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Submission on the Discussion Paper “Quality Flexible Work” from Volunteering New Zealand

Introduction

This short submission on the Quality Flexible Work discussion paper is made by Volunteering New Zealand.

Volunteering New Zealand is an association of regional volunteer centres and national organisations with a strong commitment to volunteering. These organisations cover emergency services, health, welfare, education, sport and recreation, conservation, international aid, special interests and advocacy.

Volunteering NZ’s mission is to create an environment which supports, promotes, values and encourages effective volunteering by the people of Aotearoa New Zealand. As the national voice of volunteering and volunteers in this country it has a different role from that of other organisations which speak on behalf of not-for-profit or voluntary organisations.

The key points of the submission are:

- Work should be seen as being both paid and unpaid. The references to work in the discussion paper are almost entirely about paid work.
- Flexibility in paid work will provide more opportunity for volunteering activities. The individual volunteer/employee, their employer and the wider community will benefit from this. Volunteering NZ submits that the opportunities which can be provided through flexible paid work arrangements are be highlighted in any promotional programme.
- There are particular issues relating to volunteer emergency services such as firefighting which employers need to recognise and allow for in work arrangements for their staff involved in such volunteering. Volunteering NZ supports the introduction of legislation as outlined in the discussion paper and submits emergency services volunteering should be a group which is able to request flexible working arrangements under the legislation .

“Work” includes more than paid employment.

The word ‘work’ as used in the discussion paper refers, almost without exception, to paid work or employment. This gives the impression it is the only form of work.

The opening paragraph refers to the pressing issue of New Zealanders trying to balance “work” with other things in their lives as caring for children or older parents, playing sport or working in the community. Only the last example suggested that there were situations of work other than paid work. Yet caring for children and older people – or even other family members - usually involves considerable work, unpaid. Likewise involvement in sport or other recreation activities, if it involves coaching or assistance in the running of a club or group is a type of work. Professional coaches are in paid employment, volunteer coaches in unpaid work.

The paper would have presented a more complete picture if it had acknowledged all the different types of work, paid and unpaid and then stated it was referring to paid work in advocating quality flexible work practices.

Flexible Work will enable opportunities for voluntary community involvement.

Volunteering NZ endorses the sections in the paper which record the benefits to individuals and for families and the community. However, this does not fully state the benefits which are to be gained through volunteering which can be advantaged through flexible paid work arrangements.

Two sections on page six of the paper state that quality flexible paid work is important for individuals and for families and communities. However the section headed "Quality flexible work is important for families and communities" seems to be more about how the demands of the modern workplace have impacted on family and community life rather than the benefits of quality flexible paid work arrangements. The potential benefits to be gained focus more on the time requirements for parenting and providing care for older people. There is a passing reference to unpaid community work. It should have been given much greater recognition in the paper, including that flexible work arrangements facilitate maintaining and increasing community development through volunteering.

There are more than one million adult New Zealanders involved in volunteering. Analysis by the Statistics Department of the Time Use Survey undertaken in 1999 found that 260 million hours per year were spent in unpaid work through organisations. This time input was very conservatively valued at just under \$2.5 billion. The value of what was contributed or achieved was much greater.

There are many and varied voluntary services and activities which need to take place during what are normal paid work hours. These services often have to rely on those not in paid work for the volunteer input, which limits the pool of people they can recruit. This situation would be much improved if paid workers were able to offer their time as volunteers through having flexible working hours.

Some examples of these services and activities include:

- assistance with school activities such as outings, camps etc,
- day time weekday sports coaching of children,
- committee meetings for non-profit community groups who need to have paid staff member(s) present,
- the staffing of Citizens' Advice Bureau which operate during normal paid working hours,
- services such as meals on wheels with the meals having to be delivered in the middle of the day,
- driving services for older people and those needing assistance with travel to health treatment services,
- street appeal collecting which takes place throughout the day,
- conservation projects which are undertaken by volunteers but supervised by paid staff such as those run by the Department of Conservation,
- Emergency services which rely on volunteers – volunteer fire brigades, civil defence, search and rescue teams, ambulance services, water sports life saving groups.

This list is illustrative. It is by no means exhaustive.

Participation of individuals as volunteers in such activities and services contributes to their communities in many ways. The individuals also benefit and do so in ways which can also benefit their employers. Their knowledge and skills may well be further developed and extended and they will gain fresh perspectives from their volunteering experiences.

Those commercial organisations which are encouraging their staff to contribute some paid work time to voluntary community activities are finding this to be true and are acknowledging the value they are gaining from having staff involved in volunteering.

Any actions taken in follow up to the discussion paper, especially information promoting flexible paid work arrangements, should highlight the benefits to the employer as well as the employees and the wider community.

Special needs of emergency services

All volunteering is important and if volunteers were to withdraw their services, many important community activities and programmes would cease to operate.

However there are some particular issues relating to emergency services which need to be highlighted. First there is the primary function of the protection and saving of human life as well as community assets.

Those such as volunteer fire services, search and rescue and civil defence have to respond to unplanned situations such as fire events, someone getting lost in the mountains or a major catastrophe requiring civil defence. These usually happen with minimal warning.

The volunteers in these services require specialist skills requiring ongoing training programmes to ensure they achieve and maintain skill levels.

Employers of people involved in this type of volunteering need to be encouraged to offer flexible work arrangements which involve staff leaving for an emergency assignment with little or no period of notice. There may also be times when staff need time during normal paid working hours to attend training.

There is evidence, especially in relation to volunteer fire services, that an increasing number of employers are reluctant to provide flexible work arrangements to enable one or more of their staff members to take up or continue service as a volunteer fire fighter. This is one reason for some volunteer fire brigades having difficulty in attracting the numbers required to maintain daytime manning levels required to ensure a continuous 24 hour service.

Some volunteer brigades, possibly as a means to maintaining their service, have adopted a rostered approach, where the volunteers are on duty or available at the fire station for fixed rostered periods particularly over evenings and weekends. However, this type of arrangement needs the co-operation of employers due to fatigue issues and the occasional late arrival to 'work' due to callouts whilst on rostered duties.

The needs of volunteer based emergency services should be especially highlighted in any material developed to promote and give guidance about flexible paid work arrangements and the mutual benefits to the employer and the community

Volunteering NZ supports legislation being introduced along the lines outlined in the discussion paper. We submit that volunteers involved in emergency services be one of the groups which qualify as having the right to request flexible hours for their paid work.