

Volunteering Australia's Definition of Volunteering

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS SUPPLEMENT – MAY 2017

Introduced in 2015, Volunteering Australia's definition of volunteering has a set of explanatory notes, a detailed Issues Paper that provides background and context, and a set of FAQs around it.

This set of supplementary discussion areas have been written based on further queries and discussions Volunteering Australia has had since the launch.

Can students and children be volunteers?

Most global definitions of volunteering, including Volunteering Australia's have no lower boundary of age, so children can be volunteers. Many young people take on a wide variety of roles and the context of each needs to be considered to determine whether it is volunteering. For instance, in some circumstances the child may be undertaking a task as a learning exercise, and this is generally considered outside volunteering as the focus is on the child gaining skills / experience. In addition, the task may not have been taken on voluntarily, or not have a component for 'the common good'. Other tasks may be undertaken as part of a family obligation. At other times a young person may be volunteering – such as helping sports functions or a tree planting function.

Are carers volunteers?

The Issues Paper notes the wide set of overlapping terms that are used globally, that are similar, or have overlaps with volunteering. The term 'carer' covers a wide variety of circumstances and categories and can be a long term situation or a short term temporary arrangement.

Many carers have direct familial relationships with those they are looking after and because of the family relationship, these have long been considered to be outside of volunteering. Of course, there are other types of carers who have no kinship ties.

Foster caring is an example where a family-like arrangement is provided, and there is a view that foster carers perceive their foster children as part of their family. In drafting the new Definition, the Steering Committee spoke with Foster Carers Australia, who agreed that foster caring fell outside the parameters of volunteering.

Note: It has been suggested foster carers are outside the new definition as the amount of time per week they spend volunteering exceeds the recommended level (Volunteering Australia advocates that volunteers undertake no more than 16 hours of volunteer work per week for one organisation). This recommendation is a guideline around good practice. The amount of time spent on a volunteering activity in a week is NOT a criterion to include or exclude an activity from being volunteering.

There are also other types of carers, such as animal carers, who generally are considered within the definition of volunteering. (see separate comments)

Are animal foster carers volunteers?

Yes, animal carers are considered volunteers if they are short term animal fostering or caring. The Explanatory Notes specifically note that animal related activities including animal welfare are considered within the 'common good' term. However, the context also would need to be clarified to ensure the activity is volunteering. If, for instance, the volunteer permanently adopts the animal it would no longer be considered a volunteer role.

Are host families for overseas students where the family may/may not receive a payment counted as volunteers?

Host families have a similar attribute to foster carers in the sense that a family-like arrangement is provided. There are many different programs with varying arrangements, including financial payments and so the full context of the arrangement would need to be reviewed to determine whether the situation was deemed volunteering.

Are medical research study volunteers included or excluded?

People who participate in medical research studies could be considered volunteers but this would depend on a number of variables. Donations of money, materials or a resource such as blood are usually termed philanthropy and were designated as being outside the new definition, though there is an acknowledgement that all donating, but particularly areas such as a blood donation have a time element attached and hence a volunteering component.

There are many medical studies where the commitment by participants only consists of a time element, such as a sleep study undertaken over a number of days in a facility. This would be considered volunteering – provided the other components of the definition of volunteering were also met.

The area is complex as there are many different circumstances and factors associated with different medical studies. For instance, a participant may personally benefit from being involved in a study that is testing a new cancer drug, but depending on the circumstances, it may still be considered overall to be a medical study for the common good.

In Australia, all research involving humans must comply with the principles set out in the following guidelines:

- [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research \(2007\) — updated March 2014 \(National Health and Medical Research Council\)](#)

- [Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research](#) (developed jointly by the National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Research Council and Universities Australia)

Further information is available at

<https://www.australianclinicaltrials.gov.au/researchers/research-principles-and-guidelines>

Informal and formal volunteering

In the past some people have distinguished between these terms by considering informal volunteering to involve situations where the volunteer was connected with the organisation in some way, such as volunteering at their child's school, or for a sports or recreation group, a place of worship, or a local Neighbourhood Watch. Formal volunteering, was considered to be related to situations where the volunteer was a stranger – at first.

While this distinction may have been the perception of some, it is not the basis for separating between the two terms. Many people take on formal volunteering, in a specific position within an organisation such as Red Cross, as they already have friends who are volunteers for that organisation.

As per the National Definition of Volunteering, informal volunteering takes place outside a structured organisation.

What is NOT volunteering?

Some people have asked for a clearly articulated list of what is not within the new definition of volunteering.

The new definition is more inclusive and better recognises the breadth of activity in our Australian communities that constitutes volunteering. It also recognises that there are an infinite number of variations in the way people choose to give their time. As the explanatory notes summarise, a number of key aspects will depend on whether the specific example is deemed volunteering, including an individual's perception – such as what constitutes family. Hence it is not possible to draw up a complete list of what IS volunteering and what is NOT volunteering. Instead guidelines are given to help individuals and organisations make sensible decisions. Volunteering Australia is encouraging people to engage in conversations locally to increase the understanding, respect and breadth of choices people have around volunteering across all of Australia.

Are there other guidelines to help consider what is volunteering?

There are a number of guidelines that help people develop appropriate volunteer roles and identify appropriate tasks, rather than define volunteering. For instance, in regards to paid and unpaid work and what constitutes a viable volunteering role, Fair Work Australia guidelines provide an indication about the types of activities that would be considered genuine volunteering roles. Key considerations include who the beneficiary of the voluntary

activity is, whether it is likely that an employment relationship exists, and whether the role is core to the functioning of the business or organisation.

Volunteering Australia together with the state peak bodies have developed the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement that provide specific advice on good practice for volunteer management and involvement.

Also, the Explanatory Notes specifically exclude a number of structured programs including limited choice labour market Government programs. One of these is Work for the Dole and Volunteering Australia has formally adopted Volunteering Victoria's Position Paper on Work for the Dole that considers Work for the Dole as falling outside the definition of volunteering. The full Position Paper can be found on the Volunteering Victoria website.

Volunteering and Contact ACT have produced a useful guide entitled 'Designing Volunteer Roles,' which can be downloaded from their website. The Guide contains a number of checklists that help to distinguish between what is, and is not, a valid volunteering role.

Volunteers should never be used to replace paid workers or be engaged in roles that have been vacated by industrial dispute. Further information in regards to this can be obtained from Fair Work Australia.

Is there a dollar figure or cut off amount that distinguishes reimbursement from financial gain?

No, like most global definitions, Volunteering Australia's definition does not include a defined maximum amount for an honorarium or stipend. It is considered best practice for volunteer involving organisations to reimburse their volunteers for pre-approved out of pocket expenses associated with their volunteering role. This is articulated in Standard 2 of the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement. The level of what may constitute fair and reasonable expenses will differ based on the context and would need to be negotiated and agreed in advance.

Are advocates also classed as volunteers?

There are many types of advocacy roles and each would need to be considered. The Explanatory Notes include activism in line with the United Nations definition of volunteering. The UN includes peaceful activism, but not harmful activities that incite violence within society. The Issues paper notes the difficulties that can arise in this sector where advocates are pushing for societal change and hence there are often different perceptions about whether the activity is meeting the 'common good' component of the definition.