

The Principles of Volunteering: why have them?

The *Definition and Principles of Volunteering* are the result of a national consultation undertaken in 1996 with a wide range of stakeholders including volunteers, personnel of not-for-profit organisations, policy makers and unions. This article looks at the thinking behind each of the principles.

Intent of the Principles of Volunteering

Principle 1. Volunteering benefits the community and the volunteer.

Intention: To break down the stereotypical view of what motivates volunteers.

The activity of volunteering is not an end in itself; rather, it is an activity that has some positive outcome for the community. The traditional view of volunteering assumes volunteering is motivated by pure altruism. The more contemporary view is that people engage in volunteer work to achieve a positive result for both the community and themselves.

Principle 2. Volunteer work is unpaid.

Intention: To show that volunteering is a freely chosen act of citizenship that is undertaken for the greater good (beyond one's self and family) and therefore without any expectation of payment.

Volunteer work is clearly not paid work but confusion sometimes arises because of the related statement in the Volunteer Rights document that volunteers should not be out of pocket due to their volunteering activity. Volunteers may still receive flat allowances or honorariums to the value of the amount deemed to be spent on their volunteer activity (fares, telephone etc) and they may also be reimbursed for expenses incurred on behalf of the organisation for which they work or receive a small living allowance when volunteering overseas. For example, a volunteer who gives up two years of salaried work in Australia to do voluntary work in a developing country would not be expected to bear the cost of living there.

Under the tax law, flat allowances (for example \$50.00 per day) may constitute income which should be declared for taxation purposes, leaving the volunteer with a tax liability. Also, depending on the amount of the payment, these allowances could be seen as 'under-Award' payments. This could leave the organisation open to industrial confrontation and workers' compensation claims.

Honorariums can also create a tax liability or the need for the volunteer to be given a group certificate, unless they are for an amount deemed to cover reasonable expenditure.

Reimbursements should not exceed the actual amount spent by the volunteer, and ideally should be paid on receipts for the original expenditure.

Principle 3. Volunteering is always a matter of choice.

Intention: To emphasise the rationale of volunteer work and distinguish it from other forms of unpaid work or obligations that people have little choice about.

Freely choosing to volunteer offers citizens a way of contributing to and participating in our society without being required to do so by law (as when voting or sitting on a jury or carrying out a community service order) or by family and other unpaid work obligations (for example, household work, caring duties, student fieldwork placements, work experience) or because of having to earn a living.

This freedom of choice is what distinguishes volunteering from the duties of citizenship and other types of unpaid work. The strength of volunteering depends on the active involvement of individuals who value the opportunity to be involved in or through not-for-profit organisations which provide a community benefit. Involvement in volunteering does not preclude individual motivations; people make choices about volunteer work in the same way that they make choices about paid work.

Principle 4. Volunteering is not compulsorily undertaken to receive pensions or government allowances.

Intention: To ensure that the fundamental principle of choice and free will is not undermined by the political need to make social participation compulsory in some form.

'Compulsory volunteering' is a contradiction in terms, since something that is 'voluntary' cannot also be 'compulsory', which has the opposite meaning. Volunteering is an activity of engaged and concerned citizens who have chosen to create, develop and support community organisations. The special value of volunteering to the community lies in its voluntary nature. Australia's robust not-for-profit sector, which offers alternative agendas to those of government and business as well as providing opportunities for citizen involvement, exists because of volunteer effort.

Many unemployed people or income support recipients are volunteers, exercising their right as citizens to become involved in not-for-profit organisations. Economic status is not a selection criterion of volunteer work.

A superficial understanding of volunteering has led some to believe that what volunteers do is the key feature of volunteering. This misunderstanding has led to volunteering being harnessed as one way for people who receive income support to meet their obligations to the community. However, any benefit that an individual gains through being required to do volunteer work can also be gained through paid employment or other labour market programs; and any benefit to the organisation can be gained in the same way. By contrast, the damage to volunteering when one of its basic tenets—freedom of choice—is disregarded is irreparable. Additionally, a valuable way in which income support recipients can express their citizenship, by freely volunteering, has been denied them. The undervaluing of the importance of volunteering as an exercise of free will ultimately weakens and undermines volunteering.

A cautionary rider to this principle is that where an income support recipient voluntarily undertakes volunteer work as provided for under the Social Security Act, receipt of income support is not deemed to be payment for volunteer work but rather the economic safety net under which no one should fall.

Principle 5. Volunteering is an activity performed in the not-for-profit sector only.

Intention:

- a. To ensure that volunteer effort always contributes to a social benefit rather than privately held capital and resources.
- b. To distinguish volunteer work from other types of paid/unpaid work.

One of the defining characteristics of volunteer work is that, unlike some other forms of unpaid work, it occurs in or through not-for-profit organisations. This element of the definition is one of the contentious areas within volunteering. Those in favour of the current definition argue that it is exploitative for volunteers to work for a private company. Opponents of the definition express concern that it would prevent volunteers from working in for-profit organisations where the greatest need lies, such as private nursing homes.

These opposite views have developed because people tend to focus on the things a volunteer can do, rather than focussing on what a volunteer is, as the definition does. It is not particularly useful or even possible to try and define volunteering by nominating the roles the volunteers undertake. Many roles are performed both by volunteers and paid workers; for example, we have career and volunteer fire-fighters. It is more useful to focus on what makes volunteering different from other forms of paid and unpaid work.

Principle 6. Volunteering is not a substitute for paid work.

Intention: To emphasise that while volunteer work may provide a number of desirable opportunities to the individual it cannot provide income.

The primary goal of those seeking paid work is to receive an income. How this is achieved depends on their level of education and experience, skills, job availability, choice and other factors. Individuals need some level of income security to survive. An equally important consideration in the search for paid work is to find satisfaction within the type of paid work gained. While volunteer work can provide some levels of job satisfaction and the opportunity to develop or use skills, it cannot provide an income.

As a community we should not view volunteering as an alternative to paid work for those who, for one reason or another, cannot find the paid work they desire.

Principle 7. Volunteers do not replace paid workers nor constitute a threat to the job security of paid workers.

Intention:

- a. To emphasise that volunteer work and paid work are essentially different;

- b. To ensure that volunteers are not exploited by placing them in a role that an organisation formerly deemed a paid role;
- c. To safeguard the relationships within the organisation between paid and volunteer staff and to ensure the critical support of both the paid staff and organisations representing them.

There are around 700,000 not-for-profit organisations in Australia and about 34,000 of them employ paid staff. A substantial number of these organisations provide services through volunteers. Some of the volunteer roles may be similar to those of paid staff but there will always be substantial differences.

Volunteer positions are designed to provide people who want to volunteer with an opportunity to offer their skills and time to in a way that suits them, while benefiting the wider community in clear and immediate ways. Paid positions may be created so that organisations can acquire particular expertise, skills and experience in order to achieve specific outcomes, often within a set timeframe. A position in an organisation that is a permanent full time role or a paid job in other organisations or subject to an Award or special conditions is generally not a volunteer role.

Principle 8. Volunteering is a vehicle for individuals or groups to address human, environmental and social needs.

Intention: To have volunteering recognised as an important source of advocacy and as a vehicle for social change.

The organisations within the not-for-profit sector provide services that supplement or are an alternative to those provided through the private and public sectors. The not-for-profit sector also provides competition to business and government and can act as advocate or watchdog. A robust not-for-profit sector helps to ensure that solutions to complex social problems have full community input and support.

Principle 9. Volunteering is a legitimate way in which citizens can participate in the activities of their community.

Intention: To show that volunteering enables people to express social concern and make a social contribution.

Regardless of their socio-economic status, education, cultural background, age or gender, every individual has the right to a voice and to make a contribution to their community. Volunteering enables a diverse range of people, who may not wish or be unable to use more formal avenues of engagement or advocacy, to exercise this right by giving them opportunities to engage with and influence the community.

Principle 10. Volunteering respects the rights, dignity and culture of others.

Intention: To ensure that volunteering action does not have a negative impact on the rights and dignity of others in the community.

The purpose of volunteering is to provide a benefit to the community and the volunteer. This is only achieved through volunteer-involving organisations and volunteers recognising and respecting the rights of all individuals and the different

cultural mix within the community. Participation in groups (such as racist or white supremacist organisations) which aim to divide the community, or disadvantage or exclude other specific groups is contrary to the principles of volunteering.

Principle 11. Volunteering promotes human rights and equality.

Intention: To show the social purpose of volunteering.

Volunteering has a wider social purpose beyond service provision, and it is important that volunteering is not used to provide cheap labour or prop up failing social institutions. The work done by individual volunteers in providing services to others is not an end in itself but is a means to promoting human rights and equality.

The following example illustrates these principles at work, and shows how they can help differentiate volunteering from other activities.

Washing the dishes - volunteering, or something else?

At home:

When I wash the dishes after dinner I am doing the housework (I am keeping my dishes clean so I can use them at my next meal).

Informal volunteering:

When I wash the dishes for my neighbour because he has a broken wrist I am being a good neighbour (this man is my friend and I am helping out because I want to express my friendship in the knowledge that he would help me if the situation arose).

Formal volunteering:

When I go to a not-for-profit organisation and apply to help out in their soup kitchen, and one of my duties is to wash some dishes, then I am a volunteer. I have chosen freely to volunteer. I am not being paid for my work. I am motivated to perform the duties of this volunteer role because I believe that my unpaid labour benefits the community.

Work experience:

When my school organises my class to visit and help at a local hostel for homeless people, my task is to wash the dishes and I do this as part of the school's requirements. This is work experience (my main motivation is to meet the requirements for that particular subject).

Community service:

When I commit an act of vandalism and a magistrate orders me to make reparation by washing dishes at a local community centre then I am on a community service order (I don't want to wash dishes even though I think the community centre does good work).