

Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a profound and ongoing impact on volunteering in Australia, accelerating the long-term decline in formal volunteering and changing the way many people in Australia volunteer.¹ Throughout the Australian Government's response at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteering both supported the delivery of key services and helped to mitigate the pandemic's impact on mental health and social isolation. However, the volunteering ecosystem also required additional support from government, which was often insufficient to ensure that volunteering could continue safely and efficiently. It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated impacts continue. Recent spikes in infections in Australia caused by new variants and renewed calls for mandatory restrictions and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in some sectors demonstrates the enduring and detrimental impact of the pandemic.

Appropriate policy, based on a robust base of evidence and which supports new patterns of volunteer engagement, will be crucial to the recovery of volunteering and to support better planning for the role of volunteering in future crises, including the ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. To support this, Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies make the following recommendations:

1. Include volunteering clearly and consistently in official guidance and messaging.
 - In particular, the Australian Government should play a more active role to ensure consistent and comprehensive language.
 - The volunteering ecosystem should be consulted on how best to include volunteers in relevant policy decisions.
2. Engage actively with the volunteering ecosystem to plan for volunteer involvement in crisis response as an ongoing activity, including resourcing for preparedness, not just at the point of required activation.
3. Provide appropriate and ongoing support to volunteer involving organisations to meet heightened demand for services and to engage volunteers safely.

Policy lessons from the pandemic

Volunteering, both as a meaningful activity for many Australians and as an integral part of the social welfare and public health response to COVID-19, was not considered strategically in government policy. Further, volunteer involving organisations, particularly charities and not-for-profits, have not received adequate support to engage volunteers safely and effectively while satisfying surging demand for services. The lack of strategic consideration caused many complications for the volunteering ecosystem, the most significant of which are outlined in the sections below.

Volunteers in official guidance and communications

The inclusion of volunteers in official guidance was often left unclarified. Lack of clarity regarding the inclusion of volunteers in official guidance caused frequent delays for volunteer involving

¹ Research on the impact of COVID-19 on volunteering is available at <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/covid-19-research/#/>

organisations adapting their operations to comply with government regulations and to ensure COVID-safe practices. These included:

- **The mandate for COVID-19 vaccinations in key sectors, such as aged care and disability support, initially lacked clarity regarding whether volunteers were included.** For instance, when vaccinations were made mandatory for residential aged care workers in June 2021, it remained unclear if volunteers were covered until clarification on 3 August.² Inconsistencies persisted, as the AHPPC recommended vaccinations for residential disability support workers without specifying volunteers.³
- **The definition of "essential work" during the COVID-19 pandemic varied across states and territories, creating uncertainty about the inclusion of volunteers.** In New South Wales, both paid and unpaid workers in designated essential roles were considered essential workers, while Queensland explicitly excluded volunteers as "critically essential workers."⁴ This lack of uniformity caused confusion and frustration among volunteers in critical areas such as hospitals, food relief, mental health services, and caregiving activities, impacting their involvement in the pandemic response. Full examples are provided in the supporting evidence attached.

Involving volunteers in the response to COVID-19

Early in the pandemic, there was little engagement of volunteers in the Government's response. Despite this, volunteers contributed extensively to the COVID-19 response across Australia. Demand for services delivered by volunteers, which include emergency and food relief, crisis support, domestic/family/gender-based violence hotlines, aged care, disability care, and mental health support, was high throughout the pandemic. In some states, volunteers also contributed directly to the provision of COVID-19 relief efforts.

Better facilitation at the Commonwealth level could have increased access to these services throughout Australia during the height of the pandemic, particularly during times of additional need. This could have been achieved even through relatively modest policy improvements, such as the consistent inclusion of volunteering in Commonwealth government advice. Examples of this are provided in the supporting evidence attached.

Ongoing support for Australia's charities and not-for-profits

Volunteer involving organisations, particularly charities and not-for-profit organisations, are essential to facilitating volunteering in Australia. These organisations were severely impacted by COVID-19, and many have still not fully recovered.

During the early months of the pandemic, volunteer involving organisations were extended emergency support, including the introduction of JobKeeper payments for paid staff in charities and

² <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/08/covid-19-vaccination-mandatory-vaccination-of-residential-aged-care-workers-covid-19-vaccination---mandatory-vaccination-of-residential-aged-care-workers.docx>

³ <https://www.health.gov.au/news/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc-statement-on-mandating-vaccination-for-disability-support-workers>

⁴ <https://www.qld.gov.au/health/conditions/health-alerts/coronavirus-covid-19/industry-and-businesses/critically-essential-worker-requirements>

not-for-profits, contractual flexibility for grant-funded organisations that were required to close or change their business operations due to COVID-19, and Supplementary Volunteer Grants in late 2020.⁵ All of these measures assisted many volunteer involving organisations to remain viable and maintain their operations in a safe capacity, and were welcomed by the volunteering ecosystem.

However, the JobKeeper payment was withdrawn before there was time for the sector to recover. Resourcing is required to engage volunteers, and support to the charity and not-for-profit sector could have alleviated this strain and significantly improved their capacity to engage volunteers and to deliver services. There are many parts of the volunteering ecosystem across the country that are still struggling to re-engage volunteers and reach the same numbers they had pre-pandemic.

Ensuring COVID-safe volunteering

In addition to heightened demand for services, volunteer involving organisations were obligated to ensure that volunteer involvement was safe and compliant with public health restrictions.

Volunteer involving organisations were not provided with the resourcing needed to ensure volunteering was COVID-safe. Already facing significant financial challenges, many organisations had to create COVID-safe plans, and provide hand sanitiser, personal protective equipment (PPE), rapid antigen tests (RATs), and other materials to their volunteers to facilitate safe volunteering and comply with government requirements. The lack of support for these measures meant that resources had to be directed away from service provision during a time of increased demand.

Leadership and engagement

Throughout the pandemic, policymaking was often inadequately responsive to changing circumstances. Measures that could have preserved volunteer involvement, including those outlined above, were often not considered. When asked about their engagement with government early in the pandemic, many volunteer-based organisations reported feeling overlooked in the COVID-19 response.⁶ As a consequence, many organisations disengaged from the government response during the later Delta and Omicron variant outbreaks. Improved leadership, particularly from the Commonwealth government, was needed to retain the engagement and confidence of the volunteering ecosystem.

Supporting volunteering during the recovery from COVID-19

Investing in the volunteering ecosystem is essential for Australia's COVID-19 recovery. Volunteering has demonstrated benefits to health and wellbeing, promoting improved mental health, access to social support, and community connection.⁷ Supporting opportunities to volunteer safely, and on terms that maximise the benefits of volunteering, will be crucial to Australia's ongoing recovery and response to future crises. Volunteers play a vital role in various sectors, such as mental health, disability support, food relief, arts, heritage, and sports. Supporting their recovery requires greater resourcing for both volunteers and the broader volunteering ecosystem.

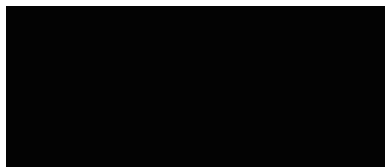
⁵ <https://www.communitygrants.gov.au/news/2020-supplementary-volunteer>

⁶ https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Australias-community-sector-and-Covid-19_FINAL.pdf, 62

⁷ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Evidence-Insights-Volunteering-and-mental-health-Final.pdf>

Authorisation

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



Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

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

