



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

In the coming weeks, Federal and State/Territory Government advice is likely to change as COVID19 restrictions are reviewed. We are urging all organisations to ensure they are aware of the most up to date advice which applies within their jurisdiction.

This paper was updated on 29 April 2020

Amendments/additions:

- Additional material on essential and non-essential gatherings
- Updates to section on mutual obligation
- Additions to informal volunteering section
- New sections on:
 - Impact of JobKeeper Payment on volunteering
 - Volunteer honorariums and compensation

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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.

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

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

Volunteering Australia also urges Government to ensure that official guidance and communications, specifically COVID-19 advice coming from the Federal Department of Health, refers 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 have closed and will remain so while relevant social distancing and other restrictions are in place.

We are also urging the Federal and State and Territory governments to provide further guidance on the distinction between essential and non-essential gatherings and activities³. This lack of clarity has made it very challenging for Volunteer Involving Organisations to determine whether a volunteering program should continue. In the meantime, our advice to Volunteer Involving Organisations⁴ has been to first consider whether or not (and in what circumstances) a person is allowed to leave their primary place of residence for the purpose of volunteering and then consider what Federal and State/Territory governments have defined as 'non-essential gatherings'⁵. If their activity is listed, then the organisation should cease the program (if it cannot be undertaken remotely). If their activity is not listed, then we are recommending that organisations carefully consider their Work, Health and Safety (WHS) and duty of care obligations before proceeding with the volunteering activity.

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

³ For more information, see:

https://www.nfplaw.org.au/sites/default/files/media/State_and_territory_government_guidelines_and_order_s_restricting_gatherings_and_movement.pdf

⁴ Link to updated Position Paper 2.

⁵ <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/how-to-protect-yourself-and-others-from-coronavirus-covid-19/limits-on-public-gatherings-for-coronavirus-covid-19>

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Relaxing contractual obligations

Volunteering Australia is urging all funding bodies, including the Federal Departments of Social Services⁶ 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 who need information to inform their business planning being unable to get through to contract managers.

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 suspension of mutual obligation requirements⁷ until 22 May 2020 that the Federal Government has announced. However, this temporary lifting of mutual obligations to relieve congestion on government services does not address the more fundamental challenges that people are facing in meeting their obligations because of COVID-19.

Many job seekers currently volunteer⁸ as part of their mutual obligation requirements⁹. 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 have pared 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.

⁶ We welcome the willingness of the Department of Social Services to adapt and allow flexibility in contractual arrangements in this regard.

⁷ <https://www.employment.gov.au/newsroom/explainer-covid-19-mutual-obligation-arrangements>

⁸ See <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Definition-of-Volunteering-27-July-20151.pdf> for discussion of definition of volunteering.

⁹ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/volunteering-and-mutual-obligation-requirements-for-unemployment-payment-recipients/>

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Impact of JobKeeper Payment on volunteering

Volunteering Australia welcomes the introduction of the JobKeeper Payment¹⁰ and supports the Community Council for Australia's calls¹¹ on Government to ensure the payment works for the charitable sector and its Volunteer Involving Organisations.

The Australian Government's JobKeeper Payment is designed to enable organisations significantly affected by the COVID-19 outbreak to keep people in their jobs. Eligible organisations will receive a subsidy from the Government to continue paying their employees. The introduction of the JobKeeper Payment is relevant to volunteering and Volunteer Involving Organisations in several ways:

- Volunteer Involving Organisations typically employ paid staff in addition to their volunteer workforce. The introduction of the JobKeeper Payment should help organisations that are eligible to come through the COVID-19 crisis in better health and able to return to normal business operations more quickly¹².
- Many not-for-profits and Volunteer Involving Organisations have lost revenue and/or experiencing an increase in demand for their services. The JobKeeper Payment should help organisations to maintain service provision in our communities.
- A further implication of the introduction of the JobKeeper Payment is that there will now be a large pool of people who are paid employees but may not have work to undertake. This is more likely in sectors where there has been a dramatic decline in business activity such as hospitality and tourism. This pool of people might be welcome additions to the volunteer workforce, in particular in areas which might see a continued increase in demand such as community and welfare services in the coming months. The State and Territory volunteering peak bodies all have registration systems in place to help people to volunteer in the current COVID-19 context.

Volunteer honorariums and compensation

As the COVID-19 situation evolves, Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies are keen to preserve the spirit of volunteerism whilst also ensuring that volunteers do not suffer financial hardship because of their contribution to the community.

In times of crisis, volunteers often step up and provide additional and essential services to our communities. The 2019-20 Australian bushfires and now the COVID19 emergency are cases in point. At these times, volunteers frequently go above and beyond what the community might expect of volunteers and calls are made to financially compensate volunteers or provide them with an

¹⁰ <https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus/jobkeeper>

¹¹ CCA is seeking clarification from the ATO on how the payment will work for specific circumstances of charities.

¹² Some good guidelines about how to activate JobKeeper Payments for charities are available here: <https://www.ato.gov.au/Non-profit/Newsroom/Looking-after-your-workers/COVID-19--JobKeeper-Payment/>

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honorarium¹³. This occurred during the 2019-20 bushfires with the Australian Government introducing a compensation scheme for emergency service volunteers¹⁴.

Initiatives by the Australian Government to support the vital work of volunteers and the volunteer workforce are of course encouraged. Volunteers comprise a national workforce which is critical to saving lives and community wellbeing. However, the context of volunteerism varies significantly in different organisations and across States and Territories.

Both the recent bushfires and the current COVID-19 emergency have highlighted the need for emergency management policy to be well planned, cognisant of the varying contexts of volunteerism and which have been developed through thorough consultation. These crises have focused attention on the critical roles that volunteers play during emergencies and the significant volunteer workforce that is at the forefront of an emergency response.

A key concern is that policies do not undermine the culture and the ethos of volunteering by introducing financial considerations that could be considered a wage or salary¹⁵. At the same time, volunteers should not be financially impacted because of their contribution to our communities.

Rather than setting any expectation of financial compensation for volunteers in this and future emergencies, Volunteering Australia recommends that the Australian Government and all State and Territory Governments use the lessons learned from recent national crises to improve policy settings relating to volunteers and support volunteer emergency service workforce planning.

Fundamentally, these crises demonstrate the need for greater investment in the enabling infrastructure of volunteering and in volunteer management. This is a cross-government concern which urgently requires a more comprehensive and strategic approach as Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies have consistently argued¹⁶.

We suggest that policy development related to these issues by the Australian Government and where relevant, State and Territory Governments, are guided by the following principles:

1. Maintain a clear conceptual understanding of volunteering as “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.”
2. Reimburse and cover out of pocket expenses of volunteers
3. Protect the health and safety of volunteers
4. Recognise the contribution of volunteers¹⁷
5. Consult widely with the experts, including volunteers

¹³ An honorarium is a voluntary payment that is given to a person for services for which fees are not legally or traditionally required.

¹⁴ For further information on Volunteering Australia’s response, see <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/February-2020-Position-Statement-Australian-Government-Compensation-Scheme.pdf>

¹⁵ For further information, see <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/how-we-will-help/templates-and-guides/fact-sheets/unpaid-work/unpaid-work#volunteering>

¹⁶ Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies have previously called on the Australian Government to increase investment in volunteering and to introduce a strategic Volunteering Statement to guide action. See <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/2020-21-pre-budget-submission/#/>

¹⁷ Through means other than financial incentives or rewards.

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Spontaneous volunteers supporting the emergency response

Volunteering Australia would like to engage with the Federal Government on how volunteers might further 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.

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, together with the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies, recognise the important role that this 'informal volunteering' plays, particularly in times of crisis and want to ensure that it is undertaken safely. We are 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, refers to volunteers and the challenges for Australia's volunteer workforce.
- Provide further guidance and consistent definitions on the distinction between essential and non-essential gatherings and activities. This lack of clarity has made it very challenging for Volunteer Involving Organisations to determine whether a volunteering program should continue.
- 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.

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- Consult the volunteering sector on any proposals for compensation for volunteers. We are keen to preserve the spirit of volunteerism whilst also ensuring that volunteers do not suffer financial hardship because of their contribution to the community.
- 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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