



Volunteering and mutual obligation requirements for unemployment payment recipients

What are mutual obligation requirements?

In return for receiving taxpayer-funded income support, unemployed people have mutual obligation requirements. As part of their mutual obligation requirements, job seekers may be required to undertake job search, attend employment services provider appointments, attend job interviews, and satisfy annual activity requirements.

What are annual activity requirements?

The annual activity requirement (AAR) only applies to job seekers who are registered with a *jobactive* provider, it does not apply to job seekers in other employment services (Disability Employment Services, Transition to Work or the Community Development Program). Those who are participating in *jobactive* Online Employment Services (OES) also do not have AAR. OES job seekers will generally transfer to a *jobactive* provider after actively participating in OES for 12 months, and once connected to a provider, may be required to undertake AAR.

The AAR forms part of a job seeker's overall mutual obligation requirements. It refers to a requirement for job seekers to undertake some additional activity, such as Work for the Dole, paid or voluntary work, study or training for six months of each year after their first year in *jobactive*. AAR are in addition to any other requirements that form part of a person's overall mutual obligation requirements such as job search and attending provider appointments. AAR differ according to age and circumstance:

- those aged under 50 have 50 hours of AAR per fortnight (650 hours over 26 weeks);
- those aged 50-59 have 30 hours of AAR per fortnight (390 hours over 26 weeks);
- those aged 60 to below the age pension age have 10 hours of AAR per fortnight (130 hours over 26 weeks);
- those who have been assessed as having a partial capacity to work, or who are the principal carer of a child, have:
 - 30 hours per fortnight AAR if they are aged under 30;
 - 15-16 hours per fortnight AAR if they are aged 30-59;
 - no AAR if aged 60 or over.

Are there any other ways job seekers can meet their requirements?

There are also legislative provisions that relieve job seekers from any additional requirements because they are doing what is considered a sufficient level of activity for their circumstances. For example, people with a reduced capacity to work due to disability or who are a primary carer of children have no further requirements if they undertake paid work for 15 hours per week. Job seekers who are aged 55 and over may also be taken to be fully meeting their mutual obligation requirements and have no further requirements if they are participating in approved combinations of paid and voluntary work for at least 30 hours per fortnight.

How can volunteering be used to meet participation requirements for unemployment payment recipients?

Volunteering can act as a valuable steppingstone into paid employment, where participants may gain important work-related skills and experience. For this reason, job seekers connected to a provider may count voluntary work towards their requirements if their provider considers the voluntary work to be beneficial in giving them the necessary experience to help them into paid employment. Volunteer work is also an approved activity that may be counted towards job seekers' AAR.

In addition, those aged 55 and over can choose to fully meet their requirements through 30 hours of approved combinations of paid and volunteer work. If job seekers meet their requirements in this way, they are considered to be fully meeting their requirements under provisions of social security law and do not have to undertake any additional requirements such as job search, attending provider appointments and AAR.

- For job seekers aged 55-59 during their first 12 months of payment, 15 of the 30 hours must be in paid work to fully meet their requirements in this way.
- For all other job seekers aged 55 and over, job seekers can fully meet their requirements through any combination of paid or volunteer work.

In summary, this means that people 55 and over can meet their requirements in two ways:

Age	Can <u>choose</u> to fully meet requirements by:	OR <u>must</u> meet requirements by:
55-59	<p>Undertaking 30 hours per fortnight of a combination of volunteer or paid work. For first 12 months on payment, at least 15 of the 30 hours must be in paid work. After 12 months on payment, can undertake any combination of volunteer and paid work.</p> <p>People meeting requirements in this way do not have to look for work, attend regular provider appointments or undertake an AAR.</p>	<p>Looking for work (up to 20 job searches per month, generally as determined by provider); AND</p> <p>Attending regular appointments with their employment services provider, if required; AND</p> <p>For six months each year after their first year on payment, undertaking an AAR of 30 hours per fortnight of approved activities (e.g. work for the dole, training or voluntary work), in addition to doing their usual job search and attending provider appointments.</p>
60 to age pension age	<p>Undertaking 30 hours per fortnight of any combination of volunteer or paid work.</p> <p>People meeting requirements in this way do not have to look for work, attend regular provider appointments or undertake an AAR.</p>	<p>Looking for work (number of job searches depends on capacity, generally as determined by provider); AND</p> <p>Attending regular appointments with their employment services provider, if required; AND</p> <p>For six months each year after their first year on payment, undertaking an AAR of 10 hours per fortnight of approved activities (e.g. work for the dole, training or voluntary work), in addition to doing their usual job search and attending provider appointments.</p>

Can I fully meet my requirements through volunteer work while in Online Employment Services (i.e. I do not have an employment services provider)?

Job seekers who are aged 55 and over may fully meet their requirements under legislative criteria through approved combinations of voluntary/paid work - regardless of which employment service they are in. Job seekers in Online Employment Services who wish to fully meet their requirements in this way should talk to Centrelink about recognising their paid and voluntary work as part of their requirements.

Why can't job seekers aged under 55 fully meet their requirements through volunteer work?

The Government recognises that volunteering has a range of benefits for both the individual and the community, and job seekers aged under 55 may use volunteer work to contribute towards their requirements. However, participation in paid work and reduced reliance on income support should be the ultimate goal for job seekers.

Why are there restrictions on the way a job seeker aged 55-59 years can participate in voluntary work to fully meet their mutual obligation requirements?

Job seekers aged 55 to 59 can undertake voluntary work as part of their requirements. However, to fully meet their requirements, in addition to their voluntary work, job seekers who are in their first 12 months on an unemployment payment will need to undertake either:

- at least 15 hours per fortnight of paid work, or
- other requirements such as job search, attending provider appointments and undertaking activities.

This recognises that the primary intent of unemployment payments is to support job seekers into paid work, where they are able.

What if I am aged 55-59 and go off payment during my first 12 months on payment? Will I have to wait another 12 months before I can start fully meeting my requirements through 30 hours of voluntary work per fortnight?

If you go off payment for a period of less than 3 months, for example because you find a temporary job, you will be taken to be still on payment during that period and it will count towards the 12 months. If you go off payment for more than 3 months, the 12 months period will start again if you come back on to payment.

How has COVID-19 affected AAR arrangements?

From 24 March 2020 the Government temporarily paused mutual obligation requirements, including AAR. From 28 September 2020, for *jobactive* job seekers, AAR returned as did the requirement to look for work and participate in activities, if safe, available and appropriate. At this time job seekers were not required to take part in face-to-face activities but could opt to do so. On 9 March 2021, *jobactive* services returned to face-to-face servicing and activities including AARs.

Providers are required to ensure that the AAR activities that job seekers are participating in are safe and meet local health advice. Providers are also required to have a COVID-Safe plan at all times. Providers must also take into consideration the individual circumstances of the job seeker before placing them into an activity, including any medical conditions that may limit their ability to participate in a safe manner. Job seekers who have a valid reason not to

attend face-to-face services, such as health or COVID-19 related issues, are not required to attend in-person. Every provider must make sure that job seekers fully understand that if they have any concerns at all in relation to their safety on their activity, they should contact their provider to discuss these concerns immediately.

Working within COVID guidelines and local health advice could mean that appropriate AAR placements and availability may be limited. Where a job seeker needs to meet an AAR there is flexibility for providers and job seekers when arranging and sourcing activities, including for volunteer work. Where suitable activities are not available at the time a job seeker commences the AAR phase, then a provider is able to credit the job seeker the hours until such a time as suitable activities are available.

For example, if a job seeker commences in the AAR Phase in the beginning of October 2020 and a suitable online training course is not available until mid-November, then a provider can deem the job seeker to have met their AAR hours for October and early November, until the activity commences, and the job seeker's total required hours to meet their AAR will be effectively reduced.

Similarly, where a job seeker is participating in an activity that does not offer enough hours to meet the job seeker's AAR, and no other suitable activities are available - then the provider may credit the remaining hours for the job seeker.

These flexibilities apply to job seekers either commencing in the AAR phase, or for job seekers already part way through the AAR phase.

How has COVID-19 affected arrangements for job seekers 55 and over fully meeting their requirement through volunteer and/or part-time paid work?

Job seekers who were previously fully meeting their requirements through 30 hours per fortnight of paid and/or volunteer work have been able to continue or resume doing so since mutual obligation requirements resumed on 28 September 2020. However, because these hourly requirements are legislated, there is no flexibility to deem them to have been met, as there is with AAR hours, so they must be met in full order for a job seeker to be taken to be fully meeting their requirements. This means that, if a job seeker is unable to obtain sufficient hours of paid or volunteer work, they will need to meet the same mutual obligation requirements as other job seekers in their age group, including job search and an AAR after 12 months on payment (although any paid or volunteer work they are doing may still be taken into account by their provider in setting those requirements).

Will job seekers be able to undertake voluntary work for the new activity requirement?

On 23 February 2021, the Australian Government announced a range of changes to job seeker mutual obligation requirements. These measures include the introduction of a new activity requirement for job seekers who, from October 2021, reach six months in *jobactive*.

From October 2021, job seekers who reach six months of participation in *jobactive* (either with a provider or in Online Employment Services) will be required to participate in an activity, such as a short training course or work-like experience, in addition to their job search. The new requirement is separate to the AAR and recognises the benefits of an activity earlier in a job seeker's period of assistance to help them attain the skills and experiences critical to securing a job.

AAR will still apply for those job seekers who remain in *jobactive* at 12 months after commencement. To meet this new activity requirement, *jobactive* job seekers will be able to undertake a range of activities such as approved training courses, Work for the Dole and approved voluntary work. Further detail will be made available before October 2021.