

# Volunteer Guide

Your guide to why and how you can volunteer,  
and your rights and responsibilities

**Whether this is your first go at volunteering or you are seeking a new role, this guide will help you get the most from your experience.**

**Most of us volunteer in some way, either formally or informally. Communities with widespread active participation remain inviting places in which to live and work.**

**In this guide, you will find ideas about how to look for a volunteer role that suits you. It will help you work out how to start and sort through the many options available.**

**Your host organisation and group is responsible for making sure you are safe and happy in your role. But you must also play your part by committing and contributing to them. It pays to look around for the right fit.**

## Volunteering – What is it?

The Australian definition of volunteering is “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.”

Volunteering is an activity or project which mostly takes place in volunteer-involving not-for-profit community organisations but also happens for some businesses and other organisations.

Volunteering:

- benefits the community and the volunteer
- means no financial payment – in a position not designated as paid
- addresses human, environmental and/or social needs
- respects the rights, dignity and culture of others
- promotes human rights and equality.

Volunteering should not replace paid workers or constitute a threat to the job security of paid workers.

Many people volunteer informally in their communities – you might even be volunteering now without even calling it that. This guide focuses on formal volunteering, where an organisation places you in a role and you come to a volunteer agreement.

Volunteering benefits you, the organisation and our communities.

Volunteering is always a matter of Choice.

## Benefits of volunteering

Here are just a few of the many wonderful reasons why you should try volunteering:

- learn more about your community and become actively involved
- increase your confidence and make new friends
- make a difference to a cause you support
- improve your health and wellbeing
- share your knowledge and skills with others
- develop or demonstrate skills for the workplace
- try something new and have some fun!

## The Volunteer Experience

Marg from Bright uses her qualifications in fitness training to guide a woman with severe epilepsy through her weekly personal gym session.

**Says Marg, *'It's rewarding to work with people who thought gym was beyond them. She's stronger and happier.'***

John's first volunteer role at Fernlea House hospice was driving the bus but he's since found recording people's memories is a most satisfying way to pass the time. He sees it as a privilege to be involved in such an important part of life.

***'We're all here for a limited amount of time and you make the most of it.'***

Viva volunteers on the Ucan2 Program, which helps young refugees make the transition into Australian society.

**She says, *'We do a lot of activities and go on excursions as well. I'm getting to know my local area a bit more. There's something new and exciting every week.'***

Around the state, Habitat for Humanity builds houses for people on low incomes who commit to contributing to the build.

**One of the volunteers is semi-professional builder Tony, who says, *'Doing a nice job building a house is something I enjoy but best of all this house is the start of great things happening in the family's life.'***

As a legal studies teacher and Bail Justice, Irene's got her head around the law. But a legal background isn't necessary to volunteer as an Independent Person at young people's police interviews.

***'Our role is quite simple – to support and provide help.'***

A group of women based around Alexandra have been volunteering together as part of the Shire of Murrindindi's Early Intervention Program for preschool children with special needs.

**Says one of the volunteers Marg, *'You've got to come because they're your children.'***

## Where to start?

Sometimes people ‘fall into’ volunteering, but sometimes people make a conscious decision to volunteer and then face the challenge of how to start.

1. **Decide** that you want to contribute your time to your community.
2. **Think** about your skills and interests—which of these would you most like to use, improve or obtain in your volunteering activities?
3. **Contact** your local Volunteer Support Services or visit the Volunteering Victoria website.
4. **Read** about the various roles. Choose those you like.
5. **Contact** the organisation(s) to indicate your interest. Find out how to apply for available volunteer positions.

## Finding a volunteer position

A great way to explore volunteer positions in your area is through an online recruitment platform. You will be able to find suitable roles, much like you would for a paid job.

You can search for roles via the Volunteering Victoria or visit:

Go Volunteer [www.govolunteer.com.au](http://www.govolunteer.com.au) or

Seek Volunteer [www.volunteer.com.au](http://www.volunteer.com.au)

## Volunteer Support Services

Volunteering Support Services (VSSs) provide local support for safe, effective and sustainable volunteering. Your local VSS is likely able to assist you to find the right position.

There are a number of VSSs in Melbourne and regional Victoria which assist volunteer-involving organisations to recruit, retain and manage their volunteers.

You can search for the nearest VSS in your area on the Volunteering Victoria website.

## Choosing a position

There is likely to be a wide range of volunteering opportunities in your area for you to explore.

In the words of Tony, a volunteer for Habitat for Humanity, “look around for what you enjoy rather than putting on a pair of shoes that doesn’t fit”.

*Seeking answers to the questions below will help you decide on the best ‘fit’ or match.*

### Openness

Is there a written position description for the position?

Is the organisation willing to provide you with a volunteer policy explaining your rights?

Is the organisation willing to provide you with written information about itself?

### Support

Does the organisation have a Manager of Volunteers or other contact person to support and supervise volunteers?

Does it offer adequate training and orientation for you to perform your job?

Does it offer reimbursement for travel or money spent on behalf of the organisation?

### Skills

Will the work maintain or develop your skills, if this is part of what you want from volunteering?

Will the organisation provide you with a reference, if you need one?

## Volunteer rights and responsibilities

### Volunteer rights

All volunteers have a right to:

- Orientation at your host organisation
- Recognition as a valued team member
- Clarification of your role (through your position description)
- Agreement about hours and conditions (through your volunteer agreement)
- Access to training to perform duties to the standard required
- Information and consultation on matters directly or indirectly affecting you and your duties
- Support and supervision in your role
- Adequate insurance cover and a healthy, safe work environment
- Awareness of the organisation's grievance procedure
- Reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses
- Freedom of choice (including refusing positions that may be filled by paid staff rather than volunteers)
- Holiday breaks
- Access relevant information about your host organisation, e.g. volunteer policies.

### Volunteer responsibilities

All volunteers are expected to:

- Commit to their volunteer position
- Be punctual and reliable
- Notify in advance any changes to your availability
- Accept responsibility for your actions and behaviour
- Notify your host organisation of any potential hazards or dangerous situations
- Abide by your host organisation's volunteer policies
- Deal with complaints in the appropriate manner
- Respect the rights and privacy of others
- Carry out the duties listed in your volunteer position description, including training
- Support other team members and ask for support when needed
- Give advance notice before leaving their host organisation.

Unlike paid staff, volunteers are not covered by industrial awards.

## Volunteering – things you should know

### Checks and protection

Some community organisations screen potential staff and volunteers. Screening is a standard procedure that is used to protect volunteers, organisations and service users as well as check that your character and skills match the position.

The level of screening conducted reflects the level of risk and responsibility attached to each position. Standard checks include references, driving records, background checks, Working with Children and Police Checks.

Organisations have a duty of care to protect staff, volunteers and service users from harm. Organisations must honour this duty when choosing volunteers.

### Volunteer agreements

A Volunteer agreement is a record of the requirements and expectations related to a volunteer position. It clearly states the organisation's expectations of volunteers.

Volunteer agreements include:

- title and expected duties of the volunteer position
- purpose of the volunteer position
- location and contact details of the host organisation
- time(s) of work
- name(s) of volunteer supervisor(s) to whom the volunteer will be responsible.

Before accepting a volunteer position, make sure you understand the conditions outlined in the agreement.

### Code of conduct

A code of conduct guides the organisation's responsible and ethical behaviour. Such a code must be consistent with legislative requirements.

A code of conduct may also reflect the philosophy of an organisation. Volunteers and staff will be expected to conduct themselves in a manner consistent with an organisation's philosophy.

### Complaints and suggestions

If you become unhappy in your role, alert the organisation. In such cases, you are encouraged to follow your host organisation's formal complaint or grievance procedure. Your concerns should be heard and action taken to remedy the issue.

If you become critical of an organisation, express this in a constructive way. Discuss this with your volunteer supervisor, perhaps suggesting an improvement to the situation.

**For some services, such as childcare, thorough screening of staff and volunteers is mandatory.**