

Some Centrelink clients can choose to volunteer with an approved organisation to meet their Mutual Obligations requirements. Eligibility for each person depends on their Mutual Obligation requirements – individuals should check with Centrelink.

If an individual is eligible to do this, the next step is to find an Approved Voluntary Work Organisation.

Becoming an Approved Voluntary Work Organisation

Volunteer involving organisations can apply for approval online by visiting www.servicesaustralia.gov.au and searching the term 'Providing voluntary work opportunities.' You will need to download and complete a form and attach evidence of your organisation's status as a not for profit organisation, plus evidence that you hold both public liability and personal accident insurance.

The criteria for approval are that you are:

- a not for profit organisation that provides services to the community.
- All profits go back into the services provided and must not be distributed to the members, even if the organisation winds up.

You will be asked to supply evidence to support your application, including any of the following:

- articles of, or a certificate of incorporation
- a copy of your organisation's constitution
- a copy of your membership certificate from Volunteering Victoria.

You will also need to supply evidence of your organisation's insurance. You can provide either a certificate of currency or notice in writing from your provider. The two types of insurance required are:

- Public liability insurance
Covers injury to third parties and damage to third party property.

- Personal accident insurance
Covers volunteers for any accident or injury they have while working with your organisation. It's also known as voluntary worker's insurance. It is often purchased on its own or as an addition to your public liability insurance.

If your application is approved, Services Australia / Centrelink will write to you, confirm approval, and provide you with an Organisation ID for Centrelink purposes.

Organisation responsibilities

Services Australia / Centrelink may ask an organisation to confirm how many hours per fortnight a job seeker volunteers at your organisation. This is so that details can be recorded on their job plan. It is the job seeker's responsibility to seek confirmation from the organisation, if required.

Organisations have the same work health and safety responsibilities for both job seekers and anyone else who is working or volunteering there.

You will need to make sure your workplace and any activities meet all work health and safety obligations under relevant legislation. Volunteering Victoria's Health and Safety Guide and Volunteer Management Toolkit can help you to check that you have the right processes in place.

Services Australia / Centrelink also requires organisations to let them know if a job seeker is not meeting their voluntary work activities. You can do this by contacting Centrelink.

If your organisation's circumstances change, contact Services Australia / Centrelink without delay. The following specific changes must be reported within 14 days:

- organisation name
- location
- not for profit status
- insurance cover
- contact details or contact person
- organisation is closing down.

Offering volunteer opportunities

According to the Australian Government's Social Security Guide (3.11.3.30 Voluntary Work), a voluntary work placement must:

- benefit the job seeker and the community and offer no financial gain to the voluntary work host organisation
- provide the job seeker with the opportunity to gain skills which will directly improve their employment prospects
- provide opportunities which will develop or enhance a job seeker's ability to work as part of a team, take directions from a supervisor, work independently, communicate effectively, and improve motivation and dependability, and
- not exceed 26 weeks duration, unless it is the best participation option in the circumstances, as determined by the employment services provider or if the job seeker is classed as a mature age participant - aged 55 or over.

Mature age participants

The Australian Government's Social Security Guide (3.11.6 Fully Meeting Requirements) states that, *Depending on their age and how long they have been receiving payment for, under social security legislation, job seekers aged 55 years and over may choose to satisfy their mutual obligation requirements through approved voluntary work, suitable paid work (including self-employment), or a combination of these activities.*

In their first 12 months on payment, job seekers aged 55 to 59 can generally satisfy their mutual obligation requirements through 30 hours per fortnight of paid work, or a combination of paid work and approved voluntary work, where at least 15 hours is in paid work. After 12 months on payment, these job seekers can satisfy their mutual obligation requirements if they undertake at least 30 hours per fortnight of approved voluntary work, paid work, or any combination of these activities.

Regardless of their duration on payment, job seekers aged 60 and over as well as Parenting Payment recipients (aged 55 and over) can satisfy their mutual obligation requirements if they undertake at least 30 hours per fortnight of approved voluntary work, paid work (including self-employment) or a combination of the 2.

Even though job seekers aged 55 years and over who are satisfying their requirements through undertaking voluntary work or a combination of voluntary and paid work do not have job search or other requirements, they must still be available for additional suitable paid work and must accept all referrals to job interviews that do not interfere with the job seeker's paid work.

When a volunteer applies

When a volunteer applies to join your organisation, it is their responsibility to obtain a 'Verification of Voluntary Work' form from Centrelink.

The volunteer completes details including their Centrelink Reference Number.

The organisation completes details including the period over which the volunteer work will take place, and the total number of anticipated hours.

Maintaining records

When you make a commitment through the Verification of Voluntary Work form, you should maintain records of the hours completed by the volunteer.

Designing Suitable Roles

Volunteers fulfilling mutual obligation requirements can bring plenty of skills and experience to volunteer involving organisations, as well as a significant and regular time commitment.

Other jobseekers may find mutual obligations more challenging, particularly if they have not been able to hold employment for a range of reasons.

Finding the right role is important – there is a requirement to provide opportunities which develop or enhance employability skills. Making a clear connection between what an organisation asks the volunteer to do, and the employment skills that can be gained or enhanced, is likely to lead to a more satisfactory outcome for both the organisation and the volunteer.

The role should of course provide real outcomes to your organisation; there are clear requirements to enhance skills and help improve motivation and dependability.

It is important to consider whether you can fulfil these before agreeing to provide a mutual obligations placement; however, the right volunteer and a carefully considered role can be a win-win for both sides.