

Volunteering Australia’s Definition of Volunteering

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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A New Definition of Volunteering

What is Volunteering Australia's new definition of volunteering?

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

Are there additional explanatory notes?

A set of explanatory notes accompany this definition and aim to provide clarity on what is considered volunteering and what is outside the definition (but is part of the broader civic participation area).

Volunteering Australia also has information available around best practice in volunteer management.

When was the new definition launched?

Volunteering Australia's new definition was launched on the 27th July 2015.

What are the main differences between the previous definition and the new definition of volunteering?

The new definition of 'volunteering' covers a wide range of activities, including:

- formal volunteering that takes place within organisations (including institutions and agencies); and
- informal volunteering (volunteering that takes place outside an organisational setting).

While the vast majority of volunteering is undertaken by individuals, the new definition recognises that entities also can volunteer, as they can donate employee time.

The new definition covers a wider range of volunteering activities, unlike the previous Volunteering Australia definition which only recognised volunteering in not for profit organisations or projects.

Why are some philanthropic activities excluded from Volunteering Australia's new definition?

The new definition of volunteering acknowledges that there are many areas of citizenship and ways to give back in the community that are a positive and rich part of Australian life.

Activities such as 'donating' or 'giving resources' are one example. These activities fall under the term 'philanthropy'. Philanthropy Australia defines philanthropy as "the planned and structured giving of money, time, information, goods and services, voice and influence to

improve the wellbeing of humanity and the community”. Volunteering Australia recognises that there are a range of philanthropic activities which should be valued and acknowledged. These activities, however, are not considered volunteering if the primary motivation and purpose of the activity is the donation of a resource (such as blood or money). While there is often a component of time involved, the activity itself is a donation or giving of a resource.

Is Volunteering Australia’s definition similar to other definitions of volunteering?

There are many global definitions and extensive work in this area. [The Issues Paper](#) written in the first phase of the National Review, highlights many of the differences and commonalities between international definitions of volunteering.

The new Volunteering Australia definition is closely aligned with the [United Nation’s definition of volunteering](#).

Where can I go for more information?

If you would like more information on the new definition or would like to discuss how it may impact on your organisation, please contact your [State and Territory Peak body](#).

To stay connected to updates on the Definition of Volunteering please keep in touch with Volunteering Australia on [social media](#).

Volunteering Australia’s Previous Definition of Volunteering

Why change the definition of volunteering?

It has been over fifteen years since Volunteering Australia settled on a definition of volunteering.

Volunteering Australia has accepted that the past definition of volunteering was out-dated and did not accurately reflect the many and varied ways that volunteers contribute to society.

Other States and Territories had already started, or were about to commence a review of the characteristics of volunteering, including:

- Volunteering South Australia – Northern Territory – New Strategy
- Volunteering Victoria – Manifesto
- Volunteering Tasmania – Characteristics of Volunteering statement

What was Volunteering Australia’s previous definition of volunteering?

In 1996, **Volunteering Australia identified a set of principles to describe volunteering.** These principles underpinned volunteering policy for not for profits, business and government.

Volunteering Australia previously defined formal volunteering as an activity which took place through not for profit organisations or projects and was undertaken:

- to be of benefit to the community and the volunteer;
- of the volunteer’s own free will and without coercion;
- for no financial payment; and
- in designated volunteer positions only.

Volunteering Australia also provided some essential principles of volunteering which underpinned volunteer work in Australia. These principles included:

- Volunteering benefits the community and the volunteer;
- Volunteer work is unpaid;
- Volunteering is always a matter of choice;
- Volunteering is an activity performed in the not for profit sector only; and
- Volunteering is not a substitute for paid work.

Why did the previous definition of volunteering need to change?

The way Australians are choosing to volunteer has altered since Volunteering Australia’s definition of volunteering was formed back in 1996. When the definition of volunteering was first agreed upon, it was expected that volunteers worked in not for profit organisations in a long term and face to face capacity.

There are many different ways that volunteers actively contribute to society that were not considered to be volunteering under the past definition, including:

- corporate volunteering
- micro volunteering
- digital or virtual volunteering
- episodic and spontaneous volunteering

The Impact of Changing the Definition

What is the point of changing the definition?

The way volunteering is defined has a critical impact. The new, wider definition will help improve:

- Understanding of the size and breadth of the volunteer community;
- Understanding the economic contribution of volunteering in society;
- Recognition and acceptance a wider range of volunteering activities; and
- Support for a wider variety of volunteering activities.

In addition, the change in the definition may impact on future legislation and policy and lessening the distinction between profit making and not for profit entities in the growth of social enterprise in Australia.

Will it have any impact on Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs)?

Volunteer Involving Organisation (VIO)s are encouraged to consider the new definition and determine what, if any, changes they wish to make within their own organisation. Possible changes will vary for each organisation based on its own mission and resources. For VIOs the new definition may:

- challenge stereotypes around volunteering;
- make volunteering more attractive and accessible for individuals; and
- encourage greater recognition across Australia of the diversity in the volunteering sector

How will the new definition provide recognition for Volunteers and Volunteering Sector?

The new definition of volunteering will better support the work that volunteers undertake every day in Australia. The role of volunteers has changed drastically since the 1996 definition was formed, and their work has previously gone unrecognised.

The new definition will ensure a common understanding of what volunteering is, ultimately supporting the integrity of the wide variety of activities volunteers undertake.

The new definition will also assist VIOs with workforce planning, providing a basis for policies throughout these organisations including:

- Managing volunteer programs;
- Volunteer insurance;
- Recruitment and Retention of volunteers; and
- Measuring volunteering.

Does the new definition change the type of support available for Volunteering Involving Organisations (VIOs)?

Support for VIOs, volunteer managers and volunteers will continue through Volunteering Australia, the State and Territory Peak bodies and allied stakeholders. The new definition will assist Peak bodies support a wider variety of volunteering activities.

Background

How was the new definition developed?

The Review of Volunteering Australia's Definition of Volunteering was initiated in late 2013.

A National Steering Committee was established and comprised representatives from all states and territories from volunteer peak bodies, government, academia and varied stakeholders.

Existing Australian and international definitions of volunteering were examined in Phase 1, and are summarised in the [Issues Paper](#).

Stakeholder consultation was also conducted, including interviews with key experts in the volunteering field; nationwide information session and an online National survey. Consultation enabled stakeholders to have their say on a potential new definition.

Based on the results from the consultation process, the National Steering Committee concluded that a new definition was required; one that needed to:

- resonate with all parts of the Australian community;
- be inclusive, aspirational and enabling;
- be enduring, robust and adaptive, acknowledging the dynamic nature of the sector;
- be measurable: allowing the value of the sector to be better understood;
- allow VA to take a lead role in advocacy around policy support, infrastructure needs and the ongoing resources needed to improve volunteering; and
- be usable, pragmatic and able to be widely adopted, allowing entities to work constructively with the definition – both individually and collectively.

A recommendation with a revised definition was presented to the VA Board in June 2015.

The VA Board adopted the new definition in July 2015.