



COVID-19 Position paper No.2: Safeguarding Volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations

25 March 2020

Position paper: COVID-19, Volunteering and National Policy Settings

Introduction

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies are providing advice and guidance to volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations as the COVID-19 situation evolves. This position paper sets out our shared views on how volunteers can be safeguarded during the COVID-19 emergency and how volunteers can best support the emergency response to COVID-19. Overall, our aim is to provide guidance which draws directly from official sources of advice and expertise, and which is mindful of rapidly changing State and Territory priorities.

The aim of this position paper is to help guide decision-making of Volunteer Involving Organisations and of volunteers in these very challenging times.

The COVID-19 situation is changing by the hour. This position paper is a live document and new versions will be produced as the situation and official advice changes.

This paper is by way of general information and is designed for discretionary use. It does not replace the requirement for the reader to obtain specific operational, legal, insurance, or other advice. Volunteering Australia accepts no responsibility for any errors in the information provided, nor the effect of any such errors.

Issues

Adapting your volunteering programs

Volunteering Australia recommends adapting volunteering roles to minimise or remove face-to-face contact to reduce the risk of infection of COVID-19.

Adjustments to volunteering roles may include:

- Postponing volunteer work that cannot be done safely within COVID-19 requirements
- Moving volunteering online so volunteers can work from home
- Replacing face-to-face contact with telephone contact
- Ensuring volunteers keep a distance of 1.5 metres during instances of face-to-face contact
- Reducing face-to-face contact to less than 15 minutes

Safeguarding volunteers¹

Work Health and Safety Requirements

Volunteering Australia recommends that due to the unpredictability of COVID-19, including limited measures available to control the spread of the virus, Volunteer Involving Organisations cease volunteering roles that cannot be done safely within COVID-19 requirements. This aligns with the Australian Government's advice to practice social distancing.

If your organisation has one or more paid employees it is legally required to adhere to your jurisdiction's relevant work, health and safety (WHS) laws. Under WHS legislation your organisation

¹ Further guidance is available from your State or Territory volunteering peak body – see links at end of this document.

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has an obligation to protect the physical and mental health wellbeing of your volunteers. This means that your organisation has the same obligations to your volunteers as it does to your employees, which includes the duty to provide a safe working environment.

Your organisation should consider whether it is able to comply with WHS laws to provide a safe working environment for volunteers as COVID-19 continues to spread throughout Australia. It is important to remember that people can be asymptomatic carriers of the virus and unknowingly pass it onto others, including at risk populations.

If your organisation decides to continue involving volunteers at this time, you are encouraged to seek independent legal advice about the measures you need to take to comply with WHS legislation.

If your organisation is entirely run by volunteers with no employees you are not legally obligated to adhere to work, health and safety legislation, but it is recommended you do so as a matter of best practice.

Insurance Requirements

Volunteering Australia strongly recommends that Volunteer Involving Organisations seek advice from their insurer about the implications of the pandemic regarding their volunteer workforce if they choose to continue involving volunteers at this time. *Please be aware this is a complex area and, as States and Territories declare 'states of emergency' and enact emergency legislation, advice may change.*

Volunteers are not covered by worker's compensation and therefore your organisation needs to consider specific volunteer insurance to cover them for injury in the workplace. This is sometimes known as Voluntary Workers Personal Accident insurance. There is no legal requirement for your organisation to have volunteer insurance, but it is highly recommended. It is critical to note that volunteer insurance does not cover volunteers for illness, so your organisation should be exercising exceptional risk management with regards to volunteers and policies typically do not cover pandemics. This means that the health and safety of volunteers needs to be considered, more than ever, in these challenging times. There may also be further insurance considerations associated with volunteers working remotely, for example cybersecurity concerns with the use of personal or work-owned devices.

We strongly encourage you to communicate with your volunteers about the limitations of your insurance policies (and that no insurance may be applicable) and give volunteers the option to suspend their involvement for the time being. Your volunteers are important and they will likely value the opportunity to stay connected with your organisation so that they may choose to reengage in the future.

Keeping Volunteers Safe

If your organisation decides to continue running programs and services that involve volunteers, it is imperative you take every measure possible to keep your volunteers safe in the workplace. This includes following all advice provided by the Australian Government with regards to hygiene and social distancing. Where possible, consider how face-to-face contact can be lessened or removed altogether. Where face-to-face contact is an essential requirement, ensure your volunteers strictly

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comply with handwashing and sanitising guidelines. Further, consider how you can assist service users to comply with guidelines to minimise the risk to your volunteers.

Business Continuity and Risk Management Considerations

Volunteering Australia is urging all Volunteer Involving Organisations to prepare further for how COVID-19 will disrupt operations including updating or creating a business continuity plan. Several resources are available to help organisations undertake this planning².

Volunteering Australia also recommends your organisation revisit the risk management plan that governs your volunteering program/s to consider any new or heightened risks posed by COVID-19. It may be the case that existing risks will now have a higher risk rating due to COVID-19 and require new treatments and mitigation strategies. When considering the risks posed by COVID-19 to your volunteers remember that volunteer insurance does not cover volunteers for illness. As part of this process, it is advised that you seek independent legal and insurance advice about your organisation's requirements to remain compliant with legislation.

Mutual obligation and volunteering

Our current advice to individuals unable to meet their mutual obligation requirements because of the COVID-19 situation is to contact Centrelink to discuss.

Volunteering Australia is also urgently calling on the Federal Government to introduce an extended pause on mutual obligation requirements³ in line with the call by the Australian Council of Social Services⁴. The temporary pause on mutual obligations⁵ to allow the MyGov website to recover capacity is welcome, but it does not address the more fundamental challenges that people are facing in meeting their obligations because of COVID-19.

Many job seekers currently volunteer⁶ as part of their mutual obligation requirements⁷. As many volunteering programs are suspending or altering operations, job seekers may be unable to fulfil their mutual obligation requirements through no fault of their own. In addition, many people will be self-isolating and so will be unable to fulfil their mutual obligation requirements. An extended pause on mutual obligation requirements is essential to ensure people, particularly many who are very vulnerable, continue to receive income support in these challenging times. Further, pausing mutual obligation requirements may reduce the burden on Volunteer Involving Organisations to find work for mutual obligation participants where these organisations are considering how to pare back their operations to respond to the risks of COVID-19. Suspension of requirements will enable both participants and organisations to manage the risks posed by COVID-19 to themselves and their service users.

² See links to State and Territory peak volunteering bodies at the end of this document.

³ See Volunteering Australia's COVID-19 Position Paper 1: Volunteering and National Policy Settings.

⁴ <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020-March-Plan-of-Action-for-Covid19-followup-final.pdf>

⁵ <https://ministers.education.gov.au/Cash/mutual-obligations-lifted-until-congestion-clears>

⁶ See <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Definition-of-Volunteering-27-July-20151.pdf> for discussion of definition of volunteering.

⁷ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/volunteering-and-mutual-obligation-requirements-for-unemployment-payment-recipients/>

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Informal self-organising volunteers

Volunteering Australia is urging people to exert caution in embarking on informal volunteering (for example, individuals or self-organising groups who are providing support to people affected by COVID-19). Individuals need to consider issues of privacy and self-care and avoid putting themselves and others in the community at risk. This means adhering to recommended social distancing guidelines and other official guidance as it emerges in the coming months.

Spontaneous volunteers supporting the emergency response

The State and Territory peak bodies for volunteering register offers of assistance from spontaneous volunteers. If you are interested in volunteering in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency, we encourage you to contact your State and Territory peak volunteering bodies and register your interest.

Conversations are taking place at the state/territory level about how volunteers might help as the crisis develops and our health services and paid health workforce come under increasing pressure.

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies are keen to engage with their relevant governments on how volunteers might support efforts going forward, and how volunteers can be protected in doing so.

Relaxing contractual obligations

Volunteering Australia is recommending that Volunteer Involving Organisations contact their funding bodies to explain how their operations are being affected and to discuss their contractual obligations during this crisis.

Volunteering Australia is urging all funding bodies to relax their contractual requirements so that if a Volunteer Involving Organisation has to close or change their business operations due to COVID-19, they are not penalised for failing to meet their contractual obligations. Many Volunteer Involving Organisations are already having to operate with reduced volunteering capacity, and this is affecting their ability to meet contractual requirements.

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Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.



Ms Adrienne Picone
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This position statement has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.



About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

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State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies

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