

Returning volunteer programs and volunteers during COVID-19



SAFETY IS PARAMOUNT

All Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) have an obligation to protect the health and safety of volunteers:

- VIOs should take reasonable steps to protect volunteers' health and safety
- Volunteers should take reasonable care for their own and others' health and safety
- In practice, these are the same considerations that apply to employees.

Taking reasonable steps involves:

- Following Government requirements
- Undertaking risk assessments
- Implementing controls and
- Effective communication and engagement of volunteers.

INTRODUCTION

We all know that the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus is a global health pandemic. The COVID-19 virus is extremely infectious and serious illness, including death, is a risk particularly for those who are older or with chronic underlying health issues.

All Australians are required to comply with State Government's requirements to limit the spread of the disease.

In March 2020 a range of measures, including social distancing, was implemented by the NSW State Government to flatten the curve of the pandemic. Volunteer Involving Organisations were quick to respond – suspending most non-essential volunteer programs. The number of new and active COVID-19 cases in NSW has fallen, leading to the progressive removal of restrictions from late April 2020.

During this 'respond' stage of the emergency management, this guideline is intended to assist Volunteer¹ Involving Organisations to consider which programs may be recommenced and how to safely mobilise volunteers.

SIX STEPS TO GUIDE YOUR DECISION MAKING

VIOs are recommended to have their own governance requirements and processes which guide the retention of volunteers. However, the circumstances of COVID-19 are unique and may not be specifically considered in existing policies. The following steps may help your organisation if you are looking to return to the active delivery of programs and volunteers.

¹ Volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain

6 STEP GUIDE



Throughout the 6 Steps listed below, you will see underlined red text. Click on this text to go to the relevant information online.

STEP 1

STEP 1

Familiarise yourself with the most up-to-date requirements and advice from the Australian and NSW State Governments

- Requirements are changing rapidly and constantly
- Remain up to date with the [latest requirements in NSW](#), including those regarding social distancing and testing
- Specifically note the stage of community transmission. For example, whilst NSW has entered the stage of “limited community transmission”, if this escalates to “widespread community transmission”, State Government requirements, including for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)² will change
- Access advice and resources from Safe Work Australia on how to maintain a safe workplace during the pandemic - including this [workplace checklist](#)

STEP 2

STEP 2

Evaluate the impact of any changes you have made to your operations as part of responding to COVID-19

- What changes have been made to your services?
 - They have ceased - e.g. stopped sporting fixtures, closed community centres or suspended home visits
 - They have been modified e.g. only staffed by one or two volunteers at a time or delivered on line
 - There are now formal or informal groups active in a similar area
- Has there been any loss of capacity?
 - Financial - donations, grants, events, other fund-raising
 - Staff
 - Volunteers, governance, strategic partnerships
 - Loss of in-kind support from partners - such as access to sporting grounds, club rooms or mobile vans
- What restrictions remain in place that affect your operations?
 - Such as travel bans, restrictions on contact sport or limits to visitors in aged care facilities and schools
- Review your volunteer personal accident insurance with your broker to understand what is, and is not, covered including working remotely

² Note there is a world-wide shortage of some PPE such as surgical masks

STEP 3

STEP 3

Determine your priorities

- What activities are most important to re-establish?
 - Consider the needs of people who are vulnerable and require help for daily living and basic needs of food, shelter and safety
 - Consider activities that will contribute positively to the health and well-being of your community
- Do you have the resources to sustain these activities if restrictions remain in place for say a further 6 or 12 months?
 - For example if you cannot take cash or hold large events to cover costs
- Consider impacts if there are further changes to restrictions including
 - Further relaxation of current restrictions or
 - A return to or introduction of more severe restrictions

STEP 4

STEP 4

Redesign your volunteering programs

- Where possible, continue to or redesign programs or activities for remote delivery
 - E.g. phone, web-based, welfare checks
- Eliminate any remaining programs that
 - Do not meet [social distancing requirements](#)
 - Cannot be delivered safely
- Undertake a detailed risk-assessment on programs involving person-person contact
 - Read the 'fine print' to ensure that the activity is not restricted in NSW.
 - Eliminate close contact with people wherever possible face-to-face for over 15 minutes or an enclosed space such as a vehicle for more than 2 hours
- Specifically consider the issues of engaging volunteers or delivering services to people [at greater risk](#) (people over 70, people with underlying chronic health issues over 65, Aboriginal people over 50 or people with compromised immune systems)
- Use the [risk hierarchy principles](#) to design the strongest controls to reduce the risks
- Update policies and procedures for any changes, e.g. safety, IT and privacy
- Ensure that privacy risks (such as dealing with health information of volunteers and remote working) are addressed

STEP 4 cont'd...

- Prepare to undertake the programs or activities
 - Write/tailor position descriptions
 - Determine how many volunteers you need
 - Source and develop training and orientation material
 - COVID-19 awareness, hygiene
 - Organisation induction
 - Role specific
 - Source resources
 - There may be delays / shortages for some goods and services
 - Ensure you can access PPE and skilled resources specifically to manage COVID-19 hygiene and other requirements
 - There may be NSW State Government funding available for PPE for State-funded programs
- Ensure processes are clear regarding:
 - Volunteers with suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19
 - See Australian Government infographic shown on the next page
 - Volunteers who meet Government criteria for testing
 - Should get tested and not return to the role until they have been cleared
 - Volunteers who are sick but do not meet Government requirements for testing
 - Should stay home
 - Volunteers who have come into close contact with someone with the virus but are not experiencing any symptoms
 - Should not return to their role for a minimum of 14 days
- Ensure that all volunteers who require information in other languages have access to the information they need
 - SBS has Coronavirus information in different languages [here](#)
 - Other resources may include training, induction and what to do if they come into close contact with the virus
- Consider if volunteers should be encouraged to have a current flu shot
- Consider if volunteers should be encouraged to participate in [COVIDSafe](#) - this initiative of the Australian Government is designed to assist in the notification of people who have come into close contact with the virus
- Develop processes, reporting, supervision to support activities
- Implement physical changes to your operations
 - Increase cleaning regimes
 - Install posters
 - Ensure adequate access to handwashing stations, hand sanitiser and PPE

Suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 at work

If the suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 is at work



1. ISOLATE

Isolate the person from others and provide a disposable surgical mask, if available, for the person to wear.



2. INFORM

Ring the national COVID-19 hotline (1800 020 080). Follow the advice of health officials.



3. TRANSPORT

Ensure the person has transport to their home or to a medical facility.



4. CLEAN

Clean the area where the person was working and all places they have been. This may mean evacuating those areas. Use PPE when cleaning.



5. IDENTIFY

Identify who at the workplace had close contact with the infected person in the 24 hours before that infected person started showing symptoms. Send those people home to isolate. Allow employees to raise concerns.



6. CLEAN

Clean the area where the close contact people were working and all common areas they have been. This may mean evacuating those areas. Use PPE when cleaning.



7. REVIEW

Review risk management controls relating to COVID-19 and review whether work may need to change. Keep employees up to date on what is happening.

If the suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 is not at work when diagnosed



1. INFORM

Ring the national COVID-19 hotline (1800 020 080). Follow advice of health officials.



2. IDENTIFY

Identify who at the workplace had close contact with the infected person in the 24 hours before that infected person started showing symptoms. Send those people home to isolate. Allow employees to raise concerns.



3. CLEAN

Clean the area where the infected person and their close contacts were working and all common areas they have been. This may mean evacuating those areas. Use PPE when cleaning.



4. REVIEW

Review risk management controls relating to COVID-19 and review whether work may need to change. Keep employees up to date on what is happening.

Remember:

- > From a WHS perspective, there is not an automatic requirement to close down an entire workplace, particularly if the person infected, or suspected to be infected, has only visited parts of the workplace.
- > Workers assisting the person who has suspected or confirmed with COVID-19 should be provided with appropriate PPE, if available, such as gloves and a mask. They should also follow hand hygiene procedures.
- > Consider whether you have to notify your WHS regulator.
- > Be aware of privacy obligations.
- > Follow the advice of health officials at all times.

STEP 5

STEP 5

Re-engage and recruit volunteers

- Identify volunteers who can be re-engaged
 - Thank them for their patience and ongoing engagement
 - Assess their interest/willingness to undertake any roles
 - Let them know it's ok to say no, and return to your organisation at a later stage
- Contact The Centre for Volunteering or a Volunteer Resource Centre (VRC) if you need volunteers
 - Register your interest in emergency volunteering [here](#) and The Centre for Volunteering will contact you to find volunteers who have registered to be a part of the COVID-19 community response
 - Or use the [VIKTOR/VIRA recruitment platform](#) if you are a member
- Ensure background checks are undertaken
 - In accordance with statutory requirements and
 - Your organisation's policies
- Consider the physical and psychological safety of volunteers
 - If working from home, they can complete a working from home questionnaire to assess if the workplace is safe
 - Ensure there is adequate supervision and support for volunteers' mental health and well-being
 - They may have limited contact to usual supports due to social distancing requirements
 - Pay particular attention if their role may be stressful or interface with people in need
 - If applicable, consider access to mental health support such as Lifeline, Beyond Blue or an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for volunteers
- Complete training and induction
 - Ensure that all hygiene, PPE and COVID-19 awareness training is completed

STEP 6

STEP 6

Commence delivery of your prioritised program of activities

- Ensure understanding, access to and compliance with cleaning, hygiene, social distancing and PPE requirements
- Make any accommodations to your program for any changes arising in demand, resource availability or interface with other groups or VIOs
- Check in with volunteers to support their physical and psychological well-being

MORE RESOURCES

The Centre for Volunteering has a number of resources and advice for VIOs during COVID-19


<http://www.volunteering.com.au>

Safe Work Australia has developed COVID-19 safety resources to download and display

<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/collection/covid-19-resource-kit>

Not-for-profit Law has a range COVID-19 resources and may be able to answer specific queries for community organisations on legal issues

<https://www.nfplaw.org.au/>

action at a glance 	Suspend	Modify to eliminate person-person contact	Complete a detailed risk assessment and eliminate or mitigate risks	Continually monitor, assess and improve
Not a priority activity for your organisation	✓			
Do not meet current social distancing requirements	✓			
Cannot be delivered safely	✓			
Rely on at risk groups in the community to deliver	✓			
May not be able to be sustained or may be curtailed suddenly	✓			
Can be delivered without any contact (i.e. from home)		✓		✓
Can be delivered while meeting social distancing requirements and do not involve vulnerable groups or volunteers			✓	✓
Requires person-person contact involving vulnerable groups			✓	✓