



Setting up a volunteer program

Setting up a volunteer program takes time, resources, and strategy.

Learn how to develop and grow your volunteer program so you can continue to make an impact and meet the needs of your community and your volunteers.

A strong volunteer program development creates a robust foundation for addressing community needs, resulting in increased impact and organisation-wide growth

Setting up a volunteer program

Where to begin

Step 1 - Decide whether your organisation should involve volunteers

Let your group or organisation know of your idea to involve volunteers and discuss the value volunteers could add, compared to the additional work required.

Your not-for-profit organisation is growing and the Board is thinking about involving volunteers to support the good work you're doing in the community but they're not sure where to begin. Involving volunteers in your organisation isn't just about inviting them in. Running a successful volunteer program involves many things. In this beginner's guide, we offer advice and tips to help you get started.

| Discussion point | Answer |
|--|--------|
| Who will manage the program and supervise the volunteers? | |
| Do we have time to commit to a new way of working now with volunteers? | |
| Are there enough funds for resources and recognition of volunteers? | |
| Can we apply for funding? | |
| How can we ensure that volunteer support is high-quality and reliable? | |
| What benefits can we offer volunteers and how will we benefit from them? | |
| How will we collect and store volunteer information? | |
| How will we communicate with volunteers? | |

Step 2 - Conduct a needs assessment

A needs assessment will help you decide if involving volunteers can help both the community and your organisation. Do this together as a board, committee or team, and ask staff and the community you serve for input.

The first question to ask is “Why does your organisation want to involve volunteers, and what do you want them to do?” A volunteer program might take up so much time that it doesn’t increase your capacity or free up staff, so understanding the ‘why’ will help you decide if this is important or not.

Volunteering is a two-way relationship, and people volunteer for many reasons; to make friends, to learn and give skills, for career opportunities and to make a difference in their community.

Provide volunteers with roles they find satisfying and enjoyable. Offer them ongoing support and training. This helps create a successful and lasting volunteer partnership.

Involve volunteers to boost your ability to provide services and to also benefit the volunteers themselves, rather than expecting to save on wages and employee-related costs. Volunteers bring extra value, they are not used just to do the tasks no one else wants to do.

Then, ask this question – ‘If we had more time or expertise, we would.....’

You can do a SWOT analysis ([attachment 1](#)) which looks at Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats that involving volunteers could create. It’s a simple tool you can use to develop strategies and plan for volunteers in more detail. For example, a weakness might be not knowing how to recruit the right volunteers for the right roles which could lead to developing a targeted recruitment campaign.

Consider these questions:

- What are the benefits and challenges of involving volunteers for the organisation?
- What are the benefits and challenges for volunteers?
- What are the motivations of volunteers?

Step 3 - Create a volunteer program strategic plan

Create a plan that outlines what you want to achieve and how you’ll do it.

The plan explains how volunteers will help your organisation meet its goals and how to find, recruit, support, and appreciate them. It can be part of an organisation-wide plan or a separate one just for volunteers.

(See attachment 2, [create a volunteer program strategic plan](#))

Your plan should answer some or all these questions depending on the size of your club, group or organisation:

1. What are the organisation's goals, and how will volunteers help achieve them?
2. How could our organisation's vision, mission and values connect with volunteers?
3. What risks and opportunities will our organisation face in the next three, five or ten years?
4. How will we set tasks and roles for volunteers?
5. Who will make sure these tasks are meaningful?
6. What skills and attributes will volunteers need?
7. How will we advertise volunteer opportunities?
8. How will we make sure our volunteering activities are inclusive for everyone?
9. How will we recruit, train and support volunteers?
10. How will we acknowledge, celebrate and develop volunteers?
11. What policies and procedures will we need to support volunteering?
12. How will we show the impact of volunteering?
13. How will we collect feedback from volunteers' experiences and use it to improve?
14. What other resources will we need to make volunteering successful?
15. Who will make the decisions about volunteering and the policies that affect it?
16. How will we measure success?

Involve a range of people to help write your plan such as other staff, board members, your clients/customers, and members. Make sure there are various ways for people to give input on your plan. Do this through focus groups, online surveys, and by asking the people you want to reach how they would like to share their views.

Volunteering should also be part of your organisation's financial plan. Depending on the organisation's size you might need to think about:

1. Resources (people, financial, material) needed to run the program and set budgets
2. Funding opportunities
3. Volunteer management software
4. Paid staff roles to support volunteer management
5. Researching how risks and opportunities facing your organisation will impact volunteering.

Step 4 - Essential policies and procedures

Knowing what policies and procedures to include in the volunteering toolbox can be a daunting task. Adopting the necessary policies and procedures depends on the work your organisation, group or club does. The most important thing is to make sure that everyone stays safe while involved with your organisation.

Here are some common volunteer policies to start with:

- volunteer involvement
- risk management
- work health and safety
- background screening checks
- recruitment and selection
- grievance
- recognition
- reimbursement
- privacy & confidentiality
- when a volunteer leaves.

There will be policies and procedures that relate to the work you do, such as child and family services, health and aged care and community support – the list is endless and it's up to your organisation or group to develop these policies in line with your work and the services you provide.

Tip: You can include volunteers in all general organisational policies, you don't always need separate ones. Policies apply to paid and volunteer staff equally. You don't need to have policies on everything. In deciding which policies to establish, use the 'what's important' test by asking the question, 'Does this topic affect volunteers or our organisation's operation?'

Step 5 - Relevant legislation

There are several pieces of legislation that relate to volunteers depending on their role and the nature of the organisation's business. Commonwealth, state, and territory legislation relevant to sexual harassment, discrimination, bullying and victimisation apply to volunteers in various ways and circumstances.

Create a safe and welcoming environment, where everyone is respected and valued and ensure volunteers will want to stay with you. Running your organisation in a way that actively prevents harm, harassment, bullying, and abuse fosters a culture of safety and respect. Everyone involved has a role to play in developing this culture.

Here are the pieces of legislation that relate to all volunteers:

- Fair Work Act 2009
- Volunteer Protection Act (SA) 2001
- WHS Act (2012) SA
- WHS Act 2011 (NT)
- Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (SA)

Further details can be found [here](#).

Volunteer Protection Act 2001

In South Australia, the Volunteer Protection Act of 2001 protects volunteers within the community from personal liability for actions or omissions carried out in good faith and without recklessness. To support volunteers, organisations mitigate their personal liability for negligence by transferring it to the community organisation, which is covered by liability insurance.

Not-for-Profit Law offers a checklist, providing a straightforward guide for South Australian community organisations to:

- work out if its volunteers are protected under the Act
- understand when it could be held liable (legally responsible for the actions of its volunteers)

Tip: Another essential for the volunteer program toolbox is a Code of Conduct, find a useful resource [here](#).

Step 6 - Keeping everyone safe

Work Health and Safety

Organisations, groups, and clubs who involve volunteers have a duty of care to provide a work environment free from risks. It should take care of everyone's physical, and mental health and safety including volunteers.

Before you set up your volunteer program, it's important to think about what could go wrong and what might happen if things go wrong. We call this "risk management," and it has four steps:

1. identify hazards and work out what harm they could cause
2. assess the risk by understanding the nature of the harm that could be caused, how serious the harm could be, and how likely it is to happen
3. control the risks by putting control measures in place
4. review control measures to check they are working as planned.

Think about the risks related to the tasks volunteers will do and the risks connected to working with the people you serve.

Safe Work Australia has a guide that provides information on how the WHS laws apply to organisations that engage volunteers.

What insurance do we need?

Organisations that involve volunteers must make sure their volunteers have the right insurance cover. Your organisation might have to take legal responsibility for accidents or injuries that happen to your volunteers or because of them while they're carrying out their roles.

Some types of insurance to consider are:

- Public Liability Insurance
Covers injuries or damage caused by staff or volunteers while carrying out work for your organisation.
- Volunteer Personal Accident Insurance
Provides cover to volunteers for accidental injury, disability or death while they're doing volunteer work for your organisation. (Usually, volunteers are not covered under Workers Compensation Insurance – WorkCover).
- Associations/Directors and Officers Liability Insurance
Covers committee members and officers of a registered organisation for legal problems. For instance, if they make a mistake or do something wrong while running the organisation. It also pays for the legal expenses.

For further information and resources visit Knowledge Base.

Step 7 - Developing meaningful and tailored roles

If you and your team have completed the steps above, you are ready to develop the roles and responsibilities that volunteers can do. You should have defined the roles as part of the strategic plan.

Consider if you can take on volunteers who can only meet some of the role requirements. Can you offer flexibility or adjust to suit? If you take on volunteers in a flexible arrangement, over time, they may be able to offer more, especially if they are developing and learning new skills and they can see the results and impact of what they are doing.

Consider:

- What tasks need doing?
- How long will the tasks take?
- Are there timeframes? (for instance, when providing a service or an event)
- Can the tasks be divided up between two or three volunteers?
- What are the risks associated with the role?
- How is the volunteer going to benefit from this role?

Preparing roles will help you recruit, manage, and support your volunteers to stay with you longer.

Tip: Prepare role descriptions for each role. They provide clear guidance and boundaries for volunteers, and help to create your volunteer advertisements. Clearly outline the tasks and consider the volunteer's needs as well as the organisation's.

Tip: Use [attachment 3](#), 'Designing a volunteer role' worksheet to assess whether a role is suitable for a volunteer.

Step 8 - Develop an equitable recruitment campaign

Promote your volunteer opportunities using equitable and inclusive approaches to attract a wider audience. Refer to attachment 4, Inclusive Volunteer Practices Tip Sheet.

Consider:

- How will you reach potential volunteers and tell them about your mission, values, and goals?
- What are the benefits and incentives that you'll highlight to attract and motivate them?
- What important details need to be included (tasks, time of shifts, location, benefits)?
- What are the channels and platforms that you'll use to advertise your opportunities, such as advertising platforms, social media, website, newsletter, posters, or word-of-mouth?
- How will you create a compelling and engaging message that will inspire them to choose your organisation over the one down the road?
- Who will be responsible for coordinating the recruitment campaign?

Step 9 - The volunteer experience

Taking time to plan your volunteer involvement will set you up to give volunteers a great experience from day one. Use your volunteer strategy to guide your volunteer involvement.

Once you have a team of engaged and willing volunteers, how can you ensure they are having a positive experience and will want to volunteer long term?

Support them by offering training opportunities, not only what's required for their role, but opportunities to learn and develop their understanding of other topics.

Make sure volunteers have a go-to person during their shift and know who to contact with any challenges or confidential matters.

Periodically review the role description with the volunteer and consider their skills and knowledge. Are they bored? Are they learning from and enjoying what they are doing? Adjust role if necessary.

During the strategic planning stage, you would have determined how to acknowledge and celebrate volunteers– do this often.

Step 10 - Program evaluation - how are we doing?

Encourage volunteers to give feedback, openly and where appropriate, anonymously. Where possible, act on their feedback to improve the program. Remember to give volunteers feedback too. This can be about their involvement, what they are doing well, and to suggest areas for improvement.

How will you measure success of the volunteer program and what long-term sustainability goals for the program will you set?

Consider:

- measuring success in various ways, such as number of volunteers recruited, their hours of involvement and the impact on your clients/customers.
- setting SMART goals – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound. This will help you set clear and achievable program targets.
- celebrate your volunteer program's achievements and milestones as they happen. Recognise and appreciate the hard work of your volunteers.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to involving volunteers. Once your program is established, you can consider the [National Standards for Volunteer Involvement](#) which offer good practice guidance in volunteer management.

Attachment 1 - SWOT analysis - setting up a volunteer program

Consider these questions when completing the SWOT analysis:

- What are the benefits for the organisation of involving volunteers?
- What are the challenges for the organisation of involving volunteers?
- What are the benefits for volunteers?
- What are the challenges for volunteers?
- What are the motivations of volunteers?

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Strengths What are your advantages? What do you do well? What can you offer volunteers?</p> | |
| <p>Weaknesses What could be improved? What could be avoided? 'Without volunteers we will continue to</p> | |
| <p>Opportunities What opportunities can we realise if we had the support of volunteers? What are the trends in your community? Who could you partner with? Where are the grants?</p> | |
| <p>Threats What obstacles do you face? What is the demand for your service? Are your clients satisfied? What factors could put us at risk? What are our competitors are doing?</p> | |

Attachment 2 - Create a volunteer program strategic plan

Building the foundations for successful volunteer involvement

Create a plan that outlines what you want to achieve and how you'll do it. The plan explains how volunteers will help your organisation meet its goals and how to find, recruit, support, and appreciate them. It can be part of your main plan or a separate one just for volunteers.

Your plan should answer some or all these questions depending on the size of your club, group or organisation:

| | Consider this | Answer |
|----|---|--------|
| 1 | What is the organisation's goals and how will volunteers help achieve them? | |
| 2 | How could our organisation's vision, mission and values connect with volunteers? | |
| 3 | What risks and opportunities will the organisation face in the next three, five or ten years? | |
| 4 | How will we set tasks and roles for volunteers? | |
| 5 | Who will make sure these tasks are meaningful? | |
| 6 | What skills and attributes will volunteers need? | |
| 7 | How will we advertise volunteer opportunities? | |
| 8 | How will we make sure our volunteering activities are inclusive for everyone? | |
| 9 | How will we recruit, train and support volunteers? | |
| 10 | How will we acknowledge, celebrate and develop volunteers? | |
| 11 | What policies and procedures will we need to support volunteering? | |
| 12 | How will we show the impact of volunteering? | |
| 13 | How will we collect feedback from volunteers' experiences and use it to improve? | |
| 14 | What other resources will we need to make volunteering successful? | |
| 15 | Who will make the decisions about volunteering and the policies that affect it? | |
| 16 | How will we measure success? | |

Select three volunteer involvement priorities from your brainstorm list to focus on.
For each of the priorities define the very next step to move the strategy forward:

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Risk Assessment - outline risks (if any) and mitigation strategies:

| Risks (include anything that might prevent you from completing an activity) | Mitigation (details of how the risk will be managed) | Key dates |
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Attachment 3 - Designing a volunteer role

Considering if role is suitable for a volunteer

Volunteer roles should be meaningful, enjoyable, and add extra value to your organisation. If you answer “no” to any of the following questions, you may need to consider whether this role is suitable for a volunteer:

| | Consider this | Yes | No |
|---|--|-----|----|
| 1 | Does the role have intrinsic value to the volunteer and the organisation? Consider motivation, benefits and skill level needed to perform the tasks? | | |
| 2 | Are there adequate and effective management supports for this role? | | |
| 3 | Do the paid staff, board and clients or the organisation accept this as a volunteer role? | | |
| 4 | Did the paid staff, board and clients of the organisation have a role in determining the status of the position? | | |
| 5 | Does the role add value to and not replace the work of paid staff in the organisation? | | |
| 6 | Can this role be performed in less than 16 hours per week? When answering these questions, consider: a) How long is the arrangement for? (How many weeks/months is this role likely to be required? The longer the period, the more likely that an employment relationship may exit. b) How many working hours per week does this role require to be adequately resourced? i.e., are there any periods where the worker may be required for more or less than 16 hours per week? c) The organisation should calculate the total hours required for the role over the expected engagement. If the average hours are greater than 16 hours per week over the term of the role, then an employment relationship may exist. Splitting the role between two or more volunteers may not absolve the organisation from an employment relationship | | |
| 7 | Is this role significantly different to the role of paid workers? | | |
| 8 | Will the client, organisation and volunteer benefit from the role? | | |

For this next set of questions, if your answers are mostly yes, then the role is most likely better suited for a paid worker:

| | Consider this | Yes | No |
|----|--|------------|-----------|
| 1 | Is this role critical to the overall successful functioning of the organisation? | | |
| 2 | Does the role closely align to an industrial award? | | |
| 3 | Is it likely that an employment relationship could exist? | | |
| 4 | Is it likely that an employment relationship could exist? | | |
| 5 | Is this a role that might be filled by a paid worker for regulatory, legal ramifications for the organisation? | | |
| 6 | If the role is not performed effectively, will there be any legal ramifications for the organisation? | | |
| 7 | If the role is not performed effectively, will there be any financial ramifications for the organisation? | | |
| 8 | If the role is not performed effectively, will there be any negative implications on the work of paid staff? | | |
| 9 | Has funding been sought, obtained, or is available for this position? a) If funding has been sought and/or obtained, it would be appropriate to employ a paid worker. b) When funding was sought but not obtained, it may be necessary to review budgets to determine if funding could be allocated. | | |
| 10 | Has the role ever been filled by a paid worker? | | |
| 11 | Is this role normally a paid position in other not-for-profits? | | |
| 12 | Would a person reasonably expect remuneration for this work? | | |

Adapted from 'Designing Volunteer Roles – A Practical Guide', Volunteering ACT