

ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS WITH DISABILITIES

Volunteering offers a unique opportunity for community connection and engagement. To ensure everyone – including those with disabilities – can fully participate, creating an inclusive volunteer experience is key.

The Volunteer Involvement Cycle breaks down volunteer engagement into four key stages, each with essential sub-stages:

Prepare | Recruit | Support | Evaluate

From the first welcome to ongoing support, here are essential tips to help your organisation build an accessible and empowering volunteer environment.

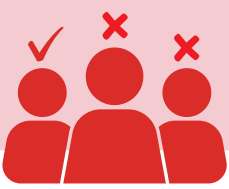


VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT CYCLE



1

PREPARE



Governance

Inclusive policies:

Ensure your vision, mission, and policies clearly reflect a commitment to diversity and inclusion, and are easy to understand.

Utilise lived experience:

Involve people with disability when developing or reviewing policies and procedures.

Review regularly:

Regularly review governance documents, position descriptions, and handbooks to ensure inclusive and accessible processes are maintained over time.



Design

Role flexibility:

Develop role requirements focusing on skills and strengths, rather than physical or cognitive assumptions.

Make roles meaningful:

Consider whether the role contributes to the organisation and meets the interests and needs of prospective volunteers.

Role clarity:

Clearly define roles and responsibilities in plain, accessible language to help all volunteers feel confident and informed.



Resource

Be flexible:

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to accessibility and safety.

Safe spaces:

Offer quiet areas with sensory tools (fidget toys, headphones, etc.) or allow volunteers to set up their own calming spaces to support wellbeing.

Accessible environments:

Ensure physical accessibility, such as ramps, wide doorways, and accessible bathrooms.



2

RECRUIT



Promote

Role promotion:
Advertise on multiple platforms, ensuring the content and method of communication is inclusive.

Inclusive role descriptions:
Use inclusive language, such as "all abilities are welcome" to encourage a diverse range of applicants.

Accessible registration:
Provide materials in a range of formats, such as online forms, paper copies, large print, screen reader technology etc.

Encourage connections:
Emphasise the social and community benefits of volunteering.



Select

Person-centred matching:
Align roles with individual interests and strengths to ensure meaningful engagement.

Tailored roles:
Avoid assigning tasks that don't suit a volunteer's needs (e.g. do not require prolonged standing if not suitable).

Ask about accommodations:
During the interview process, ask volunteers what supports or adjustments they might need. Never assume.

Interview preparation:
Share materials in advance, use plain language, and offer buddy support to ease the process.

Support through screening:
Extend peer support to assist new volunteers during the registration and screening processes.



Onboard

Meet at the door:
Implement a strategy of "meeting people at the door" to understand the accessibility and support needs of new volunteers.

Smooth start:
Ensure a seamless beginning by preparing accessible onboarding materials and provide the materials in advance to your new volunteer.

Training and support:
Provide person-centered training and support that equips volunteers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to carry out their role.

Inclusivity training:
Equip staff and volunteer managers with training to support people with disability, including inclusive communication and performance feedback.

Buddy up:
Pair new volunteers with experienced ones to support connection and confidence beyond onboarding.

3

SUPPORT



Develop

Mentorship:
Help set your volunteers up for success by establishing a mentorship program or a peer-to-peer buddy system.

Learning loop:
Embrace the ongoing learning and teaching dialogue where knowledge is shared both ways.

Training pathways:
Consider the diverse learning styles and preferences of your volunteers. Craft training experiences with inclusivity and accessibility in mind.

Promote diversity education:
Educate staff and volunteers on diversity, tolerance, and openness. Share learning experiences from a variety of volunteers to foster a culture of understanding.



Communicate

Communicate regularly:
Maintain open, ongoing conversations to ensure accessibility needs are met and adjustments are working.

Use plain language:
Communicate information using simple and clear language.

Flexible training options:
Offer both in-person and online training where possible to accommodate preferences and access needs.



Recognise

Personalised recognition:
Ask volunteers how they prefer to be acknowledged – privately or publicly – and adapt accordingly (e.g. thank-you notes, verbal praise, certificates).

Significance of acknowledgment:
Understand the profound impact acknowledgment and recognition can have on a volunteer's motivation and self-esteem.

Share stories:
Promote the stories of your volunteers' contributions and the difference it has made.

4

EVALUATE



Feedback

Feedback mechanisms:

Actively seek feedback from people with disability to improve processes and implement their suggestions.

Feedback formats:

Consider asking for feedback from volunteers in a variety of formats to accommodate different preferences (e.g. written, verbal, etc).



Review

Empathetic reviews:

Conduct performance discussions with patience, active listening, and empathy.

Calm settings:

Conduct performance reviews in a quiet, private space to ensure volunteers aren't stressed or overwhelmed.

Supportive performance management:

Allow advocates during reviews and offer emotional support afterwards to maintain volunteer confidence.



Share Impact

Share stories:

Share testimonials from volunteers with disability to help others understand the experience and feel welcomed.

Diverse perspectives:

Provide real examples of volunteer journeys within your organisation to inspire and prepare new volunteers.

EXTRA TIPS

VOLUNTEERS FINISHING IN THEIR ROLE

Patience and understanding in exiting:

Show empathy and patience when volunteers exit, regardless of the reason.

Exit interview culture:

Encourage a culture where volunteers feel comfortable providing feedback during exit interviews and beyond. Make exit interviews a standard practice and ensure volunteers understand their value.

Feedback integration:

Incorporate feedback from exiting volunteers into your organisation's continuous improvement processes.

Listening and acting on feedback:

Actively listen to feedback and implement changes accordingly to improve the experience of people with disability at your organisation.



Funded by the Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Volunteering Victoria acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.

Resource developed with thanks to the Volunteering Victoria People with Disability Advisory Group.