

Playing community sport may come back, but will the volunteers?

Professors Rochelle Eime and Hans Westerbeek, Victoria University

Community sport has been devastatingly affected by the COVID-19 lockdown and recovery will take time. The Government has responded to widespread concern about getting kids back to sport with a range of initiatives, including a \$45.2 million [sport voucher program](#) that gives families \$200 to help with costs.

Maintaining physically-active communities and the importance of playing sport for people of all ages has been recognised as more important than ever since the pandemic hit.

But with an almost singular focus on supporting participants and subsidising the cost of getting them back to their activities, we have forgotten one of the most important groups of people who deliver community sport: the volunteers.

Without volunteers, there is no return to play. While there has been significant focus on the pandemic's effect on paid employment and income, little attention has been paid to how it has impacted unpaid community activities like volunteer work, which is valued at around \$46 billion to the Australian economy.

Not only do players gain physical, social and mental health benefits from participating in community sport. Studies show volunteering positively impacts the wellbeing of volunteers by providing a sense of belonging, meaning, inclusion and satisfaction, as well as social interaction.

Similar to the lower rates of player participation due to COVID-19, volunteering in sport has also shown a significant and much overlooked decline.

As we emerge from widespread disruption to community sport, the challenge will be not only to simply bring back the volunteers who coach players, run canteens, or score at games, but also to consider how to support them in a more complex and demanding future environment.

This challenge is intensified by cost-cutting at higher levels. Job cuts at organisations such as Cricket Victoria directly affect the large community club workforce that runs regional cricket competitions, and the club officers who provide much needed support and advice to clubs. This puts even more pressure on volunteers to keep clubs operating.

The pandemic prompted a flurry of online webinars, podcasts, and zoom meetings to plan strategies for getting back to play after lockdown. Sport organisations and government have been forced to shift from their usual sales-focused participant recruitment strategies to a more customer-focused participant retention approach.

While funding programs to individuals, families, clubs and sporting organisations may go a long way to kickstart community sports' recovery, without an overarching strategy to prepare for the sustainable return of community sport, financial handouts will be short-lived.

We advocate for a 'community sport ecosystem' perspective – one with a truly strategic systems approach. This will involve the clubs, national and state sporting organisations, planning departments for sport and recreation at all government levels, industry professionals such as leisure planners, architects, and engineers, and last but not least, local businesses that surround the clubs and supply and benefit from actively engaging with community sport clubs.

We have seen that professional sport can continue without spectators and large crowds, even though empty stands are not a pretty sight. But community sport cannot exist without volunteers – the unsung heroes of sport and our communities, and the ones who are often forgotten.

Now is the time to consider a coordinated strategic recovery effort that supports volunteers and participants alike to be part of a healthy and sustainable club so that community sport can continue to make key contributions to the physical, social and mental health of individuals, families, and communities.

Professors Westerbeek and Eime will host a free online forum, *Future of Sport – Building new Business Models for Engaged Community Sport*, led by the Committee for Melbourne and Victoria University on Wednesday 11 November.