



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMY AND GENDER  
AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY**

(Reference: [Inquiry into unpaid work](#))

**Members:**

**MR J MILLIGAN (Chair)  
MS S ORR (Deputy Chair)  
MISS LAURA NUTTALL**

**PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**WEDNESDAY, 10 JULY 2024**

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**Secretary to the committee:  
Ms S Milne (Ph: 620 50435)**

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

## **WITNESSES**

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## **Privilege statement**

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*Amended 20 May 2013*

**The committee met at 2 pm.**

**GENTLEMAN, MR MICK**, Minister for Business, Minister for Fire and Emergency Services, Minister for Industrial Relations and Workplace Safety, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Police and Crime Prevention

**NOUD, MR RUSSELL**, Executive Group Manager, Public Sector Employment Group, Office of Industrial Relations and Workforce Strategy; Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

**THE ACTING CHAIR** (Ms Orr): Good afternoon and welcome to the second and final public hearing of the Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality for the inquiry into unpaid work. The committee will today hear from the Minister for Industrial Relations and Workplace Safety, as well as the Minister for Community Services, Seniors and Veterans.

The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land that we are meeting on today, the Ngunnawal people. The committee wishes to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution that they make to the life of this city and this region. We also would like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today's event.

The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful for witnesses to use the words: "I will take that question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm the questions that have been taken on notice in the transcript.

If anyone is a little bit confused, I note that our regular chair, Mr Milligan, is away, so I will be chairing today. As it is 2 pm, we will start with the Minister for Industrial Relations and Workplace Safety. We welcome Mr Mick Gentleman MLA, Minister for Industrial Relations and Workplace Safety, and officials. I remind all witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and I draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is the pink card on the table. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Could you please confirm that you understand the implications of the statement and that you agree to comply with it?

**Mr Gentleman:** Yes; I understand the implications and agree with the conditions.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Thank you. Before we jump to questions, is there anything that you want to say very briefly? By briefly, I mean two to three minutes.

**Mr Gentleman:** Yes; if I could, Chair. Last week, I was able to visit one of our SES stations. I do this on a regular basis. I visit various volunteer stations in the evenings. At Woden, I mentioned that I would be coming before this committee today and asked for their views on what we should look at with regard to unpaid work and volunteerism. They were of a very firm mind that the volunteer work that they do should not be considered as unpaid work. They said that they do this to give back to their community. They do not consider it as work in such a sense. They give generously and they are

rewarded for that in the responses they get from the ACT community. As we went around the room seeking some thoughts from members of the SES, all who responded were quite firm. That is probably something to think about as you deliberate on the submissions to the committee.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** That is great. It picks up on my first clarifying question. We heard this from a number of witnesses—you might have seen some of the sessions of the first hearing: there is a nuance between paid work, unpaid work, volunteer work and caring work. My question is: how does the ACT government approach these different types of work—that is probably the best way to put it—and factor that into policy? As the Minister for Workplace Relations, how do you look at that in your remit?

**Mr Gentleman:** One thing to ensure we get across is that, in all the situations of volunteerism and unpaid work, we want to make sure that they go to a safe workplace. We have particular safety rules about how people operate within a workplace and, of course, we have a workplace regulating commissioner, Jacqueline Agius, and WorkSafe ACT as well. With regard to remuneration, we provide leave for volunteers who do work for the ACT community. There are the SES volunteers that I talked about earlier. If they work for an ACT government agency, we provide four days leave for each event, and we encourage the private sector to provide leave opportunities for them as well. It is a quite large volunteer base. We have more than 350 in our SES and we have similar numbers in RFS as well, and they feel very proud to be able to assist the Canberra community in times of need.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Great.

**MISS NUTTALL:** A few submissions talk about having room to incorporate volunteering and unpaid work more widely in the Wellbeing Framework. To give you an example, Community Sports ACT observed that volunteering encompasses at least seven of the framework's domains: health; education and lifelong learning; social connection; economy; identity and belonging; access and connectivity; and safety. In your opinion, do our current measures accurately and meaningfully measure the wellbeing impacts of volunteering when we use indicators to make decisions to support programs?

**Mr Gentleman:** I think they do, in the sense of an area we control or we can have input into. It was quite important to instigate the framework in the first place. We have seen that framework occur in other jurisdictions as well. New Zealand is a good example of embedding that wellbeing framework into their budget process as well. With regard to the areas that we can control and assist in facilitating, I think it does.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Could you give me an example of those areas?

**Mr Gentleman:** I will ask some of the team to come to the table to provide some information for you.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** While they are doing that, I have a supplementary question. Picking up on the nuance between unpaid work and volunteering and some of the

comments that you made in your opening statement about the SES volunteers that you spoke to—that they did not see it as unpaid work—that is a theme we have heard from most witnesses: volunteering is not unpaid work. It is something they do because they see the worth in investing back into the community. Thinking about this in the sense of the wellbeing indicators and embedding them, how important is it, when we are looking at policy, to make sure we are not construing unpaid work as volunteerism and that we are responding to both as separate propositions?

**Mr Gentleman:** It is something we need to look at. I will ask Russell and the team to provide some information.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** In my capacity as chair, I remind you to state whether you accept the privilege statement before you bring in your testimony.

**Mr Noud:** Thank you, Ms Orr. I accept the statement and the requirements around that. Coming to your question, in a policy sense, we treat paid work and unpaid work quite differently. Paid work would generally come under the auspices of a second job process. With respect to an application for other employment—and it happens a lot—we look at whether there is a conflict of interest, but also whether there are potential work health and safety issues, such as when a person works all night and then cannot employ their primary activities during the day. But we certainly would not see caring responsibilities or other non-paid activities as a second job; we see that as unpaid work, and volunteering is a sub-section of that. They are not the same thing.

Our provisions deal with both of those sets of circumstances together. Our enterprise agreements in the territory's service have a smorgasbord of options, if you like, that you can select through a flexible work arrangement to adapt to your particular circumstances. It might be job sharing; it might part-time employment; it might be leaving at three o'clock on Tuesdays to take the kids to band practice or whatever it might be. There are provisions in the commonwealth's Fair Work Act that started this process, but our provisions go broader than that. The concept is that an employee makes an application to their supervisor in the directorate and there is a strong onus within the provisions to properly consider them. That is really the driving force behind the construct of the clauses. It is very easy for supervisors to accept that it is all too hard and easier to say no. The agreement and, in fact, the Fair Work Act are very clear. To try to reverse that onus, you have to consider how you can make this work rather than why you cannot make it work. To quote *Little Britain*, it is not "The computer says no." The emphasis is on trying to make it happen.

The idea is to work with the employee who has requested the flexible work arrangement and concoct a set of circumstances that suits their particular needs. That might be to care for children or care for a sick relative; it might be to do volunteering work. There is a very broad and loosely defined set of criteria to suit your personal circumstances. Those agreements can be entered into for up to three years and there are quite strict criteria about changing them or cancelling them. The idea is that it gives the employee certainty for the period they have asked for and, similarly, it gives the directorate certainty about the time the person will be doing their job. That is how our flexible work provisions work.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Mr Noud, that is a good example of how paid work can

respond to unpaid work and balancing the two. Is that what we should be taking from that: the relationship between paid and unpaid work?

**Mr Noud:** Yes.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** What you have just described to us is very much how the ACT government approaches the pressures that people might have from both unpaid and paid work responsibilities, whether it be caring or domestic—

**Mr Noud:** Whatever—yes.

**Mr Gentleman:** That is right. Chair, you would have noticed that, in the submission we put to the committee, we talked about the ILO's convention of workers with family responsibilities. That was raised by the Australian government. That means that we have to understand that people have family responsibilities at home and we need to make opportunities for them to work through those responsibilities while still providing work for the ACT.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Minister and Mr Noud, you have both alluded to the difference between volunteerism and volunteering. It is not necessarily a day-to-day activity. It might be non-ongoing; it might be once a week or once a month.

**Mr Noud:** There are so many different circumstances that we have to write clauses about and try to meet. The flexible work provisions might facilitate volunteering. You might say, "On Tuesday afternoons, I am going to the school," or whatever might be the case. It might be that there are separate volunteering provisions that provide specific leave for volunteering. We expect that they will be used in combination for individuals, based on whatever they need to do. It does happen. It is not like it is a clause that no-one takes any notice of. There is a lot of interest in this across the service, and I know for a fact that it is used a lot.

These agreements are not recorded in a central database; they are held with the supervisor. They are commonly spoken about and referred to part of enterprise agreements. Certainly, in negotiating agreements, there is a lot of interest by staff and unions in how it works and how we can facilitate the use of flexible work in the service. The best statement in enterprise agreements in relation to this, at the core, is B11.1, which states:

The ACTPS is committed to providing flexible working arrangements which allow employees to manage their work and personal commitments. This must be balanced against the operational requirements for the ACTPS to deliver services to the Canberra community.

That says in a nutshell that we accept that people have lives outside work and we will facilitate that where it is practical to do so. That is the underlying theme.

**Mr Gentleman:** We have learnt a lot since COVID. We learnt about the opportunity to be flexible with people working from home when they need to. Indeed, in some of the studies done during the lockdown, we found that there were a lot of really good outcomes from working from home. Efficiency in some directorates was quite

phenomenal. The Treasury was the most efficient—around 100 per cent more efficient. Our planning people were more efficient by working from home as well. After the lockdown, we produced some statistics to show how each directorate operated differently. There are challenges, of course, when it is a first responder role and people need to actually be out in the community or need to deal with family members in an education setting, but we sure did find some efficiencies.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** You raise an interesting point. There is a growing body of evidence, and it is commonly accepted that there is a productivity return. Once you hit a certain number of working hours, your productivity goes down by a lot. Minister, I think what you are alluding to is that people working from home can set their own pace and manage their competing priorities a bit more, so we actually saw that they were a bit more productive in what they were doing. Picking up a little bit on what Mr Noud was touching on, as an employer you do not necessarily influence the unpaid work pressures that are on an individual. They are usually contributed to by a lot of factors in someone's life and are not something within their control. The part in your control, though, is the paid hours.

You have identified flexible work arrangements. The committee has heard evidence from other witnesses that the two combined can affect the productivity of both, not just of one or the other. Has any thought been given to reducing the number of hours, reducing the burden of the two combined, in reflection of getting that work-life balance better placed so that we continue to see productivity gains in the paid work environment?

**Mr Noud:** I will come back to that, but, in relation to COVID, the policy we put out at the time was quite forward thinking. Frankly, we had a very short period of time to work out how on earth we were going to do this. For employees working from home, the policy at the time talked about wanting to focus on outputs, not bundy clocks. If you do your work in chunks over the course of the day, interspersed with other chunks of time when you are doing other unpaid work—looking after kids, picking them up from school, doing homework or whatever—that is fine with us. We were able to make that work in a way that we had never rehearsed, never tested—

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** But it sounds like it was not just that it worked but they were more productive, and the output was higher.

**Mr Noud:** Yes. You do not have the travel time for a start and people—

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** But the travel time would not be on the paid clock. The time sheet would not start with the travel time.

**Mr Noud:** But it is still time out of your day. You are not doing unpaid work or paid work; it is just “nothing time” when you are sitting in a car.

**Mr Gentleman:** There could be some entertaining stuff on the radio.

**Mr Noud:** That is true. It was a really interesting social experiment, for want of a better description, about how we make this work. Not much good came out of COVID, but exploring how we could make working from home and more hybrid and flexible work



work was great. Coming back to your question about how we can reallocate the number of hours apportioned to each, it comes back to whether you are talking about paid or unpaid work hours. One of the flexible work options is to reduce the number of hours. One of the flexible work options is to compress your hours. Also, in this place last year, one of the committees was looking at—

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** It was our committee.

**Mr Noud:** Yes; that is right. I was just trying to think of which one it was. The committee was looking at a four-day working week. That is still to be looked at. The government committed to looking at that next year, I think. We are a small service. There is always willingness to see if we can make different things work.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Just to clarify, if you reduce the number of hours at the moment, there is also a commensurate pay reduction, but, if you compress the hours, you are working the same number of hours over a shorter period time.

**Mr Gentleman:** But your outputs are similar to—

**Mr Noud:** Yes. You might do five days over four, for example, or whatever the case may be.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** I will ask one more question and then I will throw to my colleague so that she can sneak in a question. I am interested in the idea of outputs versus time. It is a discussion I have thrown around with my friends a lot: not minding the time you take to get to something, as long as you get to it, within reason. Obviously, we do not want people working seven days a week to achieve something that is an unrealistic workload. With the experience that you have raised, where you have seen productivity go up because you have not necessarily—and I will paraphrase, so correct me if you do not agree with my paraphrasing—adhered to a strict timetable of having to work particular hours. There is a level of flexibility in how you let an individual manage their personal and professional time. This is a bit of an open-ended question. Where does that leave us with the concept of: “If you are not doing the hours, you are not contributing what we need you to contribute”?

**Mr Noud:** That is a hard—

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Yes. Russell, if you can answer that question in three minutes or fewer, that would be great.

**Mr Noud:** We are in a period of high transition industrially. I think we are moving out of a period, especially for white-collar workers who are working on time based around 8.30 to 4.51—

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** That is fair, because it has been very much time based. It is a wider issue; it is not a specific ACT issue.

**Mr Noud:** As the minister said, the challenge for us is in trying to make these provisions work in a less rigid structure—for example, for frontline workers. It is not impossible for a nurse or an ambulance officer to enter a flexible work arrangement. It is harder for

the employer to make it work, simply because the employees are on rosters and roster slots need to be filled. But we can do job-sharing. We can come up with innovative and different arrangements.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** And, if you see the productivity of people going up in the time that the arrangements are there, wouldn't that also be a factor in determining—

**Mr Noud:** Absolutely.

**Mr Gentleman:** A good example of that is the recent change to the roster for paramedics. They were doing two night shifts in a block. They were 14-hour shifts. Very little time is down time. We have changed that, after their request, to move to only one night shift with supporting shoulder shifts. That means that they are at work for less time, but they are supported by their colleagues on the shoulder shifts when they are really needed—that is, when there is most demand. For example, there is less demand at 3 am than at 8 pm. We have been able to amend those rosters and morale has really gone up among ambulance paramedics.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** I will throw to Miss Nuttall shortly. Mr Noud, I will pick up on one of the comments you made about the frontline workers and so forth. I believe that in the UK, in Cambridge, one of the councils has just finished a trial with garbage collectors working four days a week. That might be of interest to you.

**Mr Noud:** We will look at that. Thank you.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** I do not know too many places that have had garbage collectors move to a reduced number of hours, so that is an interesting one.

**Mr Noud:** It is an emerging area about how you can be flexible for inflexible workers—that is, for those on rosters and those performing a service that can only be performed in a particular way.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Picking up on what the minister said and noting that ambulance employees have seen quite an increase in morale, you would think there would be a higher focus on the time that they were at work and better productivity. I wonder how we would actually measure.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I have been learning so much. Your submission gives a lot of really interesting statistics on the uneven experiences of unpaid work if you are a carer, if you have a disability or if you come from a culturally or linguistically diverse background. How does that data feed into government decisions and influence them? Could you walk me through that process?

**Mr Noud:** Our provisions do not necessarily target any of those groups specifically. Sorry—I did not write them down as you said them. It started with the Fair Work Act, but, in fact, our flexible work provisions were in place before the Fair Work Act caught up with us. Our philosophy at the time was that all our employees should have access to flexible work and be given the best opportunity to manage their life and work balance, regardless of their particular group or cohort. We did not target any specific groups. It was for the service as a whole.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Have you done any evaluation or analysis as to the number of employees taking up flexible work arrangements and their reasons for accessing them? Is it people with caring responsibilities? Are you predominantly seeing women as opposed to men? Are any demographics indicated to you?

**Mr Noud:** It is only anecdotal because, simply, the agreements are not centrally recorded in a way for us to pull the data out of a database. We certainly speak to the HR communities in the service. The reasons are quite varied and more than you would think. There are the obvious ones about caring for children or caring for a sick relative, but there were others out of left field.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** What are some of the other reasons that you would not necessarily—

**Mr Gentleman:** Travel. I previously had the corrections portfolio. There were a number of corrections officers who lived interstate and would travel to Canberra for their 12-hour shift. They often wanted to do a number of 12-hour shifts so they did not have to travel every day to the workplace. We have seen that too with some of our paramedics, for example. They would rather do a couple of shifts and then have time where they live, remotely.

**Mr Noud:** It might be to go back to uni. They will have a flexible arrangement around their—

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Managing to study and—

**Mr Noud:** Yes—around their uni schedule. It is as varied as life is varied, as people's lives demand. That is the whole intent of the provisions: trying to meet as broad a set of circumstances as we can.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Have you made any amendments to flexible work upon reflection of the different ways that people engage with it?

**Mr Noud:** Yes. In the most recent bargaining round, we made some further amendments to the provisions. In fact, we have made amendments in every single round. In the most recent round, we added more rigour to the application and approval process. We put in a requirement to enter into an agreement. We put in provisions about how those agreements are varied or terminated. That is for the protection of both the employee in the agreement and the service that needs that employee's services or skills. Historically, 10 years ago, we had circumstances where someone relied on an email that their supervisor sent that they would leave at 3 o'clock on Thursdays. That is not good for anyone. The whole concept is to have an active discussion with the manager and the supervisor—"What do you need? How can we help with that?"—and then document that. We have strengthened those administrative provisions.

We have also broadened the categories. Historically, the agreement's provisions, because they have been built bit by bit over three or four rounds, were a bit piecemeal. We have structured it much better so that our employees can see very clearly and say, "Here is what I can do." That is underpinned by a policy that documents all that, and

that is publicly available on our portal.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** We are over time. Because I am the chair, I am going to ask one more quick question. We had one of the parents and citizens groups here and they said that it is good to have leave, but it does not recognise, say, weekly commitments. One of the things that they found is that parents say they cannot get on the P&C association because they do not have the time on a regular basis. If I have understood what you have said correctly, Mr Noud, that is the kind of thing they could negotiate if they want to make a regular contribution.

**Mr Noud:** Absolutely.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** They could negotiate flexible work arrangements to allow for that. It is not a need for more leave; it is—

**Mr Noud:** You are right. That is exactly it. The leave is just X number of days per year. How you use that leave or you make arrangements to make up the time—

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** For, say, the SES in a storm event, so you are not turning up for one day a week; you are turning up for four days to fix things. It allows for both, really.

**Mr Noud:** Yes; that is exactly it.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** We will have to finish because we have gone a little bit over time. On behalf of the committee, thank you for attending today. I do not believe any questions were taken on notice, so there is nothing to follow up. An uncorrected proof of the *Hansard* will be sent to you, so check that out and let us know if any edits need to be made. Thank you very much for your time today.

**Short suspension.**

**DAVIDSON, MS EMMA**, Minister for Community Services, Seniors and Veterans, Minister for Corrections and Justice Health, Minister for Mental Health and Minister for Population Health

**STATHIS, MR NICK**, Executive Branch Manager, Disability, Seniors, Veterans and Social Recovery, Community Services Directorate

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Welcome, Ms Emma Davidson MLA, Minister for Community Services, Senior and Veterans, and Mr Stathis. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is on the pink card on the table. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Could both of you confirm that you understand the implications of the statement and that you agree to comply with it.

**Ms Davidson:** Yes.

**Mr Stathis:** Yes. I have read it, understand it and acknowledge it.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Great. Thank you. Minister, would you like to make any opening remarks, noting that we are keeping to a two-to-three-minute time limit?

**Ms Davidson:** I am happy to go straight to questions.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Because I took quite a bit of time in the last session, Miss Nuttall, I will let you go first.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you so much, Chair. I have heard that carers are more likely to live in a household in the lowest quintile of gross household income and their requirements to provide care impact on their availability for employment. Given that the requirement for carers to care for others poses challenges and barriers to engage in paid work, how can we better support carers to participate and avoid long-term financial disadvantage?

**Ms Davidson:** The Carers Recognition Act can be a really helpful tool in making it clear that our ACT government agencies have responsibilities as employers to be aware of and really sensitive to the needs of carers in the workforce. It is also a helpful tool in helping all of us in the community to be mindful of our responsibilities that the person that we might be working alongside, studying with, teaching or delivering support services to might also have caring responsibilities, and that means that they might need a bit more advance notice and a bit more flexibility in how they manage their time. We all have a part to play in supporting that kind of flexibility. That certainly became very apparent in what happened during COVID, but it is something that we can carry through as an understanding: “Yes; it is possible for us to have a bit more flexibility, and we can all do that.”

Our aged-care system and our disability community systems are quite often far too reliant on the support of unpaid carers—usually the family and friends of someone who needs care. We know that most of the care that is provided in the community is still done by unpaid carers. If we had to replace all of that with paid care workers, it would cost the ACT alone a billion dollars. It is actually really important that we think about

what we are asking people to do when we ask them to move appointments around, change working hours or change where and when they complete their studies—how that impacts on their unpaid caring responsibilities. It might make it very hard for them if we cannot give them a little bit more flexibility.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I have a supplementary to that. What sorts of things are in place to inform workers in the ACT government about the need to be mindful of carers' time, give more advance warning and things like that?

**Ms Davidson:** This is why things like the ACT Carers Strategy is so important. Having that as a funded strategy has been critically important for Carers ACT, who have been doing a lot of the delivery work—delivering advice and governance of that strategy. They also help everyone else in the community have a better understanding of how we can provide a bit more flexibility and what it is to be a carer. It really raises their profile in the community. Those things are really important. Making sure that we continue to have a well-supported ACT Carers Strategy will be very important into the future to make sure that they can continue to build on the work that they have been doing.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** I want to pick up on unpaid and paid work, regarding carers in particular, and some of the comments you have made, Minister. We have just had Minister Gentleman here, and I am sure you saw a bit of that testimony—I hope you did—looking at how the ACT government, as an employer, provides a lot of opportunity and flexibility for people through flexible work arrangements. I am interested in clarifying your comments about making sure there is support. Is that directed to the wider workforce or are you looking specifically at the ACT government's response?

**Ms Davidson:** I am thinking about the wider workforce. It is really important that the ACT government, as an employer, offers flexibility and recognition of people who have volunteering work or those who have unpaid caring responsibilities. That means that other employers in the ACT community are going to say, "If this person were working in the ACT public service, they would be able to access this kind of flexibility and this kind of support, so we will have to think about what we can do." That is really important, and it does make a difference.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** You made some comments about the ACT Carers Strategy and also the Carers Recognition Act—which, as you know, I am very familiar with—

**Ms Davidson:** Yes.

**ACTING CHAIR:** talking about how those two things can help influence the unpaid work responsibilities and the paid work responsibilities. My understanding of the Carers Recognition Act is that that it is not quite what it does. I want you to point me to your interpretation of that or where you might see opportunities in the future for strengthening what can be done for carers through legislation.

**Ms Davidson:** I think it is really important to have things like recognition acts and the like to send a clear signal to the community about what we value as a society and what is actually important to us. Even if you are not covered by the mandatory reporting requirements in the act, knowing that this act exists, that these are the kinds of things that people are looking at and talking about, and that these are things that appear in

annual reports actually raises the profile and the role of carers in the community, and that is really important. It means that more people are thinking about: “Maybe there are things that I could do better in the organisation I am in.”

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** I have a substantive question. Miss Nuttall, do you have anything to finish that line of inquiry?

**MISS NUTTALL:** I am happy for you to go to your substantive.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Okay. We have heard from a number of witnesses throughout the inquiry—and I put this to Minister Gentleman too—about the importance of understanding the difference and the nuance between paid work, unpaid work, unpaid caring responsibilities and volunteering. I want to get your view. Minister Gentleman answered particularly from the perspective of paid work and the difference with the others. Minister, I note that your focus is a little bit different. I want to get your understanding of how the nuance and the difference between those is applied in your policy and whether there is anything about that understanding that you would like to draw our attention to?

**Ms Davidson:** Is the question about the difference between volunteering and unpaid caring?

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Yes. What has been raised with us is that paid work is one thing and unpaid work is another thing. Unpaid caring is another thing again, and there is volunteerism. There is the understanding that they cannot be lumped together. This is something that has come through quite strongly from a number of witnesses. The point is that you need to understand the difference in order to have an adequate response. My question to you is: how do you recognise the difference between those and adequately respond to them?

**Ms Davidson:** This is why different things have their own strategies. There is an ACT Carers Strategy and there is a volunteering strategy that is currently being worked on in collaboration with VolunteeringACT, and that is different to a strategy around supporting unpaid carers. Both of those things are different to our industrial relations framework for paid work. The intrinsic reasons why people engage in different activities absolutely matter. There is absolutely no question about that. There are some things that we can learn from other strategies and frameworks that provide for people to meet all the needs that they have, regarding their time and their capacity. We can learn from what is happening in one area and maybe apply some of those learnings in other areas, around how we provide flexibility and how we provide support for people who have multiple things at once going on in their life. Human beings are complex things.

When we are talking about what is actually happening with volunteering, for example, the ACT has traditionally had a really strong community of volunteers—much higher than a lot of other parts of the country, in terms of the proportion of people who are able to commit their time to volunteering—but we went through a lot of things during COVID that made it harder for people to keep volunteering. Some of the people who needed to stop volunteering because of COVID public health regulations and what they were going through have not been able to come back to it.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Yes. We have certainly heard some testimony from a number of organisations around those challenges.

**Ms Davidson:** Yes.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** I want to pick up on the Volunteering Strategy. At the hearings we had the other week, a number of volunteering groups and people who work with volunteers were here. I put to all of them: what is your involvement in the Volunteering Strategy? Minister, you noted that you are working with VolunteeringACT. Essentially, groups that were members of VolunteeringACT felt that they were included, they were getting a bit of a say and they were being represented, but other groups were, I think it is fair to say, surprised that a strategy was being developed. My question to you is: knowing the strategy is under development, how are you reaching out to the broad range of groups to make sure that everyone is able to feed into the development of it?

**Ms Davidson:** Before I pass to Nick, who can talk a bit more about how we are doing the consultation on the ACT's Volunteering Strategy, there was a listening report that was prepared over two years, from 2021 to 2023, about Canberra's volunteering landscape. It is also something that has been guided by the National Strategy for Volunteering, which is a 10-year strategy that runs through to 2033, as well as what we are doing with VolunteeringACT. So a number of things are coming together to inform that piece of work. Nick can talk a little bit more about the kind of consultation we have been doing.

**Mr Stathis:** A lot of what we used as background in developing the report was from the listening report that VolunteeringACT did. That was done with quite a broad range of stakeholders that are not just members of the volunteering community. That has been the basis of the consultation that we have done. To that we have added consultation within government. Government relies a lot on volunteers, be it through schools, hospitals or other areas. Emergency management comes to mind. We have worked closely with VolunteeringACT, based on that consultation, to put together a draft strategy. Post that strategy, pending its approval through government, we will promote it more broadly. It is intended that it will be reported on annually, a lot like other strategies. There would be a way for the broader community to understand what is going on through the annual reporting and to provide feedback as well.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** The consultation for the listening report, if I have understood correctly, was led by VolunteeringACT, but it was not exclusive to their members.

**Mr Stathis:** That is right. Quite a broad range of groups and people were consulted.

**Ms Davidson:** It is also worth noting that the ways in which people volunteer changed quite markedly during COVID-19. There was a lot of food relief, for example, and informal volunteering. Mutual aid groups and neighbourhood support groups sprang up, where people offered help and support to strangers in their community—people they did not already have an ongoing relationship with—because they wanted to volunteer. They wanted to give their skills and the time that they had available to help people in their community, and they were doing that through very informal networks. That has been quite a learning experience for the ACT community, in terms of how we recognise



and provide support for that kind of volunteering to happen as effectively as possible.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** It is interesting that you raised the word “informal”. We have had that raised by other witnesses too. I think they had a slightly different definition. Minister, the distinction you seem to be making is that there is the formal one, which might be done through an organisation and is a bit more structured, and the informal one, which is a bit more grassroots, community based and of their own volition. The other way we had it put to us is that “formal” is more ongoing and regular, whereas “informal” is something that is not ongoing. That seems to be the litmus test, as opposed to it being done through an organisation or not.

There was quite a bit of testimony. Some concern was around making sure that we are not exploiting volunteers and that we are doing volunteering in a way that is good for everyone involved—something that provides a value add to the individual. That is why it is important to have the support of an organisation. I want to drill down a little bit more on how we can support volunteers from your perspective, knowing that there are different ways in which people make community contributions. I guess that is the way to put it.

**Ms Davidson:** If we are talking about the definition of informal volunteering being something done by someone who gives their time and their skills but outside the structure of an organisation, an incorporated body or where they join a roster and things like that, really good examples to look at would be things like the mutual aid, food relief groups and the street pantries that sprang up. It goes back to intrinsic value and why people give their time. One reason some people find that a particular form of volunteering is really valuable to them is that it does not require them to be part of a formal structure; it is something that they can do even anonymously. You can restock a street pantry without having to sign up to a group or identify where and when you are doing things. You can just say, “I have the capacity right now. I have something to give right now and I am going to do that.” The value that people get back from it is the feeling: “While life can be very difficult in this community, I still have things that I can share and give. It reminds me that, actually, we live in a world of abundance and we can find a better way to distribute that abundance in a time of scarcity, when it is very easy to start thinking that that is all there is.” It can be really positive for people’s mental wellbeing and for their sense of social connection to be able to do that.

If the only ways in which people could volunteer were through formal structures, they might feel differently about the ways in which they are engaging in volunteering and unpaid work. That is part of what makes our community function and makes us who we are. Both kinds of volunteering have real value for people, but it is also about how we find ways to support those things to happen effectively and safely for everyone involved.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Are there particular things? It sounds like the government is quite aware. What are we doing to measure or track this kind of informal volunteering? And what sorts of things do we do to support them?

**Ms Davidson:** It can be really tricky to find ways to measure or quantify things that happen outside of formal structures. That is a really tricky thing to do. But there are examples of people engaging in things and why they are doing it—the value they get

out of it and the challenges they face when they are doing it. For example, if we look at some of the things that we have learnt through our Food Relief Network, a lot of informal volunteering goes on through food relief services in the ACT. Some of our larger and more formalised organisations that are engaged in that work are now finding that they are hearing a lot more from people who are doing that in less structured ways. They are doing it through more community led and community developed ways.

There were also things that happened during COVID-19. Woden Community Services, I believe, produced a book that told stories of ways people connected and engaged in their community during that period. There were some really good stories about informal volunteering, what it meant to people and why they were doing it. There are ways in which we can hear about those things.

We know that a lot of people are volunteering and that there are more than just those doing it through the formal structures. Our understanding is that last year, in 2023, nearly 75 per cent of people in the ACT over 15 years of age were volunteering in one form or another. They were contributing around 63 million hours of their time to the community, which is huge. That makes a huge difference to who we are. It is not necessarily just the over 15-year-olds. The Mission Australia Youth Survey of 2021 found that around 16 per cent of young people in the ACT were participating by volunteering in environment group activities alone—just through those things—and that that has a really positive benefit for their mental health, particularly when they are dealing with things like climate anxiety. And there are all the young people who are contributing through volunteering activities that are not related to the environment: disability care and getting involved in intergenerational programs with older people in our community. All those things contribute to making our community a more connected and caring place.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Miss Nuttall, do you have another question? I am very conscious that I had two-thirds of the last session. If you want to have a bit more time on this one, I will not stop you.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you. More broadly, what is the ACT government doing to understand the volunteer workforce and to ensure that we are supporting the sector and all its needs into the future?

**Ms Davidson:** The volunteering strategy is going to be critically important for us in understanding how we can support volunteers in our community. The research tells us that, for every dollar that is invested in volunteering in the ACT, there is a \$5.40 return to the community. That is very helpful for treasurers to know. Actually, it is all about who we are as a society and making sure that we are allowing time for the things that actually make life meaningful for people and what they want to be able to do. Making sure that we have a volunteering strategy that references what was in the listening report, which we talked about earlier, and making sure that we can draw a line between the actions that ACT government can take to support volunteering in the community and what the community themselves told us is most important to them to overcome some of the barriers to volunteering, will be really important. We expect that will take a little bit of time to complete but hopefully before we go into caretaker mode.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Miss Nuttall, do you have a final question?

**MISS NUTTALL:** If you want to go ahead, you can.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Okay. Minister, I want to pick up on the comments you made earlier around unpaid caring and how it would cost a lot if we did not have people doing unpaid caring and had to replace it with paid work. But we also had Carers ACT here, and they made the point that, often, unpaid carers do not necessarily want to stop the caring. They do not want it replaced with a paid service. Bearing that in mind, how do we better support carers in their unpaid role as opposed to just saying it is a binary option of one or the other?

**Ms Davidson:** The reason I mentioned the economic impact is that I am very aware that, at the moment, there are treasurers all around this country looking at care work, reforms and things that are happening in that space, whether it is through My Aged Care or the NDIS reforms and foundational supports and whether there might be gap periods when the foundational supports have not been transitioned into yet and people cannot access certain things through NDIS plans anymore. There is the fact that we have a growing number of people with mental health support needs in the community as well. If we do not provide services to people, the support needs do not go away; it just creates a lot more stress for whoever is left to pick up the pieces.

In terms of how we provide support to people who are doing unpaid caring work, because that is actually what they want to spend their time doing—it is really meaningful for them—it is about making sure that we recognise that it means they will not necessarily have the same level of income or wealth over their lifetime to provide for their retirement. We need to be very mindful of the fact that, if someone is reaching retirement age and they have spent a long period of their life doing unpaid caring work, they are not necessarily going to have their mortgage paid off and they are not necessarily going to have a high superannuation balance. They will actually need support themselves. We need to make sure that our systems and support services provide for them.

It is also about things like the work that is being done through the ACT Carers Strategy around carer recognition activities that Carers ACT runs. That is done through that strategy. It is about making sure that people have access to respite. Respite looks different for different kinds of caring work. For mental health carers, for example, they are telling us that the kinds of respite they need might be quite different to what might be needed for someone who is a carer of, say, an older person in the community or someone with physical disability needs. We need to make sure that is readily available for people. There are also the additional supports that are needed for young carers in our community. They are going to have different needs again. There are things like the CYCLOPS ACT program for young carers. We need to make sure that is well supported and well connected to youth mental health services, Education Directorate supports and all of those things.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** Great. Noting the time, and we started a little bit late, on indulgence, Miss Nuttall, you may have one final question, otherwise we will finish there.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Absolutely. VolunteeringACT produced their report in 2023 about

the volunteering landscape, and this included the identification of challenges facing the volunteer sector. Would you be able to speak briefly to these challenges?

**Ms Davidson:** Yes. We talked a little bit about what happened during the COVID-19 situation, when a lot of people who had previously been volunteering had to stop. Not everyone has been able to come back to volunteering. We know that the cost-of-living crisis that people are facing is putting pressure on people to spend more of their time in paid work and that they have less capacity for unpaid volunteering work. Mental health issues are also making it harder for people to be able to engage in the kinds of activities that they might otherwise have been able to do before. These are challenges that need to be overcome if we are going to get people back into volunteering again.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you.

**THE ACTING CHAIR:** We have to wrap it up there. On behalf of the committee, I thank you both for attending today. I do not believe any questions were taken on notice. If the transcript proves otherwise, please provide your answers to the committee secretariat within five days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. That pretty much brings us to the end of today's proceedings. On behalf of the committee, I thank everyone who has assisted the committee through their experience, their knowledge and the testimony they provided. We also thank broadcasting and Hansard staff for their support. If any members of the committee wish to ask questions on notice, please upload them to the parliament portal as soon as practicable and no later than five business days after the hearing.

**The committee adjourned at 3.02 pm.**