



COVID-19 Position paper No. 1: Volunteering and National Policy Settings
25 March 2020

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

Introduction

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies are monitoring the evolving COVID-19 situation closely. We are actively providing guidance to the volunteering community during these very challenging times¹. Our overall approach in guiding volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations is to draw on, and refer people to, sources of official advice.

This position paper sets out our shared views on how national policy settings and messaging might need to adapt to help ensure volunteers are safeguarded during the COVID-19 emergency and that volunteers can be facilitated to best support the emergency response to COVID-19. Volunteers are critical to many essential services and voluntary action will be a key part of the solution to many of the challenges that communities will face.

The COVID-19 situation is changing by the hour. New versions of this document will be produced as the situation and official advice changes.

Issues

Impact on volunteers and the wider community

Volunteering Australia urges Ministers and officials to engage with us and the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies throughout the coming months, and to listen to the concerns that are coming from the volunteering community and consider the impact on services to our communities. Volunteering Australia also urges Government to ensure that official guidance and communications, specifically COVID-19 advice coming from the Federal Department of Health, makes reference to volunteers and the challenges for the volunteer workforce.

The COVID-19 crisis is having a profound effect on volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations and this has further consequences for the wider community, particularly as the volunteer workforce decreases. Further consideration by the Federal Government needs to urgently be given to the impact that COVID-19 is having on volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations, and the consequences of this for vital services to the community. Many essential community services rely on volunteers.

We are urging Volunteer Involving Organisations² to undertake business continuity planning and to adapt their volunteering roles to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection. We are seeing innovative examples of organisations that are adapting their services (for example, through use of on-line, telephone and letter services). However, many volunteering programs are closing down and we anticipate this will continue.

We support the Community Council for Australia's broader messages about the need to engage more effectively with charities in the coming months³.

¹ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/coronavirus/>

² See Volunteering Australia's COVID-19 Position Paper 2: Safeguarding volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

³ <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2020/03/charities-can-be-part-of-the-solution/>

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Relaxing contractual obligations

Volunteering Australia is urging all funding bodies, including the Federal Departments of Social Services⁴ and Health, to relax their contractual requirements so that if a Volunteer Involving Organisation is required 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 volunteer capacity, and this may be affecting their ability to meet contractual requirements.

It is also imperative that Volunteer Involving Organisations are able to contact their grant and contract managers to discuss their contractual arrangements as the crisis unfolds. We have heard of several examples of organisations being unable to get through to contract managers who need information to inform their business planning.

Mutual obligation and volunteering

Volunteering Australia is calling on the Federal Government to introduce an extended pause to mutual obligation requirements linked to the receipt of social security payments as a matter of urgency. We welcome the temporary lifting of mutual obligation requirements⁵ which the Federal Government has announced. However, this temporary lifting of mutual obligations to allow the MyGov website to recover capacity does not address the more fundamental challenges that people are facing in meeting their obligations because of COVID-19. A lifting of mutual obligation for only one week (until 31 March) gives little reassurance to the many people unable to satisfy these requirements 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.

We are advising individuals unable to meet their mutual obligation requirements because of the COVID-19 situation, to contact Centrelink to discuss.

⁴ We welcome the willingness of the Department of Social Services to adapt and allow flexibility in contractual arrangements in this regard.

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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Spontaneous volunteers supporting the emergency response

Volunteering Australia would like to engage with the Federal Government on how volunteers might support efforts to meet the challenges of COVID-19 going forward, and how volunteers can be protected in doing so.

In partnership with their relevant Governments, the State and Territory peak bodies for volunteering register offers of assistance from spontaneous volunteers. If people are interested in volunteering in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency, we encourage them to contact their State and Territory peak volunteering bodies and register their 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.

Informal volunteering/self-organised groups

There is also evidence across the country of individuals self-organising and volunteering support to people affected by COVID-19, including people in social isolation or healthcare workers.

Volunteering Australia is urging people to exert caution in embarking on these activities, to consider issues of privacy and self-care, and to avoid putting themselves and others in the community at risk. This includes adhering to recommended hygiene and social distancing guidelines and other official guidance as it emerges in the coming months.

Recommendations

Volunteering Australia is calling upon the Federal Government to:

- Engage with Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies throughout the coming months, and to listen to the concerns that are coming from the volunteering community. We support the CCA's broader messages about the need to engage the charitable sector.
- Ensure that official guidance and communications, specifically COVID-19 advice coming from the Federal Department of Health, makes reference to volunteers and the challenges for Australia's volunteer workforce.
- Relax grant and contractual requirements for Volunteer Involving Organisations who are having to adapt their activities in response to the COVID-19 situation, and ensure that grant and contract managers (for example in the Department of Social Services and Department of Health) are available to discuss contractual arrangements as the crisis unfolds.
- Put in place an extended pause to mutual obligation requirements linked to receipt of social security payments. We support ACOSS's call in this regard and urge the Department of Education, Skills and Employment to urgently implement this measure.
- Work with us to draw on the expertise of the volunteering community to consider how best to involve volunteers in the emergency COVID-19 response. Volunteers and voluntary action can be one of the nation's best assets in meeting the challenges our communities are facing as the COVID-19 situation develops if deployed and managed safely.

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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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