

Research Project: Shaping the Future of Volunteering

Overview and Summary of Findings of Narrative Based Research commissioned by Challenger. – May 2016



Introduction

There is an increasing body of evidence that supports the notion that Meals on Wheels is *More Than Just a Meal*.

This evidence is most often associated with the benefits to clients in relation to the core elements of the service; monitoring, well-being and socialisation.

- **We Nourish;**
A meal delivered to your door
- **We Care;**
A safe and well-being check
- **We Strengthen Communities;**
A service that brings people together
- **We're More Than Just a Meal.**
- **Indeed; We're Three Services in One!**

The third 'service element' above, 'We Strengthen Communities' is the one that receives the least attention.

The findings of this research address this oversight and illuminate the multi-faceted benefits of volunteering for individuals and communities.

For the Australian Meals on Wheels Association (AMOWA), State Associations, and Services; it provides valuable insights in terms of recruitment and volunteer retention.

For government and other stakeholders; it indicates that there are positive mental and physical health outcomes for volunteers and that their ongoing engagement generates social capital.

The Research

Questions raised in reference to the Community Services Sector about volunteering, have often included;

1. **What motivates people to volunteer, what might make them stop volunteering and what detracts them from volunteering?**
2. **How do service delivery models work (or not) and impact on attracting and retaining volunteers?**

Using narrative based research, especially designed to better understand complex issues, people were asked to respond to the question, ***“Thinking about your day to day life, what major experience have you had that would cause you to consider volunteering”.***

Respondents were then asked a series of questions about their experience.

The narrative collection spanned a two-month period, resulting in a total of 609 contributions, 536 from current volunteers and 73 from non-volunteers, from all states in Australia.

Researcher *Complexability* used Sensemaker™ software, and the data was used to identify a series of insights to provide answers to the questions above.

This process allowed insights to emerge, directly gained from the volunteers and prospective volunteers, without any interpretation of third parties.

Summary of Findings:

What Motivates Volunteers?

Respondents **did not feel** volunteering was about a **need to fulfill duty and obligation**. Volunteering is not a haphazard and random matter.

Respondents actively choose an organisation.

It is an informed choice.

Their initial attraction and on-going commitment depended on;

- Sharing similar values to the organisation
- The opportunity of working in a team
- Opportunity to utilise their skills, and or professional development
- Giving back to the community in a way that suited them
- Having an organisation that would assist them on their volunteer journey

In terms of what demotivates people from volunteering, 71% of respondents agreed that **government imposes too much red tape and bureaucracy**.

This was the most common theme in terms of any negativity.

Health and Well-Being Benefits

Of those respondents currently volunteering, 83% strongly agreed that volunteering means "I am able to stay independent and active longer".

The process of volunteering contributes significantly to a person's health and well-being.

It provides;

- **A sense of belonging**
- **It gives purpose**
- **It fosters friendships**

Broader Community Benefits – A Two Way Street

Volunteers indicated that volunteering is about **impacting the lives of others** and **keeping in touch with the community**.

Volunteering also gives a **sense of enablement** to volunteers through the **development of social capital**.

Volunteering enabled volunteers;

- To engage with a variety of new people, including those different from them and the inspiration and gratification of making a positive impact.
- To build friendships, many of which were long lasting and to have a sense of belonging, through the support of other volunteers, as well as a connection to their community.
- Personal growth through and sense of purpose and an opportunity to learn new skills by being involved in a variety of roles and jobs.

Most volunteers had only volunteered for one or two organisations.

The overwhelming majority of volunteers indicated that they would remember positive experiences from their volunteering for a very long time.

They felt that Meals on Wheels appreciated and recognised their efforts which encouraged them to stay with the organisation for the longer term

What Volunteers Say

A key element of the research involved asking respondents to reflect on the experiences they most valued by volunteering, and this is the focus of the majority of the comments listed below.

Many get to the heart of what motivates them to volunteer, and they invariably recall specific incidents that directly relate to those they have helped.

In relation to Meals on Wheels volunteers, their comments repeatedly highlight that recipients and their families place significant value on the socialisation, monitoring and well-being aspects of the service, and that these contribute to their on-going peace of mind and independence.

The first hand, tangible outcomes/benefits witnessed by volunteers, as a result of their contribution, indicates that a sense of purpose is vital to their ongoing commitment.

A sample of comments that illustrate the summary of findings is also available.

A Sample of Comments



The following comments are a small sample and illustrate the summary of findings.
Note; Some comments have been condensed and slightly edited in terms of syntax.

Community services and volunteers are vital to all communities. Whether I'm fighting fires, rescuing people, delivering meals, reading with children... I'm happy volunteering. Seeing faces filled with relief, joy, happiness and sadness are all part of the volunteering experience...

Volunteering for me bridges the gap between paid work and full time retirement. It gives me a reason to get up in the morning and provides me with the daily social contact that, living on my own, I don't have. I feel needed, alive, important and included.

I volunteer my time to assist those who by circumstances - the luck of the draw - are not as well off or as able as I am.

I went to call on a client, I had to go through two security gates...as good luck would have it, the first security door was opened by a car coming out and the second one was opened by another person coming out of the building. When I finally reached the client he had fallen and was on the floor...I rang the office, who then contacted an ambulance...and the client was then taken to hospital. If I hadn't come to give him Meals on Wheels he would have been left alone ...

When meals aren't delivered the deliverers telephone me or leave a message on my mobile. I then contact the client to make sure if they are ok. They always thank me for ringing, in fact some clients are not aware that a check is done on them when they do not answer the door. If I can't get hold of the client, I have to contact their family/friends. They are always grateful to receive the call ...

It is the overall experience of creating a link with vulnerable people. Not only by ensuring they have nourishing food, but having a legitimate reason to be in their homes and to have a conversation. I look forward to my visits and have done so for over 40 years.

I remember the friends I made and the experiences I gained working with people from different generations.

I am of migrant background and started my volunteering 31 years ago...My volunteering has widened my networks and help me learn so much about Australian culture and how to navigate the system.

While visiting a couple I noticed that the female partner was not well. I asked what the problem was and she showed me an angry sore on her leg. I suggested that she could perhaps contact her doctor, which she did...The next time we delivered to this couple I noticed how much better the client was looking. I asked after the sore on her leg and she told me that the district nurse was dressing the wound daily. Meals on Wheels is more than just delivering a meal.

The experience that most stands out is a regular MOW delivery I make to a man in his 40's. He is a paraplegic and despite his disability he is always cheerful and welcoming and always looks out for our arrival. Prior to his accident, this gentleman was a medical specialist with a brilliant career ahead of him... What I admire the most about him is his humility, and his positive nature. It shows me that in the face of adversity, there is always some positives and that we as humans can adapt to almost any situation we are faced with.

More than just a meal

A Sample of Comments



Meals on Wheels

The people I deliver to are very grateful for the service as it means they can actually remain in their own homes. It always crosses my mind that the people I deliver to were once vital people in our community and that someday I may find myself in their position. I feel that we all have an obligation to 'pay it forward'.

Volunteer work opened the door to paid work. I learned new skills, upgraded existing ones and learnt to socialise in an office again...my confidence returned ...

My experience of volunteering at Meals on Wheels is one of satisfaction. The most important factor has been providing help and assistance to those who need it, as well as the wonderful friendships with the other volunteers and working as a team.

Having been in catering and education for over 40 years, much of that in managerial roles...I am amazed how year after year the kitchen produces hundreds of meals without any one person being obviously "in charge". Despite this the work runs smoothly, with most volunteers being able to multi-task and do whatever jobs are required. New volunteers are supported and welcomed and allowed to find their place in the group.

Our deliverer arrived at a client's home and noticed the man's gopher was outside. The dog was inside and he could not get a response from the client. As the deliverer had been doing this route for a number of years he knew this was out of character. He rang me at the kitchen, then I rang the home number and received no answer, so called the police. The man made it to hospital. He died the next day, but at least his family were able to get down from the country to say their goodbyes. At his funeral his family had nothing but praise for our service. Our motto More Than Just a Meal proved to ring true. Whilst nutritious meals are important, the total well-being of our clients is also a priority.

I have really enjoyed my time working with other volunteers in the Meals on Wheels kitchens... It has meant meeting other like-minded people who both inspire and broaden your life experiences.

It gives me a sense of satisfaction each time I volunteer by delivering a healthy meal to those unable to provide it for themselves for various reasons. I have met many interesting people who keep me motivated and remind me that age is not a barrier to enjoying life and that much can still be achieved.

I deliver Meals on Wheels to a vision-impaired lady who has a Labrador guide dog, who is very friendly and comes to the door each time. She is always remarkably cheerful and enjoys having a chat.

Delivering meals...is very rewarding. I came across one lovely lady on one round, her only visitors were the meals deliverers. I noticed she needed a little more care and was able to refer her for further support.

I have found Meals on Wheels volunteering a very fulfilling and rewarding experience... over the 20 years I have been involved I have met and befriended people I would never have had the chance to meet ... It is not just delivering their meals but also being a contact for them if they need to be referred to a health service. It is a wonderful way to contribute...and only requires a few hours of my time.

I remember delivering a meal to a lady and she told me it was her 84th birthday. I asked her what she would be doing to celebrate? She said that she had no close family and would just spend the day in her unit. I suggested that there was a club around the corner where she could go it brought home to me the importance of volunteers...

My dad was a volunteer driver for Meals on Wheels in the UK. After he died, I wanted to do some volunteer work I wasn't sure what. I was passing a Meals on Wheels kitchen one day; I had driven past many times but I had never actually realised what the building was. The door was open... it seemed to be fate; Meals on Wheels kind of found me! Becoming part of a group of people with a common goal and helping those within the community was very important to me, particularly as a new migrant.

A Sample of Comments



Meals on Wheels

I delivered Meals on Wheels on Christmas Day. It saddened me to think I may be the only person a person would see on such a special day...the clients we visited were so grateful...it makes you appreciate what you have and what you can do to make a difference.

The concept of "not just a meal" is not new...we bring clients' bins from the street, empty their letter boxes...but it can be sad and funny...the sight of a young man clearly affected by substance abuse and not being able to communicate, I worried about him for a long time...another client had a habit of answering the door naked and I'd say "I will come in when you get some clothes on."

I have developing a rapport with an 80 year-old male client who lives alone and shares my previous vocational interest in defence and love of sport, particularly Rugby League. I look forward to delivering his meal each week when we discuss current affairs, the previous weekend's games and prospects for our different teams on the following weekend.

Our service is essential to people being able to live in their own homes and maintain the independence they so value.

I like the company of other volunteers, the mateship of working together in the kitchen for such a worthwhile cause and the joy of visiting our clients and speaking to them face to face.

I have been involved for over twelve years. It is a constant buzz when delivering to see the difference it makes to people who are able to stay in their own homes and who so much appreciate the service.

I had to stop driving due to a back problem, but have been given the opportunity to look after the accounts here at my local service. Although I am not in contact with clients directly, I still keep tabs on their wellbeing through the other volunteers here.

I remember delivering a meal to a wonderful woman who was about to celebrate her 100th birthday. My delivery partner said "I guess you are looking forward to receiving a telegram from the Queen?". She replied indignantly, "Why would I want a telegram from the Queen? I don't know her and she certainly doesn't know me!". End of discussion.

One particular client looked forward to her meal deliveries as we were her only regular social contact apart from family. We had great conversations about our local area. She had lost her sight but still enjoyed swimming and listening to the radio, she kept right up to date with anything in the news. We could share a good laugh. She lived in a very modest run-down house, never used heating in winter because of cost, but always remained positive and upbeat. She passed away two years ago... I admired her greatly and think of her always when I drive past her house.

I deliver to a woman in her nineties who is quite alert and mobile. She is very appreciative of the service and the volunteers and refers to me as her "special friend" which I appreciate immensely.

The wife of one of our clients passed away and we didn't know until the day we were due to deliver again. We were able to offer our sympathy and support...He and my partner are keen on their gardening and often share ideas ...

While volunteering a very elderly woman taught me so much with her quick wit and wisdom. Considering her probable discomfort due to her health...her interest in me is something I am so grateful for.

When meals aren't delivered (because the client does not answer the door) the deliverers telephone me or leave a message. I then contact the client to make sure if they are ok. Of course there are some that can be quite blunt about being interrupted by a call but that is the minority. Once I explain the call is to check on their welfare they end by thanking me.

A Sample of Comments

Myths and Misconceptions



I remember delivering a meal with my husband to a dear gentleman who we watched slowly declining in health over the last few months. It took us a while to get to know him and have a chat. One morning we opened the door and found him in his chair breathing very shallow and incoherent. I followed the procedure and called 000...I sat with him and held his hand in between talking to the paramedics. I knew he felt someone was with him as he squeezed my hand when I was talking to him. The paramedics called a doctor but he passed away peacefully. I will always remember this experience, and felt that he was not alone when passing.

Two things stand out during my time volunteering. On two occasions I found clients who did not answer their doors. I feel that by volunteering I may have saved their lives (after calls to the office, an ambulance was called). This shows how important this service is...and the only contact could be the person who delivers their meals ...

When I first started delivering in my area, I went to a house that I had often walked past but had always believed to be empty (derelict). This however was the home of an elderly gentleman, who had lived alone in the house since both his parents had died. It was like a time capsule from the 1940's. Over time we spoke more and I would visit every so often when I walked by to the local shops. I could have known and helped my "neighbour" (only 2 streets away) 15 years sooner... Meals on Wheels connected us. We spoke over the years about many topics, he was sharp as a tack. I was one of five people at his funeral.

I delivered a meal to a woman, and one day when she opened the door she leaned against the wall clutching her chest with both hands. I thought "heart problem". I offered to call doctor, was told "no". I offered to call family, was told "no". I called the office and reported the situation...they called an ambulance and she was taken to hospital. Five weeks later she returned home and was full of thanks for saving her life. Family members also passed on their thanks.

I have volunteered...for over fifteen years and choose not to be in paid work. My husband earns enough to sustain us and we have adjusted our lifestyle accordingly. People have asked me when I'm going to go and get a "real" job. People who don't volunteer think of volunteering as a hobby and not real work ...

I ring the bell, open the door and shout "Meals on Wheels". A distant response of "come in". As I walk in he sees me and says "Oh you, come in ..." and turns off the television. He still doesn't know my name but he knows me and has some fantastic stories to tell. "Want a drink?" he asks although he knows I never accept...he has had a hard life and lived through some dangerous times...he has his beliefs and very occasionally has got very vigorous about these views. Although I have heard many of the stories before there is usually something new in them and I really enjoy seeing him so engaged.

I am extremely grateful for the privilege of having the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives in this way...as it happens, volunteering has also made a difference in my life.

In volunteering my time, I have met many and varied people, lonely, trusting, elderly, unwell...helping each of them is its own reward. I remember a widower - in a state of vulnerability. He trusted me as a volunteer, which helped him come out of deep grief, and slowly see that life can recommence, even though very different ...

It is so satisfying, the realisation that you can make a real difference to the lives of some of the clients who, for various reasons, rely deeply on the service to enable them to lead a more active and fulfilling life.

I remember the first time I delivered Meals on Wheels I was very surprised when a 20 year old man answered the door and took the meal. I was 52 years old at the time and I thought the role should be reversed. It's easy to stereotype people who need Meals and Wheels, when they are actually quite diverse ...

A Sample of Comments



When I first started volunteering I had no idea what to expect. It didn't take long to get to know the people I was delivering to. It changed my life and gave me a different perspective. It wasn't just leaving the meal...it was much more, to see their faces light-up when they opened the door was absolutely fabulous, it would make my day as well. I had no idea how vulnerable and lonely some people were. When I do deliveries, I try to spend a few minutes with each client. I truly enjoy doing Meals on Wheels.

I used to deliver Meals on Wheels to an elderly gentleman who had lived in my area for many years and he loved to reminisce. I learned so much from him about local history and people...I tried to leave him until last so I could spend extra time with him as both of us enjoyed the time very much. I think he did more for me than I did for him.

Our role involves not only providing meals, but support and information that may be useful to them...acting as a sounding board for any problems or difficulties they may have...

Delivering Meals on Wheels regularly we can observe any behavioural or health changes in our customers. I felt very confident in the system... my colleagues and I reported a gradual decline in one woman over several weeks to our supervisor. It transpired she had been staying in bed, stashing her meals in the fridge and was malnourished and in need of a greater level of care. This is just one of many examples I could recount after 10 years as a Meals on Wheels volunteer.

Volunteers are what help keep the country functioning (by cutting down costs). Sometimes volunteering provides a person with a useful purpose in life and for some a connection to the outside world they otherwise would not have.

Meals on Wheels is a win-win organisation.

I get satisfaction volunteering for the organisation that delivered meals to my mother in the later stages of her life. She was a difficult lady and the volunteers at Meals on Wheels made my life so much easier.

I found a client on the floor. It was clear she had fallen and I used my first aid training to assess her. I called the office who called her son and the ambulance. The paramedics also called me for an update until they arrived ...

I recently learned that one of our regular clients used to be a pilot, and is currently building his own plane! This in itself is of course a pretty incredible feat, but when you also consider the fact that he is very elderly and quite unwell, I find it absolutely amazing! He intends to fly the plane when it is finished and has recently had a new pergola built to protect it whilst it is under construction. It is about two thirds of the way towards completion and is looking extremely impressive!

A client was ever so grateful that we remembered her birthday. I said "Our pleasure Mrs Smith". Her response was "Heavens dear, don't call me Mrs Smith, it makes me sound so old. My name is Sarah!" *names changed

At the annual lunches given to us to thank us for volunteering I meet the other volunteers. We realise that we gain more in friends and satisfaction for ourselves than we give with our time and efforts.

Relatives of our customers appreciate that the delivery volunteers are in personal contact with their (often) elderly loved ones.

A man started on our service. He was pretty obviously an alcoholic and looked to be in pretty bad shape. At the time I was thinking "he won't be on long". Over the last year and a half, we have seen his health improve. He sits on his front veranda with a basket waiting for us to arrive with his meals. When he sees us pull up he comes to the gate to get his meal, has a short chat with us and wishes us a good day. It is just one case where I can see that we have made a significant difference to someone ...

Meals on Wheels is a wonderful community service. I once helped a client who had been harassed by a salesperson who went door to door to sign up for repairs... ones that she didn't really need or could afford. The office people investigated and helped resolve the issue. I was thanked profusely the next time I called with a meal.

A Sample of Comments



I volunteer in the office doing administration, so contact with clients is by phone when requesting meals. It gives me great satisfaction to know that you are taking away the worry from someone who is possibly unwell, just out of hospital or unable to manage to cook for themselves, by arranging meals for them. We are enabling them to be in their own home, which is where they want to be.

When I started volunteering, I realised just how many people who live so close to me get Meals on Wheels, for such a wide variety of reasons and ages. If there is one thing the majority of the people I deliver want, it is just a little bit of my time for a short chat about nothing in particular. I am more than happy to give that time as we may be the only contact they have during their day. Meals on Wheels is such an important service because if nothing else it is a check up on so many people that could go unnoticed ...

I remember delivering meals to a former nursing sister who kept a very close eye on another occupant in her unit block, also a Meals on Wheels client. This man had mental health issues and after his father died, no real family support. Mary helped him by buying clothes and helping him manage his money. She also encouraged him to do jobs for her...walking to the corner shop to buy her paper etc. and he also checked on her each day.... they helped one another. This man found Mary when she passed away... peacefully in her chair in her own home.

One of our volunteers delivering meals rang to say that one of our clients had had a fall in her garden and was unable to get up. She had already phoned for an ambulance. The client had fallen sometime that morning and had injured herself. She was taken to hospital to make her recovery.

This client received very few visitors and her home is sealed from view from passers-by. If it had not been for Meals on Wheels it is unlikely that our client would have been found; I shudder to say, but it is unlikely she could have survived the day. Meals on Wheels really did save a life that day. This is not uncommon. This is such a valuable service and I am so proud to be a part of such a fantastic service and a team that serves our community.

It is not only clients who lives are better off by Meals on Wheels. The satisfaction of doing something practical, but personal is a reward in itself. Meals on Wheels enables frail and not so frail young people with disabilities and continue to remain at home and enjoy life ...

As a Welfare Officer / Assessment Officer in a rural community I visited a husband and wife who were about to start receiving meals. Their children urged them to get meals. The husband was keen but the wife quite unwilling. I was not given any history about this couple before I visited. The visit went well, they were both quite mobile and spoke easily about their past, their current lifestyle and a little about the husband's need for meals. The wife said she didn't want to eat a main meal at midday and was very capable of getting her own meals. I left puzzled about why they needed the meals. After a conversation with their son later - he had Power of Attorney for them - I discovered that the wife had significant dementia and was totally in denial, the husband also had dementia but to a lesser degree... yet on the surface when talking to the couple they seemed very alert and capable of managing at home. As deliveries progressed the situation became complex. They would cancel meals at random, and would go out instead of staying at home to receive their meals. The family often got extremely frustrated and upset... but we kept delivering meals. What I remember about this is that things aren't always as they seem.

Whilst I feel I volunteer to help others I believe that doing it helps me. I come away with a sense of friendship and feeling appreciated.

An elderly man had lost his wife and was absolutely distraught. He was what we knew as "grumpy" - lonely, depressed, not coping with life. As time progressed he opened up and spoke of his life, his loneliness, his wife, his family, his health and how he was coping with the house. Instead of just dropping meals off we had become friends and he looked forward to our short visits. He eventually went into fulltime care, but I felt we had perhaps brightened his day and given him not only a welcome meal, but a caring word to look forward to.