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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Volunteer Fee Creates More Challenges for School Canteens**

The Federation of Canteens in Schools (FOCIS) is urging the ACT Government to reconsider its $11 fee for Working With Vulnerable People (WWVP) registration, warning that the charge creates yet another barrier to recruiting volunteers, particularly in school canteens that already face critical staffing shortages.

“Volunteers should not have to pay to give their time,” said Leanne Elliston, FOCIS Chair and CEO of Nutrition Australia ACT.

“This fee, though seemingly small, sends the wrong message, one that undervalues the essential contribution of school volunteers who are already giving so much to keep canteens running and children fed.”

Volunteers are the backbone of school communities. They staff canteens, organise events and help deliver essential services that support children’s wellbeing and learning. In a climate of rising food costs, low wages and mounting operational challenges, this additional financial barrier could see even fewer people able to put their hands up.

According to Volunteering Australia’s 2023 State of Volunteering Report, 77% of volunteer-involving organisations reported difficulties recruiting volunteers, and 59% cited the costs incurred by volunteers as a key barrier. Volunteers contribute an estimated $25 billion to Australia’s economy annually, yet many are expected to pay to participate.

“This isn’t just an ACT issue, it’s a problem nationwide, but this sets a precedent and sends a strong message to those who are already giving up valuable time for no cost at all.

When we lose volunteers, we risk losing school canteens altogether. That means children, especially in disadvantaged communities, miss out on access to nutritious, affordable food.”

FOCIS recently convened a National Roundtable, bringing together over 90 stakeholders from the education, health, and community sectors to address the urgent issues facing school canteens. The result was the development of the **National Consensus Statement**, which highlights the growing threat to school food services and calls for urgent national coordination and funding.

The **FOCIS Consensus Statement** outlines five key recommendations for sustainable school food systems, including a call to adequately resource school canteens and reduce reliance on volunteers by funding staff positions and removing barriers to participation. “Scrapping volunteer fees is an immediate and straightforward step governments can take to support the wellbeing of our students”, said Elliston.

“Every child deserves a nutritious meal at school, no matter their postcode. To make that happen, we must support, not penalise, the very people helping to hold these systems together.”

FOCIS is calling on the Government to revoke the $11 WWVP fee and urges national leaders to follow suit by investing in the school food workforce, streamlining regulations and recognising canteens as essential public health infrastructure.

Learn more about the FOCIS Consensus Statement and how you can support: <https://www.focis.com.au/focis-national-consensus-statement-2>

For more information on FOCIS visit [www.focis.com.au](http://www.focis.com.au).

**Media Interview Contact**

**Leanne Elliston**

FOCIS Chairperson and Senior Dietitian/Chief Executive Officer at Nutrition Australia ACT

0406 631 510

[lelliston@act.nutritionaustralia.org](mailto:lelliston@act.nutritionaustralia.org)

**Stacey Kershaw-Brant**

Communications and Advocacy

FOCIS

0409 690 714

[Stacey@focis.com.au](mailto:Stacey@focis.com.au)