

Swimming NSW

Engagement and wellbeing of volunteers

Evaluation Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In September 2019, Swimming NSW approached Black Dog Institute (BDI) with some mental health concerns for long serving technical officials transitioning out of their roles. Swimming NSW sought to better understand the challenges faced by these technical officials and the role the organisation could play in promoting positive mental health for these important members of the Swimming NSW community.

Black Dog Institute subsequently proposed to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of all Swimming NSW volunteers through delivery of an Engagement and Wellbeing Survey, followed by a focus group with key internal stakeholders.

Results

Overall, the news about volunteering for Swimming NSW is generally good. The majority of volunteers reported feeling motivated, supported, connected, and mentally and physically well, however there is still a minority who do not share those experiences. For example, about 40% reported low levels of motivation to volunteer, about 20% reported low levels of perceived support from Swimming NSW, more women than men reported not feeling connected to Swimming NSW, and nearly a third of the participants reported feeling downhearted and blue either *a good bit of the time* or *all or most of the time*.

In general, there were no clear differences in mental or physical health according to age, gender, or length of service. There was one exception, where older volunteers were more likely to report that pain had interfered with conducting their normal activities.

Conclusion

While the particular mental health concerns which initiated the survey (i.e. concern for the mental health of retiring volunteers) were not validated by the survey results, there were still results indicating that as a group, Swimming NSW volunteers experience levels of distress that are comparable to the general population and for some individuals, the experience is distressing. As such, BDI does recommend proactive promotion of mental health literacy, along with the provision of avenues for effective support and resources for the whole of the Swimming NSW community.

A range of additional avenues are worth exploring by Swimming NSW based on the findings of the survey, however this falls outside of the scope of BDI's offerings. A review of Swimming NSW policies and procedures and their implementation is recommended in relation to the Code of Conduct, volunteer reward and recognition and grievance management.

Acknowledgements

BDI would like to thank Swimming NSW, their senior management team and volunteers for the opportunity to engage in this important initiative to support your passionate volunteer workforce.

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 Key findings

Swimming NSW volunteers are community minded

Swimming NSW volunteers reported that the key reasons they volunteered were to contribute to their community, provide that community with their expertise, and to meet new people. Clearly volunteers are mindful of their individual membership in a community that they seek to both connect with and contribute to, in order to both give and receive benefits. Some did report that they volunteered in order to benefit their personal wellbeing, but on the whole, volunteering was conceived of at the community level, rather than just the personal.

Many of the volunteers report positive experiences related to helping swimmers develop on their potential and achieve their goals.

The news about volunteering for Swimming NSW is generally good

Across a range of different measures, the majority of Swimming NSW volunteers report positive experiences and commitment to their role. For example, the majority (69%) of survey respondents reported having served as a volunteer for five or more years, with a third reporting they had volunteered for 15 years or more. Likewise, a majority reported they were motivated in their current role (58%), felt supported by Swimming NSW (82%), and felt connected to the Swimming NSW organisation (76%).

This was further reflected in their self-reported volunteering over the previous 12 months, where the majority had volunteered at club level (90%) area level events (88%). In many cases, volunteers reported participating in at least six or more events at those competition levels (Club: 76%; Area: 51%).

Combined with the qualitative data which showed respondents were rewarded by watching the development of swimmers and seeing them compete at higher levels of competition, it would seem that Swimming NSW is in a great position to offer volunteers an interesting and positive interaction with their communities.

Volunteer experiences were similar across key variables

On the whole, volunteer experiences related to motivation, support, and connection did not vary according to respondent age, gender, or length of service as a volunteer. That is, older or younger volunteers were not more or less likely to report different volunteer experiences than others. Men and women reported similar volunteer experiences. New and established volunteers reported similar experiences.

There was one exception, where significantly more male than female volunteers were likely to report feeling extremely or very connected to Swimming NSW.

Volunteer mental and physical health was similar across key variables

Similarly, in general, there were no clear differences in mental or physical health according to age, gender, or length or service. There was one exception, where older volunteers were more likely to report that pain had interfered with conducting their normal activities.

In conceiving this survey approach, there was a concern that older volunteers, or those approaching 'retirement' from volunteering, might be at greater risk of mental health problems. However, this has not been borne out by the data in this particular sample.

There are some risks to ongoing engagement and satisfaction of Swimming NSW volunteers

While a majority of volunteers overall reported feeling motivated, supported, connected, and mentally and physically well, there is still a minority who do not share those experiences. For example, about 40% reported low levels of motivation to volunteer, about 20% reported low levels of perceived support from Swimming NSW, more women than men reported not feeling connected to Swimming NSW, and nearly a third of the participants reported feeling downhearted and blue either *a good bit of the time or all or most of the time*.

In addition, responses to specific question prompts in the qualitative data indicate that for some survey respondents, their overall experience has been less than positive. In these examples, respondents cite experiencing rudeness, social exclusion, lack of opportunities to volunteer at different levels, perceived lack of support and acknowledgement of their contributions, and lack of courtesy at different levels of the competition. In addition, some respondents highlighted the financial burden that arises from volunteering, particularly for those volunteers in more remote or regional areas that have to travel further distances.

Similarly, some volunteers reported negative experiences at different levels of competition. This poses a risk to the engagement levels of those community-minded volunteers who begin volunteering at a club level – with enthusiasm to help swimmers develop and compete at higher levels – and who then have a negative experience.

These factors indicate that for a reasonable proportion of volunteers, commitment and engagement may be seriously affected by negative experiences, coupled with feeling undervalued and underappreciated.

5.2 Recommendations for promotion of positive mental health for Swimming NSW

While the particular mental health concerns which initiated the survey (i.e. concern for the mental health of retiring volunteers) were not validated by the survey results, there were still results indicating that as a group, Swimming NSW volunteers experience levels of distress that are comparable to the general population and for some individuals, the experience is distressing. As such, BDI does recommend proactive promotion of mental health literacy, along with the provision of avenues for effective support and resources for the whole of the Swimming NSW community. Research shows that proactive education about mental health can help to prevent the development of more severe symptoms.

BDI offers a range of community education programs, self-help tools, and resources to increase mental health literacy, promote help seeking and increase uptake of evidenced based support.

A sample of BDI's programs and resources are recommended for Swimming NSW below.

Lived experience presentations

BDI's **community education presentation**, *Breaking Down Depression and Building Resilience*, aims to reduce the stigma around mental illness and increase help seeking within communities across Australia.

The 45-minute presentation is delivered by a trained volunteer BDI Community Presenter who has lived experience of mental illness. The presentation aims to increase mental health literacy, reduce stigma, and promote help-seeking.

Topics covered in the presentation include:

- Causes, signs, and symptoms of mental illness
- When and where to seek help
- Practical strategies for helping a friend or family member

Presentations are free of charge. Some costs may apply to cover Presenter travel. Presentations can be booked via BDI's website or phone (02) 9382 9513. More details can be found here:

<https://blackdoginstitute.org.au/education-training/community-and-schools>

Self-help tools

Online clinic

Created by leading clinicians and based on research, the online clinic is a free mental health assessment tool. It is suitable for anyone over 18 years of age who is:

- worried they may be developing a mental health problem, or
- would like to get a better understanding of their mental health.

The online clinic provides a screening service and personalised report with suggested support services for those at risk of developing mental health problems. Links to the online clinic can be included in your internal communications channels for staff and volunteers.

For more information: <https://onlineclinic.blackdoginstitute.org.au/?s=w>

myCompass

myCompass is an interactive, confidential, online self-help service that has been shown in research trials to be as effective as face to face therapy in reducing the symptoms of mild to moderate depression and anxiety by promoting resilience and wellbeing. myCompass is available for free and links to the program can be included in your internal communications channels for staff and volunteers.

For more information: <https://www.mycompass.org.au/>

Fact sheets

BDI offers a range of fact sheets on depression, anxiety, suicide prevention, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder and general wellbeing. Fact sheets are available from BDI's website and links can be included in your internal communications channels for staff and volunteers.

5.3 Recommendations for other avenues

Based on the findings of the survey and as agreed in the focus group, a range of additional avenues are worth pursuing by Swimming NSW, however these fall outside of the scope of BDI's offerings.

Recommendations include:

1. Define and communicate the expected or agreed behaviours for Swimming NSW staff and volunteers based on organisational values.
2. Review policies and procedures in relation to Swimming NSW’s code of conduct, grievance management, giving and receiving timely and constructive feedback. Ensure policies and procedures are up to date and communicated broadly.
3. Invest in training in how to effectively manage grievances and how to have difficult conversations for Swimming NSW staff and volunteers.
4. Review the existing volunteer reward and recognition policy and procedures.

Thank you

BDI would like to thank Swimming NSW for the opportunity to engage in this important initiative to support their passionate volunteer workforce. Please do not hesitate to be in touch with Sarah Connor, Head of Education, to further discuss the findings and recommendations of this report.