



## Considerations when organising an informal volunteer group

### Wanting to help in a crisis is a natural reaction

Many people are seeking to support vulnerable members of their local community by convening informal community groups or forming virtual groups on social media platforms such as Facebook. This is known as informal volunteering.

During these challenging times, it is important that we take care of ourselves and others. Everyone should follow government guidelines regarding the pandemic at all times.

Organisers of any form of volunteering need to consider their responsibility to the volunteers in their group and to the people they are seeking to help. They also need to think ahead about how best they can support a member in the community who needs more help than they or the volunteer can provide. This includes knowing which community or professional services are available and how to access them.

Our collective aim is to reduce the spread of COVID-19. We are therefore urging people to exert caution when organising informal volunteering activities. Organisers need to consider issues of privacy and self-care and avoid putting themselves and others in the community at risk.

This means adhering to and communicating recommended physical distancing guidelines and other official guidance as it emerges in the coming months.

**This resource is for community-minded individuals who are establishing informal groups to support members of their communities. These self-organising groups have a positive effect in the community but there are some risks that need to be considered. This resource should be read in conjunction with directives from the Australian Government, the ACT Government and the NSW Government.**

## Understand and reinforce reliable health and safety messages

First and foremost, it is important to take all necessary steps to keep yourself, the members of your group and the community safe and to prevent spread of the virus. Make sure to follow local and federal government guidelines on infection control, including instructions on hand washing and physical distancing. Ensure that all members of your group know where to find official information, and that you consistently reinforce the importance of following these guidelines.

It is vital, for your own health and that of the broader community, that you do not try to help others if you are feeling sick or unwell.

## Set some ground rules

Instruct the volunteers in your group not to enter anyone's home unless absolutely necessary, and provide guidance around what type of situation would qualify. If dropping off shopping or medication, ask them to call or text ahead and leave the items at the front door or another safe place.

Ensure the volunteers in your group know what to do in case of emergency while supporting someone in the community.

Remind the volunteers in your group that they must not continue to help out if they are sick. If you observe or suspect any illness in a volunteer, you will need to instruct them to withdraw from all activities until they are well again.

## Protect and respect people's privacy

Supporting people in your community works best when you start locally with known contacts. Consider how you can reach out to immediate neighbours and people you know through existing networks like sporting and community clubs and associations, schools and education facilities. Be aware that not everyone will want or accept help in the current circumstances. People may be wary of offers of help from strangers.

It is essential that people's privacy is protected when coordinating groups on social media or other online platforms. Do not disclose online anyone's personal details including name, address, banking details, medical history or any other personal information. Personal details should only be shared privately with volunteers if necessary and only with written consent. This includes the personal information of both the people in the community you are seeking to support as well as other volunteers.

## Support the volunteers in your group

It is important to manage the expectations of people joining the group as volunteers. Although they will have good intentions and be enthusiastic about helping others, they need to be aware of some of the risks around health and safety. Part of managing expectations is being very clear about what the role involves – a brief, written description helps to provide clarity around what a volunteer should or shouldn't be doing. It may also help in deciding whether a volunteer is suitable for the role.

Encourage volunteers to only do what they are comfortable with or capable of doing. Let them know that it's OK to take time out from helping others in order to look after themselves or those around them. It is

This resource was last updated on 15 April 2020

important to make sure that volunteers are not pushing themselves too hard or taking on more than they should.

Volunteers may encounter people who need more professional support than you can provide. Be prepared with information about local community and professional services for people who need more help.

Volunteers will experience a range of emotions in the current situation. Supporting others who are isolated and lonely may also affect volunteers mentally and emotionally. Encourage volunteers to look after their own health and wellbeing. For support call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

### Expect the unexpected, and be prepared

The number of volunteers offering to help is likely to vary rapidly. Prepare for the unexpected – at times people will express a desire to informally volunteer with your initiative but may not actually come through; people may never have volunteered before and may need a lot of guidance; and people may find themselves unable or unwilling to continue volunteering with very little notice.

Establishing and maintaining an informal volunteering group may take more of your time and energy than you expected. Think about how you might wrap up your involvement in the group if necessary – by handing over to others or by directing the volunteers to other groups or established Volunteer Involving Organisations.

More information on volunteering and on the COVID-19 health emergency is available at [volunteeringact.org.au](https://volunteeringact.org.au).