



COVID-19 Position paper No.3: Volunteering, vaccinations and being COVIDSafe

Version: 30 March 2021

Introduction

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies are providing advice and guidance to volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations as the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve.

This position paper complements two earlier position papers:

- COVID-19 Position Paper No. 1: Volunteering and National Policy Settings
- COVID-19 Position Paper No. 2: Safeguarding Volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations

This paper focuses on two specific issues that are vital to living in a COVID-19 world:

- COVID-19 Vaccinations
- Infection Control and Being COVIDSafe

This position paper sets out our shared views on how volunteers can be safeguarded during the ongoing COVID-19 situation, drawing on official sources of advice and expertise. The primary sources of official advice drawn upon in relation to the COVID-19 vaccination roll-out are:

- The COVID-19 Vaccination National Roll-out Strategy¹
- The 'Staff' definition² for Phase 1a inclusion in residential aged and disability care facilities
- The Slide Deck³ on Priority groups in Phase 1b

The aim of this position paper is to help guide decision-making of Volunteer Involving Organisations and of volunteers in these challenging times. This position paper is a live document and new versions will be produced as the situation and official advice change.

This paper is by way of general information and is designed for discretionary use. It does not replace the requirement for the reader to obtain specific operational, legal, insurance, or other advice. Volunteering Australia accepts no responsibility for any errors in the information provided, nor the effect of any such errors.

COVID-19 Vaccinations

The Australian COVID-19 vaccination program commenced officially on Monday 22 February 2021. The national roll-out strategy identifies priority populations which includes aged care and disability care residents and workers, frontline healthcare workers and quarantine and border workers.

We know that volunteers can be essential workers and are engaged in several of the prioritised industries, such as aged, disability and health care. For example, many community aged care providers rely on volunteers; volunteer paramedics provide critical health care services; volunteer drivers undertake vital patient transport in urban and rural areas; and emergency and disaster agency volunteers support border control management.

¹ <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/covid-19-vaccination-australias-covid-19-vaccine-national-roll-out-strategy>

² <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/covid-vaccination-staff-definition-for-phase-1a-inclusion-in-residential-aged-and-disability-care-facilities>

³ https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/03/priority-groups-for-covid-19-vaccination-program-phase-1b_1.pdf

If volunteers are undertaking essential frontline work, it is essential that they are given the same opportunities as paid staff to access the phased roll-out of the COVID vaccines. We have been urging governments to adopt this position to help ensure the safety of volunteers and those they serve.

As of 30 March, we have had confirmation that several key groups of volunteers have been included in Phase 1b of the roll-out. See below.

How are volunteers being included in the vaccine roll-out?

Phase 1a⁴

- In relation to aged and disability care facilities, volunteers are **not** eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine in Phase 1a.
- All workers, including the many volunteers, who provide care services in a community or home setting are also **not** included in Phase 1a.

Phase 1b⁵

- Phase 1b includes **anyone who is working in a healthcare setting**. We have been advised by the Australian Government that this includes volunteers, for example hospital and palliative care volunteers as they are in an at-risk 'workplace' setting.
- Disability and aged care support volunteers who provide support to people in their homes, respite care, educational, employment, leisure and/or residential settings, including those providing transport and advocacy services are **included** in Phase 1b (see slide 12 of the Phase 1b slide deck).
- Rural Fire Service and State Emergency Service volunteers are **included** in Phase 1b (see slide 7 of the Phase 1b slide deck).

Phase 2a & 2b

- We are awaiting confirmation of which workers, including volunteers, will be prioritised in subsequent phases.

We are currently calling on the Commonwealth Government to ensure that information regarding volunteering is easily accessible on the federal Department of Health website and included in the COVID-19 Vaccine Eligibility Checker⁶.

Is there a mandate for workers (paid and volunteers) to get vaccinated?

The Federal Government has been very clear on this issue – no mandated vaccines. However, State/Territory governments and Local Government may take a different position.

We understand some organisations are considering whether they can require their workers (paid and volunteers) to be vaccinated. This is a complex legal issue, and the potential safety benefits need to be balanced against other legal issues such as discrimination claims. If you want to put mandatory requirements in place (for example, making vaccination a requirement for volunteering),

⁴ <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/covid-vaccination-staff-definition-for-phase-1a-inclusion-in-residential-aged-and-disability-care-facilities>

⁵ https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/03/priority-groups-for-covid-19-vaccination-program-phase-1b_1.pdf

⁶ <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/covid-19-vaccine-eligibility-checker>

you may need legal advice. Justice Connect will be providing regular updates on this issue on their website⁷.

Good two-way communication between both volunteers and Volunteer Involving organisations will be helpful for planning and to make sure service delivery continues to vulnerable people relying on these services.

How does the vaccine work?

The vaccine is designed to offer protection from the COVID-19 virus, helping to prevent serious illness or death⁸.

Scientific evidence does not yet exist on whether the vaccines help to stop or reduce the transmission of COVID-19. This matter is being closely monitored internationally and by the Australian Government.

It remains vitally important that COVID-19 safe work practices are in place and implemented, which includes undertaking regular risk assessments and ensuring all workers and visitors are engaging in good hygiene and physical distancing, and that PPE is used if and when required.

All workers should be encouraged to rely on reputable sources of information, such as the Australian Government Department of Health and the State/Territory equivalent government bodies.

What steps should volunteer involving organisations take to prepare for the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out?

Volunteer involving organisations should be making sure that they are aware of State/Territory Government and industry-specific advice on the roll-out strategy relating to their jurisdiction and industry.

Considering the following questions can help organisations to prepare:

- Are you clear on which employee and volunteer roles in your operation are eligible for early phase roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine?
- Have State/Territory governments or industry sectors (such as aged care, primary health etc.) mandated the requirement for a COVID19 vaccine for certain roles?
- If you are considering mandating the vaccination for some roles, have you sought legal advice?
- Are your volunteer policies up to date with regards to which volunteer roles are eligible for or require the COVID-19 vaccine to continue in that role?
- Are volunteers included in communications, so they understand any changes to their role or eligibility to continue to volunteer?
- If it is determined that certain roles require individuals to be vaccinated, are there other roles available to transition volunteers who are ineligible for the vaccine at this stage or who choose not to be vaccinated?
- Do you have sufficient volunteer resources to continue to operate programs, as a result of any changes that result from the COVID19 vaccine roll-out?
- Have you updated your volunteer records to include capacity to record any vaccination certificates?

⁷ <https://justiceconnect.org.au/covid19/>

⁸ [How do COVID-19 vaccines work? | Australian Government Department of Health](#)

The vaccine roll-out in Australia will continue for the remainder of 2021. We suggest that organisations wait to learn more about any industry requirements, the impact of the program on the risk of contracting COVID-19 in the community, volunteer attitudes and any requirement for further vaccination before making decisions regarding any long-term changes to their programs.

All organisations should maintain communication with and, if necessary, seek direction from your government agency partners/service agreement providers (for example, funding bodies).

What if it is not clear how the vaccine roll-out will affect my volunteer program or role?

Volunteer Involving Organisations and volunteers can contact their State and Territory Peak volunteering body to discuss their concern.

The Federal Department of Health has an [enquiry portal](#) and can be contacted by email covidvaccineenquiries@health.gov.au

Safe Work Australia⁹ has information about vaccines and the roll-out across industry groups.

The Federal Government has developed the COVID-19 vaccine eligibility checker. People in Australia can use the checker to see in which phase they will be eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

[Vaccines Eligibility Checker \(healthdirect.gov.au\)](#)

Infection Control and being COVIDSafe

Vaccines are only one part of keeping workers and the community safe and healthy. It is important to continue to practise COVID19 safe work practices which includes undertaking regular risk assessment and ensuring all workers and visitors are engaging in good hygiene and physical distancing.

Safe Work Australia has a bank of resources¹⁰ to help organisations be COVIDSafe, including specific advice for protecting volunteers¹¹.

Volunteer Involving Organisations may be eligible for grants to support COVIDSafe working practices. For example, in October 2020, the Federal Government together with state and territory governments established an \$80 million Infection Control Training Fund¹² to fast-track fee free (or low fee) infection control training to support the re-opening of customer-facing businesses nationwide.

The Federal Government has confirmed with state and territory government contacts that volunteers are eligible to be included to receive training under the Infection Control Training Fund. Further information on the ICTF Fund and availability by State and Territory is available [here](#).

⁹ [COVID-19 Information for workplaces | Safe Work Australia](#)

¹⁰ <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces>

¹¹ [Volunteers and COVID-19 | Safe Work Australia](#)

¹² <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/announcements/subsidised-infection-control-training-fast-tracked-re-opening-businesses>

Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.



Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This position statement has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.



About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

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