

COVID-19 and Informal Volunteering Groups



INFORMAL VOLUNTEER GROUPS

Often grassroots volunteer groups spring up for short periods of time to respond to, or recover from, a natural disaster.

COVID-19 has inspired people to form groups, particularly via social media platforms, to come together to support their local community. The expectation for COVID-19 is that our response as a community will need to be prolonged – lasting for months and months.

This resource is for individuals who are creating these informal volunteer groups to respond to this pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 international pandemic is changing, for now, the way we live, work and volunteer.

The most important thing we can all do is to follow the Government's advice regarding handwashing, personal hygiene and physical distancing. By helping to flatten the curve and reduce the rate of infection in our community, we are all making a critical contribution.

We also know that many people are looking after children (including home schooling), elderly parents and volunteering by keeping in contact with neighbours and friends. By supporting people you know to meet practical needs (such as picking up shopping or medication) or simply being a friendly and caring voice on the other end of the phone, you are helping them and our community as a whole to get through this crisis together.

Some formal volunteering organisations have suspended non-essential volunteering programs.

However, other volunteer organisations, including those providing emergency food relief, crisis accommodation and mental health services, are continuing to provide essential services to the most vulnerable in our society. COVID-19 is creating new challenges and urgency to care for these people.

We encourage people interested in volunteering to register for volunteering opportunities with these organisations. Established volunteer organisations have in place the procedures, training and supervision to operate safely in these challenging times. There are also civil protections for volunteers acting for an incorporated body or local government.

To register your interest in volunteering in your WA community during COVID-19 visit <https://emergency.volunteer.org.au/>

FIRSTLY... KEEP VOLUNTEERS SAFE

First and foremost, it is vital to keep your volunteers and the community safe and reduce the risk of the spread of the virus.

It's important that you provide volunteers with access to information on COVID-19, on how to stay safe and keep others safe, and constantly reinforce these messages with your volunteers.

Follow the Australian Government instructions on how best to avoid the spread of COVID-19 www.health.gov.au and adhere to the requirements of social distancing, hand washing and wearing personal protective equipment (such as gloves).

INFORMAL VOLUNTEER GROUPS AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Informal volunteer groups can provide significant resources and support a timely and localised response to help members of a community in a crisis or emergency. However large numbers can overwhelm or confuse formal community responses (including Federal, State and local governments) and risk gaps and overlaps in meeting the needs of the community.

So we encourage informal groups to consider these points when setting up your group. If you have already started, don't worry. Even considering some of these points will help you, your volunteers and your community.

1. Start small

- International experience indicates that most local networking and support groups work best where people can genuinely get to know one another and connect on an everyday basis. This seems to translate to working with natural communities of less than 8,000 people.
- For some groups, even this may be far too many.
- Starting small will help you gauge how much effort and resources are required.

2. Be realistic about what services and help you can and cannot provide

- Consider what access you have to resources.
- The pandemic, and physical distancing, may last for several months.
- Consider who else in your community you can liaise with, if you begin to feel overwhelmed or need guidance or help yourself.

3. Set some ground rules for volunteers i.e:

- All volunteers should be provided with information on the virus including how best to protect themselves and others. Up-to-date information for Western Australians is available here <https://healthywa.wa.gov.au/coronavirus>
- If volunteers are unwell – they should stay home.
- Volunteers should not be active when under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.
- Advise volunteers not to enter homes.
- If dropping off shopping or medication, ask them to call or text to let people know that they have left items at the door.
- Remind them to practice physical distancing.

4. Consider how to protect people's privacy

- Volunteers and community members have a right to privacy.
- Unless you have written authority to do so, do not disclose anyone's personal details including name, address, credit card or bank details, medical history or any other personal information.
- For guidance visit www.esafety.gov.au.

5. Communicate, communicate, communicate

- Communicate key messages often – the role of the group, hygiene etc.
- Keep communications appropriate, accurate and easy to understand.
- Monitor social media accounts for inappropriate or abusive comments.

AND LASTLY... CONSIDER THE NEED FOR FORMAL ADVICE

This guide provides information of a general nature only.

You may want to seek legal, insurance¹ or other professional advice to guide your implementation.

¹ As an unincorporated group, neither you nor your volunteers have access to insurance or the civil protections of volunteers, and volunteer organisations, provided by WA legislation.

Volunteering WA can assist with a range of information and advice about volunteering in WA – please refer to our website at: www.volunteeringwa.org.au

6. Recruit wisely

- Many social media groups will simply put people in need in contact, one-on-one, with other people able and willing to help. In these cases consider how to:
 - Best select a volunteer if there are multiple offers.
 - Thank volunteers for their contribution.
 - Manage any issues of services not being delivered/sustained.
- Where roles are ongoing (such as welfare checks or food delivery) there are other considerations such as:
 - There may be more volunteers than required initially, so take some time to consider what volunteers you need and with what skill sets.
 - A volunteer role description will help you and your volunteers to understand the job at hand, including any risks.
 - Consider getting potential volunteers to provide a written statement as to their personal details, drivers licence (if needed) and any criminal or police record.
 - Encourage people to only volunteer for what they comfortable with or capable of. Particularly now, think about how age, location and other factors may influence the selection of volunteers.
- It's OK for volunteers to take time out and remove themselves from the volunteering experience to look after themselves or those around them. When they are ready, they can re-engage.
- Consider how you can monitor who is available/active at any time.

7. Protect the vulnerable

- Be aware of any predatory behaviours and the risk of abuse, particularly for those most vulnerable.
- If you sense an uncomfortable situation - address it immediately.
- For more information on working with older Australians visit www.cota.org.au/information/covid19.
- If you witness harm or abuse, contact WA Police on 131 444.

8. Identify yourself

- Consider whether volunteers are required to show people they are helping a form of ID with photograph and clearly presented name.

9. Be prepared for emergencies

- Ensure your volunteers know what to do in case of an emergency while supporting someone in the community.

10. Support volunteers

- Volunteers will experience a range of emotions due to the current situation.
- Encourage volunteers to look after their own health and wellbeing and check-in with them to ensure they are OK.
- For support call **131114** www.lifeline.org.au or call **Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636**.
- Remember to thank volunteers and share good new stories.