry this level of physical and financial cost? The International Declaration of Volunteering 1990 would encourage equitable treatment of volunteers with the paid community transport staff as fair.

Research Design

The research problem investigated in this study is: What level of volunteer engagement operates in the policies of community transport services in the New England region? The purpose of this study was to assess the key policies related to volunteer activity of four rural community transport services in the New England region of New South Wales against the seven core objectives of the HACC National Service Standards (1999). The research objectives were:

1. To identify and analyse variations in policies related to volunteer activity;
2. To identify evidence of volunteer involvement in policy process;
3. To assess whether the governance model impacted on policy related to volunteer activity and practice.

Conceptual Framework
The conceptual framework for the study is summarised in Figure 1. It identifies the goal, aim and theoretical underpinnings. The methodology used for data collection and analysis are summarised and implications for practice are identified.

Given that there are two governance models, policy documents were collected from both service types. There are eight community transport services in the region. Six programs use a ‘management committee’ type governance structure, and two programs are under auspice of local government with an ‘advisory committee’. Purposeful sampling was used to select two services from each governance type. Because this project relates only to the analysis of policy documents, ethics approval was not required. However, ethical sensitivity was required in analysing the policies as they concerned the practices of services in a regional network in which the researcher as a colleague and service manager was keen to enhance relationships across the network.
Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the New England Transport Forum policy study.

Data Collection

The managers of four community transport services were sent letters inviting their participation in the project. They were asked to identify and select what they
thought were the key policies related to volunteer activity in their service. The managers were given the option of submitting the selected policies by mail in a reply paid envelope, or by email. The timing of the data collection phase of the study was pertinent, as it fell before the final Regional Transport Forum for 2008. This provided an opportunity to present the preliminary findings of the study to key stakeholders. The service for which the researcher worked was a participant. To address issues of potential bias in the selection of policies an independent employee selected the volunteer activity policies.

**Data Analysis**

A matrix was developed to organise and analyse each of the policies. The services were coded to maintain confidentiality in the presentation of findings. Firstly, each policy was assessed against seven core objectives of the National HACC Service Standards. The policies were then grouped by type according to the following themes that are derived from the guidelines that inform the National HACC Service Standards:

1. occupational health and safety;
2. volunteer management;
3. service design and delivery.

Secondly, the tool used to analyse volunteer activity policies was adapted from existing instruments: the *Written Document Analysis Worksheet* developed by the Education Staff of the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington DC (nd). As this tool did not adequately address the involvement of stakeholders in the development of policies an action research informed process developed by Dick (1997) was integrated into the review tool.

**Findings**

Managers were instructed to select the key policies that were related to volunteer activity in their service. A total of sixteen policies were returned, four from each of the participating services. A variety of policies were submitted for analysis. Titles of the policies are presented in Table 1.
1. Variations in policies related to volunteer activity

Policy titles ranged from confidentiality, driver safety, suspected passenger trauma policy, reimbursement of expenses, and code of conduct. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants the colours yellow, blue, green and rose identified services.

Table 1: Types of volunteer-related policies returned from study participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Transport Service</th>
<th>Title of Volunteer Activity Policies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Yellow                      | Volunteer rights and responsibilities  
Volunteer driver reimbursement of expenses policy  
Code of conduct for team members  
Long distance driving policy |
| Blue                        | Volunteer rights and responsibilities  
Insurance for volunteers using their own car  
Reimbursement of expenses  
Confidentiality |
| Green                       | Driver safety policy  
Physical contact policy  
Suspected passenger trauma policy  
Passenger at-risk policy |
| Rose                        | Drivers right of refusal  
Team management policy  
Code of conduct for team members  
Privacy and confidentiality |

The policies were then analysed against the core objectives of the HACC standards and presented in a matrix summarised against three key themes: occupational health and safety, volunteer management, and service design and delivery. Table 2 shows an extract to explain the process. The policy type in the example is Volunteer Management. The specific policy identified is a Volunteer driver reimbursement of expenses. It is assessed against the relevant National HACC Standard to which it applies, which in this case is Standard 3: Efficient and Effective Management. It is also assessed against industry regulations: The International Declaration of Volunteering 1990, and Australian Tax Office - Personal Use of Vehicles to determine whether there was equity in office practices that ensured volunteers are treated in the same manner as paid staff.
Table 2: Example of policy type reviewed against the National HACC Service Standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy type: volunteer management</th>
<th>National HACC Service Standards</th>
<th>Location 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer driver reimbursement of expenses policy</td>
<td>HACC Standard 3: Efficient and Effective Management; The International Declaration of Volunteering, 1990; Australian Tax Office -Personal Use of Vehicles</td>
<td>Generally, this policy was written so the organisation could demonstrate accountable management practice. Specifically this policy was written so the service could demonstrate consistency in decision-making of the reimbursement rate to volunteer drivers. This policy satisfies in full the HACC Objective 3: Efficient and Effective Management for it also demonstrates that volunteers have participated in the review of the policy as it is dated. This also satisfies the International Declaration of Volunteering 1990. The Australian Tax Office -Personal Use of Vehicles has rates of $0.54 cents (4 cylinder) $0.62 cent (6 cylinder) per kilometre. These services rates for volunteers are consistent with rates of reimbursement to the service staff. (Being under auspice to a Local Government Authority it is common knowledge that LGA’s reimburse staff at the Tax rates). This then also satisfies the requirement of the International Declaration of Volunteering 1990, where volunteers are treated equally with paid workers for out of pocket expenses. 6 cylinder vehicles are demonstrably more expensive to run, and hence these drivers are not disadvantaged under the services policy: they receive the higher rate at $0.62 whereas 4 cylinders receives $0.54 rate per kilometre.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Evidence of volunteer involvement in policy process
Evidence of explicit engagement of volunteers in the policy process was noted in only one service. The policies from this service stated the date that volunteers participated in policy creation/revision.

Given that the National HACC Service Standards are relatively prescriptive, and that NETF services are members of the state peak body, consistency in the wording of policy documents is not surprising, given the professional context. However, the lack of consistency in the engagement of volunteers in the policy development process is not so easily understood.

3. **Assessment of whether governance model impacted on policy related to volunteer activity and practice.**

Overall, there was a 50% similarity in the focus of chosen policies across all service types irrespective of governance type. The selection of policy type may have highlighted a particular activity occurring at the time of the research. For example, a review of volunteer reimbursement was underway at both yellow and blue services as their local government authorities had this item scheduled for their financial review committees. While self-selection of policies may indicate priorities of particular managers or services, it made comparisons between services difficult. On the other hand, an unintended outcome of the range of selections was that it provided impetus towards policy consistency across services in the region.

**Limitations of the Study**

The size of the study as a regional project is a limitation of the study. The New England region is not similar to many regional areas, particularly metropolitan settings. However, given that the metropolitan services are not funded as volunteer projects and all rural services are, a degree of resonance applies for volunteer management and policy practice considerations in rural regions.

The researcher’s insider status as a community transport manager of one of the participating services may have biased the quality of analysis of the Community Transport services with a different governance type from the one she manages. Specifically, the researcher has limited understanding of the requirements under one of the two governance models. Secondly, the tool used for the document analysis was developed specifically to gather textual data from the documents.
reviewed for this study and did not allow analysis of how policies were operationalised at each community transport agency for volunteer drivers. Interviews with the service managers may have elicited additional information not available in the documents.

**Implications**

Policies articulate the shared understanding of an organisation and create a contextual understanding of the workplace. Engaging all stakeholders in the policy process contributes to work practices that are informed by those doing the job and may generate operational benefits. It is clear that policy making poses some challenges for governments, particularly in delivering services to rural communities. The way forward for the community transport services in the state is to ensure that the policy landscape sustain and supports its social capital. Only one of the services reviewed invited volunteers to participate in policy formulation and review. We propose that participation of volunteers represents an effective strategy that goes some way to ensuring that policy meets the needs of those who provide the backbone of the service.

This small study is timely and relevant to the needs of local services. This is evidenced in an outcome of a presentation of the preliminary report of the study to the quarterly New England Regional Transport Forum (NERTF). In this forum community transport managers discuss policy and practice implications for their service and the region. In acknowledging the differences and limitations of the policy development process at individual sites the managers resolved to take a collaborative regionalised policy formulation and review process as a continuous improvement strategy. This resolution entailed a commitment to engage volunteers in the policy process. Further it enabled the NERTF to engage more robustly with a national initiative for consistent standards and the pursuit of industry best practice.

**Conclusion**

Policy will become the major mode of discourse as a shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ pervades. It is important that volunteers are sustained as
contributing to social capital in the full sense described by Putnam (1995), and do not become a social risk as they assist in helping rural communities address local needs. The reported study and its findings have led to ongoing research into understanding the experience of community transport volunteer drivers in regional NSW. A safe journey should be expected as volunteers and their passengers travel the distances of their rural landscapes to connect with essential health and social care services.

References


