Off-site Volunteering

Managing volunteers outside of the workplace

Getting volunteers started:

Pages 5 – 8 of our Volunteering Management Toolkit provides a comprehensive guide on the steps organisations should take when recruiting volunteers.

For more information on how your organisations can help volunteers get off to the right start, see pages 11 – 34 of the Toolkit.

The steps set out in each of these guides should be followed with respect to external volunteers. Where practicable, organisations may wish to arrange for volunteers to attend face-to-face induction training, notwithstanding that their volunteer work will ultimately be undertaken remotely.

Re-induction program

External volunteers may have limited contact with the organisation, particularly if they are performing duties like data collection from an external location. These volunteers may only perform their functions in particular seasons of the year.

Where there are significant gaps between volunteer engagements for any reason, the internal policies or objectives of an organisation may change. It is therefore important that volunteers receive a 'refresher' each time they recommence providing support to an organisation.

Not all volunteers work onsite

While the obligations owed by organisations to volunteers while undertaking volunteer work under direct supervision in the workplace may be straightforward, fulfilling these obligations in respect to volunteers undertaking work away from the ordinary workplace can be challenging.

Examples of external volunteers may include those:

- Doorknocking
- Conducting field work (such as collecting data on wildlife)
- Working rurally (such as coaching rural sporting teams)

Entering into a volunteer relationship creates a number of obligations between volunteer-involving organisations ('organisations') and their volunteers. This guide will help you with the main things you should consider for safe and effective offsite volunteering

Unlawful workplace behaviour

Even though an external volunteer may have limited contact with others, it is essential that they are aware that the Organisations policies and procedures continue to apply in relation to issues such as:

- Discrimination
- Sexual harassment
- Bullying
- Victimisation

In some cases, organisations have been found liable for a volunteer's unlawful workplace behaviour.

The *Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission* provides a number of fact sheets on the relevant laws, including a list of frequently asked questions.

Page 43 of the Toolkit provides a sample sexual harassment policy and examples of what behaviour may constitute sexual harassment.

Workplace safety and risk management

Under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2010* (Vic) (and under equivalent workplace health and safety legislation for organisations also operating outside of Victoria), organisations are expected to ensure that volunteers are not exposed to risks to their health and safety when performing their duties. This is the case regardless of the place of work.

For more information on health and safety obligations for Volunteers generally, view the 'Health & Safety' Guide in our resources & tools.

Where a volunteer is contributing their time remotely, additional health and safety risks may arise. These can be difficult for organisations to manage where they are not able to physically inspect the place of work.

Working Rurally:

Where volunteers are collecting data in the field or providing assistance in rural areas, additional hazards may be present. Your organisation should always plan ahead and endeavour to identify those hazards, to the extent possible, prior to deploying any volunteers to a remote location.

Possible additional hazards working remotely may include:

- having to travel long distances (including whether driving or taking transport)
- meeting with unfamiliar people
- attending unfamiliar locations and environments (ie. is there a bathroom, water available, sufficient lighting, medical supplies, smoke detector?)
- communication problems or difficulty with contact (ie. limited mobile phone reception)
- weather related hazards (ie. extreme heat, cold, rain or wind)
- working unsupervised or alone (ie not performing work in the recommended manner or not taking rest breaks)
- engaging in new tasks, activities or work practices with limited experience (ie. learning a new skill)

To manage these risks, organisations should ensure they:

- Plan ahead and assess each role to ensure that potential risks are identified to the extent possible before the volunteer engages in the activity. Communicate any possible hazards identified to the volunteer.
- Consider whether the specific task or activity requires any special equipment, training or assistance.
- Have monitoring systems in place so the organisation is aware of the volunteer's location at all times.
- Ask the Volunteer themselves to ensure they advise the organisation if they identify any hazards or potential safety risks and stop work while the organisation assess the risks.
- Communicate the importance of taking breaks when driving long distances and being contactable and responsive.
- Where applicable, ensuring the volunteer is aware they must carry a first aid kit and other medical supplies (such as antivenom)

Door to door work:

Where volunteers engage in door to door campaigning, there are a number of risks that may arise, including:

- aggressive house occupants
- aggressive dogs
- harsh weather conditions
- hazardous streets and entryways
- theft of the organisation's or volunteer's property

There are a number of ways that organisations may limit these risks:

- Role play various scenarios before doorknocking.
- Where possible, have all door to door campaigners work in pairs.
- Advise volunteers not to engage with people who appear agitated or aggressive.
- Instruct volunteers to only carry out their duties in daylight hours.
- Prohibit volunteers from entering premises that have closed off entries.
- Have planned routes so the organisation is aware of the volunteer's location.
- Inform volunteers that they are not required to attend premises that do not look safe.
- Encourage all volunteers to have access to water and other equipment, such as a sun hat or umbrella.
- Encourage all volunteers to report any safety incidents that have occurred, even those that do not result in any injury.

- Provide volunteers with branded clothing and clipboards.

Door to door campaigning may include fundraising and handling money. If this is the case, it is important that volunteers handle the money in a safe and secure way. To do so, provide volunteers with a bag that conceals the money and have a policy in place where volunteers must hand the money over if a person threatens their health and safety.

The mobile workplace

Where volunteers are required to use a vehicle or other means of transport to perform tasks, this may be considered part of the workplace.

In these circumstances it is important for the volunteer organisation to ensure that:

- Volunteers that are required to drive have a valid licence.
- Where volunteers are using their own vehicles, the vehicle is roadworthy and meets appropriate vehicle safety standards.

Volunteers are aware that they are expected to observe all road rules, including speed limits and drive at a speed appropriate for the conditions at all times.

Intellectual property and confidentiality

Regardless of where your volunteers are located, Intellectual Property and Confidentiality considerations should not be forgotten in order to ensure the protection of these valuable assets when outside the organisation's direct control.

Volunteering Victoria has produced a fast facts guide regarding what Confidentiality and Intellectual Property means for volunteers

Confidential information:

The management of confidential information will be highly important for organisations engaging volunteers remotely. If volunteers are exposed to confidential information at an external location, whether it is electronic or not, a record of what information has been provided should be kept. This practice makes it easier to have the information returned or destroyed at a later date.

Volunteer agreements should contain an appropriate confidentiality clause. All volunteers working remotely should be advised of the expected information management practices, including how to safely destroy or return any hard copy documents or materials from an external location. This should be included in any confidentiality policy of the organisation.

Further, where volunteers are accessing an online program, database, website or document management system a policy which confirms the organisation's expectations for email use and online communications

should be made available to, and explained to, the volunteer. Further, where the program enables the organisation to monitor the volunteer's use remotely, they should be advised of this and required to provide their consent.

Child safety standards

Victoria has recently introduced compulsory minimum standards for any organisation that provides services for children. These minimum standards apply to all volunteers, including those working remotely.

Further information relating to the specific standards can be found here. Some of the requirements organisations are required to follow include:

- Developing a child safe policy outlining its commitment to promoting a child's wellbeing
- Only engaging suitable volunteers who are able to abide by strict codes of conduct
- All volunteers interacting with children taking part in police identity checks, Working with Children Checks and face-to-face interviews
- Maintaining ongoing supervision of all volunteers and providing further training on around matters relating to child safe standards as appropriate

In circumstances where volunteers working remotely may foreseeably have engagement with children, this should be expressly dealt with in the organisation's child safe policy

Ending the volunteer relationship

Given that remote volunteers may not physically attend the organisation, it is important that ending the relationship is managed in a procedurally fair way that is not different to other volunteers. Clear communication should be used to bring any volunteer relationship to an end, particularly where the ending of a volunteering relationship is not communicated in a face to face or telephone discussion.

Organisations should also mindful of the additional administrative tasks that may need to be undertaken where a remote volunteering relationship is terminated. Arrangements will need to be made to return any equipment, confidential information or other materials that the volunteer has and access to any online systems or materials will need to be suspended.

Page 50 of the Toolkit provides a survey organisations should provide to all departing volunteers in the aspiration of improving future volunteer experiences at the organisation. Some steps particularly relevant to external volunteers include:

- Confirm in writing that the volunteer relationship has come to an end and why

- Confirm that the volunteer has returned all property belonging to the organisation

- Confirm that the volunteer no longer has access to online accounts and materials

Finally, do not forget to acknowledge and thank your volunteers for their valuable contribution!

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