



The Centre for
Volunteering

Media Release

Embargoed until 4pm, Tuesday 25 August 2026

Foster care advocate named 2026 Blue Mountains Volunteer of the Year

Hope in a Suitcase volunteer Natalie Bennett has been named 2026 Blue Mountains Volunteer of the Year for her role in bringing comfort to children entering the out-of-home care system and for speaking out on the need to provide more support.

Natalie was recognised today at the 2026 Volunteer of the Year Awards at The Carrington Hotel in Katoomba.

The NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards are hosted by The Centre for Volunteering to help promote and support volunteering across NSW. The Awards are now in their 20th year and celebrate the work of thousands of individuals and volunteer teams from a diverse range of organisations across the state.

Other individual and team awards were also announced today:

Blue Mountains Adult Volunteer of the Year: Natalie Bennett from Blaxland

Natalie gives her time with Hope in a Suitcase, helping to collect, pack and distribute clothing, blankets and toys for children transitioning to out-of-home care.

She has supported more than 1,000 children, while organising for surplus donations to be shared with other charities like Gateway Services and Bonnie Support Services. She is also a champion fundraiser, public speaker and finder of donations, sourcing support from Woolworths, Bunnings, and other organisations.

Blue Mountains Senior Volunteer of the Year: Garry Sims from Katoomba

Detective Chief Inspector Garry Sims from the Blue Mountains Police Area Command is a Community Ambassador for the Kids with Cancer Foundation, which provides essential items, toys and personally written cards for children undergoing cancer treatment.

Garry leads an annual food drive across the Blue Mountains, coordinating local emergency services, businesses, schools and other community groups to raise thousands of dollars' worth of donations.

He's also an ambassador for RU OK? Day, highlighting the important issues of mental health and wellbeing.

Blue Mountains Emergency Volunteer of the Year: Sabella Hebels from Mount Riverview

Sabella is a volunteer with Anglicare Sydney, where she sources and packs crucial items such as toiletry packs for distribution at emergency evacuation centres, providing comfort to those in need.



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During the 2025 Mid North Coast Floods, Sabella supported the work of GIVIT, coordinating hundreds of requests from flood affected households and matching them with donated items, including fridges, beds and other household goods, enabling families to rebuild their homes and lives.

Blue Mountains Volunteer Team of the Year: Springwood Neighbourhood Centre Reception Team

The Reception Team at the Springwood Neighbourhood Centre offers a warm, safe and welcoming space for community members looking to connect with others or access support services. The team welcomes new clients, organises resources, packs food relief bags, and provides admin support for staff.

Last year, the team distributed 900 food bags and 3,500 bread and pastry items to people in financial hardship, and contributed to 5,500 social connections, building a stronger, more connected community.

The Centre for Volunteering CEO Gemma Rygate said volunteers from across the Blue Mountains give so much to the local community.

“Volunteers help build strong and healthy communities across the state,” Ms Rygate said.

“They are always there when we need them most, giving their time and support across all areas of life including health, emergency services, education and community sectors.

“Volunteers are also role models for others, highlighting how volunteering can have such a positive impact on people and places. These awards celebrate the volunteering effort and impact.”

The NSW Minister with responsibility for Volunteering, Jodie Harrison said:

“Congratulations to our everyday heroes, the winners of the Blue Mountains Volunteer of the Year Awards.

“From the bush to the sea, volunteers are the true heartbeat of our communities. Thank you for your invaluable contributions. You make New South Wales the best state to live in.

“In partnership with the Centre for Volunteering, the NSW Government continues to build a sector that is strong and diverse, and to make sure volunteers like you are recognised for and supported in what they do.”

Blue Mountains award recipients will be invited to represent their region at the State Gala Award Ceremony at the end of the year, where the NSW Volunteer of the Year in each category will be announced.



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About the NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards

The NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards are in their 20th year and have grown to become one of the largest celebrations of volunteering across Australia.

They are an annual program run by The Centre for Volunteering to recognise the outstanding work of volunteers and Leaders of Volunteers in every region across NSW.

Individuals or teams can be nominated in one of seven award categories:

- Young Volunteer of the Year – sponsored by the Minister for Youth – Hon Rose Jackson
- Adult Volunteer of the Year
- Senior Volunteer of the Year
- Volunteer Team of the Year
- Emergency Volunteer of the Year – sponsored by the Minister for Emergency Services – Hon Jihad Dib
- Not-for-Profit Voluntary Governance Award
- Volunteer Leader of the Year

Twenty-five regional ceremonies are held in towns and suburbs throughout NSW from mid-August until November.

The regional finalists will be invited to a Gala State ceremony in December in Sydney where the NSW Volunteer of Year is announced. Recipients for the NSW Volunteer of the Year are also announced across the seven categories.

The Awards are run by the Centre for Volunteering. The NSW Government is the principal partner for the awards.



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