Keeping Volunteers Safe

With COVID-19, also known as coronavirus, being designated as a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation, and cases continuing to rise in Australia, it is imperative that Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) consider the implications for their employees, volunteers, service users, and the general public. This resource provides some general risk management guidelines and includes an organisational self-assessment that can be used by VIOs to consider whether they have adequately planned for volunteer involvement during this public health emergency.

For advice on health directives and government restrictions, go directly to Australian Government, and ACT and NSW Government websites:

> Australian Government Department of Health
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> ACT Health
>
> NSW Health

VolunteeringACT strongly recommends seeking independent legal and/or insurance advice during this uncertain time about the continued involvement of volunteers and what mechanisms must be put in place to ensure the physical and mental health and wellbeing of employees, volunteers, and service users.

This resource 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. VolunteeringACT accepts no responsibility for any errors in the information provided, nor the effect of any such errors.

Risk Management and COVID-19

COVID-19 is a global pandemic and has been declared a public health emergency by the Australian Government. As COVID-19 continues to spread throughout Australia, there are significant considerations for VIOs regarding the continued involvement of volunteers. Many VIOs and community groups are on the frontline and deliver critical services to people experiencing disadvantage, including people who are at significant risk of contracting COVID-19 and experiencing severe health repercussions. This necessitates a conversation about how we can continue to deliver essential services, while simultaneously keeping volunteers safe.

From a risk management perspective, it is critical for organisations to be aware of the following:

Work, Health and Safety Obligations

If your organisation has one or more paid employees it is considered a *Person Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBU)* and is legally required to adhere to work, health and safety (WHS) laws. Under WHS legislation your organisation 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.[1]

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 may be asymptomatic carriers of the virus and unknowingly pass it onto others, including at risk populations. It is strongly recommended you seek independent legal and/or insurance advice about what measures your organisation can take to provide a safe working environment, noting advice and instruction from government about the best way to minimise the spread ofCOVID-19. Your organisation should seriously consider whether it has the means to adequately protect volunteers from risk of infection, or prevent volunteers from inadvertently infecting others, and how it will do so.

Whilst some volunteering roles require essential face-to-face contact, or the use of shared facilities and equipment, there are measures your organisation can take to mitigate risk, for example adapting or suspending all volunteering activity for an interim period or moving volunteering online or over the phone. For roles that do require face-to-face contact with others, your organisation should consider how it can comply with Australian Government Department of Health guidelines and instructions on hygiene and social distancing.

Volunteer Insurance

Volunteer insurance does not cover any illness for volunteers, so organisations need to carefully implement appropriate risk management for their volunteer involvement. VIOs are encouraged to consider the unique risk factors and potential consequences that volunteers may be exposed to during this public health emergency. Some volunteers belong to at risk groups and are more likely to suffer extreme health repercussions if they contract COVID-19.

As recommended above, VolunteeringACT strongly encourages all VIOs to contact their insurer to obtain advice about their specific volunteers and volunteering programs.

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[1] 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.

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Organisational Self-Assessment

The following organisational self-assessment may assist you to consider what risk management mechanisms your organisation needs to put in place to manage its volunteer involvement during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

☐ Does my organisation have a risk management plan that governs our volunteer involvement?

☐ Does my organisation have separate risk management plans for each of our volunteering programs?

☐ Has my organisation considered how to adapt policies and procedures to account for the extraordinary nature of the risks posed by COVID-19?

☐ Has my organisation checked in with my insurer about what COVID-19 means for my organisation's volunteers?

☐ Has my organisation ensured the Board of Directors has been adequately briefed on the risks associated with volunteer involvement during this time, and what implications this might have on service delivery?

☐ Has my organisation checked in with funding bodies, donors and sponsors regarding the potential impact of COVID-19 on services, outputs and outcomes if volunteer capacity is reduced or activities involving volunteers are suspended?

☐ Has my organisation communicated with stakeholders about what service interruptions will be likely, and what contingency planning we have put in place to minimise disruptions?

☐ Has my organisation updated its description on the Community Directory to reflect any changes to service delivery days and times?

☐ Has my organisation considered how to adapt my volunteering roles to reduce or remove face-to-face contact?

☐ If my organisation moves to remote/virtual volunteering, have we considered how to ensure volunteers are compliant with WHS requirements when working from home?

☐ Has my organisation checked with our insurer about what requirements must be put in place to ensure volunteers working remotely are covered by insurance?

☐ Has my organisation considered how it will reimburse virtual volunteers for out-of-pocket expenses such as the cost of electricity or internet?

☐ Has my organisation communicated with volunteers that volunteering is a choice, is optional, and every effort will be made to accommodate those who wish to adapt or cease their volunteering role to reduce risk?

☐ Has my organisation considered how to maintain positive workplace culture during a time of anxiety and uncertainty?

☐ Is my organisation regularly checking in with our volunteers, including those who have put their volunteering on hold at this time?