

Case study: Leading change towards inclusive practice

Using Co-Design to Support Inclusive Volunteering

In October 2023, Volunteer West partnered with Brotherhood of St Laurence to address breaking down barriers to volunteering for people with a disability. Through a co-designed series of workshops, the project brought together people with lived experience, volunteer-involving organisations, and support services to share stories and develop practical actions for more inclusive volunteering.

This case study highlights the approach taken and shares the personal stories of two participants who helped shape it: Phuong, a volunteer manager, and Maureen, a long-time carer and advocate.

Project Overview

The collaboration began when Brotherhood of St Laurence approached Volunteer West with an idea: to use volunteering as a way to build confidence and create new opportunities for people with disability. The project goals closely aligned with Volunteer West's work in the western suburbs of Melbourne, and together they developed a shared set of aims:

- Connect people with lived experience to volunteer organisations
- Identify barriers to volunteering and ways to overcome them
- Improve opportunities for people with disability
- Support volunteer-involving organisations to be more inclusive

They adopted a co-design approach for the project, ensuring people with lived experience had a voice and ownership of the process.

The Workshop Series

Three workshops were held at Volunteer West's offices in Maidstone:

- **Workshop 1** – A welcoming session for people with lived experience to meet, build rapport, and share their motivations for participating.

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- **Workshop 2** – A collaborative session identifying key barriers to volunteering faced by people with a disability.
- **Workshop 3** – The group developed a set of action items for volunteer-involving organisations, people with lived experience, and connector organisations (Volunteer West and Brotherhood of St Laurence). Participants could then select an action item they would like to commit to.



Volunteer West and Brotherhood of St Laurence collaborated to break down barriers to volunteering for people with a disability.

Participants included 11 people with lived experience (including carers and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds), 3 volunteer-involving organisations, 1 local council, and 1 support worker.

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Together, the group identified **six key barriers** to volunteering for people with disability:

- Cost
- Uncertainty
- Energy & Ability
- Communication
- Workload
- Discrimination

A total of **116 actions** were developed to address these. One was for people with a lived experience to share their stories as volunteers to inspire others.



Workshops that included people with lived experience were a valuable addition to identifying barriers to volunteering, and developing actions to overcome them.

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Participant Spotlight: Phuong

Volunteer Manager, Volunteer West

Phuong manages Volunteer Support Services at Volunteer West, which connects people with local opportunities in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. In the last year alone, her team facilitated over 2,000 volunteer referrals and advertised over 100 roles on behalf of community organisations.

When the volunteer program was paused due to organisational changes, Phuong saw an opportunity to rebuild with inclusion in mind. During this time, she also began working with a young university student with autism, who wanted to improve his confidence and communication skills through volunteering.

“He was not comfortable talking on the phone, so we initially asked him to send follow-up emails to clients.”

“Initially, I assumed that people with autism are detail-oriented and enjoy repetitive tasks. However, after a few days of volunteering, he expressed that he didn't enjoy the repetitive nature of follow-up emails.”

The experience coincided with her involvement as a facilitator in the co-design project, where she quickly realised how much more there was to learn.

“Managing volunteers is a core part of my role... However, I realised that my understanding of disability inclusion was limited. The co-design project offered the perfect opportunity to address these gaps, expand my knowledge, and become a more effective volunteer coordinator.”

Through her involvement in the project, Phuong picked up practical tips that she could then implement at Volunteer West.

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“One key takeaway was the importance of providing detailed, sensory-friendly information. For example, when organising an event for people with disabilities and their carers, they recommended taking photos of key areas – such as the bus stop, building entrance, lift, and meeting room – to help attendees familiarise themselves in advance. This level of preparation helps reduce anxiety, allowing the first meeting to focus on personal connections rather than environmental adjustments.”

The insights shared through the co-design process also highlighted transportation expenses as a significant challenge for people with disabilities looking to engage in volunteering. This prompted Phuong to implement a transport reimbursement policy for Volunteer West volunteers.

“While it is a small gesture compared to their valuable contributions, it has been greatly appreciated by our volunteers.”

As a facilitator and participant, Phuong’s confidence in engaging volunteers with a disability also grew and helped inform her own practice.

“The project helped me confidently communicate with our volunteer and understand his interests, allowing me to tailor the job description to suit him... Working with this volunteer highlighted the importance of avoiding stereotypes.”

“This experience has been deeply rewarding, both for him, as he developed his confidence and skills, and for me, as I witnessed his positive impact on others and the organisation.”

Phuong’s advice to other volunteer managers:

- Talk and listen to volunteers to better understand their needs and capacities, what is important to them, and what brings them joy.
- Involve management early to get their support when implementing change.
- Inclusive volunteering must come from the heart.
- Treat people as individuals. Don’t assume; ask volunteers what they want to do.

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Participant Spotlight: Maureen

Volunteer, carer, and advocate

Maureen has been volunteering for 45 years and a full-time family carer for much of that time. She is passionate about giving back – but it hasn't always been easy. As a full-time carer, she's required flexibility in her volunteer roles, and financial barriers and reliance on Centrelink payments have made participation difficult.

These experiences motivated her to join the co-design project, particularly to raise awareness around the hidden costs of volunteering, which became a major theme of the workshops.

But the major reason for Maureen's involvement was to advocate for people with disability, inspired by her son's negative experience in a disability employment program. Diagnosed with a psychosocial disability and on a disability pension, her son faced exploitation and discrimination in the workplace, prompting Maureen to pull him out of the harmful environment.

"This is very much why I was motivated... I'd like to think that would never ever happen again to someone. He's in a much better place now."

The co-design workshops gave Maureen a space to share her experiences – and in doing so, helped others find confidence to share their own. Her honesty sparked deep conversations, particularly around discrimination and the need for safe, supportive environments.

"Wherever possible, people with disability should be able to participate as widely as someone without a disability, where practical and with support."

She also appreciated the inclusive design of the sessions, including paper notes, photos of the venue beforehand, and informal time to chat and connect over food. Her involvement also connected her with Volunteer West's services, giving her renewed confidence to explore volunteer opportunities again.

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Maureen's advice for people with disability thinking about volunteering:

- There are many types of volunteering – try different things to see what suits you.
- Consider one-off volunteering opportunities – that way you can ease into it.
- Don't be afraid to negotiate – you can have flexibility in your role.
- You don't always have to volunteer in-person – some roles can be done online or by phone.
- Speak up if something doesn't feel right or if you have questions.

“You can literally change someone's life with what you do as a volunteer.”

Summary

This project demonstrates what's possible when lived experience is placed at the centre of change. Both Phuong and Maureen's stories show the powerful effect of inclusion in action. When people feel respected, supported, and able to contribute in ways that suit their strengths, everyone benefits.

As the sector continues to evolve, creating inclusive pathways isn't just a goal – it's an ongoing, shared responsibility.

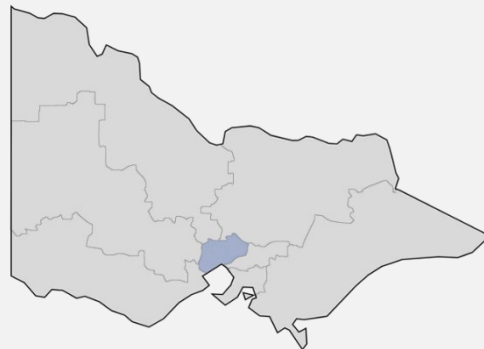
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Author: Volunteer West

Consortium region: North West Metro

Date: December 2024



This case study was produced with funding provided through the Volunteer Management Activity 2022-2026 grant. You may learn more about the program by visiting this website:

<https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/leading-volunteers/vma-2022-2026/>



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.