Information Sheet:

Definitions and Principles of Volunteering

The Definition and Principles of Volunteering are the result of a national consultation undertaken in 1996, with a wide range of stakeholders including: Volunteers, Not-for-Profit organisations, policy makers and Unions. In 2015, the National Steering Committee reported significant changes to the current definition to include key components: ‘Without financial gain and for the common good’; and to recognise informal acts of volunteering, taken outside formal organisations. This article investigates the definitions and principles of volunteering its relationship to formal organisations.

What is Formal Volunteering?

Formal volunteering is an activity which takes place through not for profit organisations or projects and is 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.

**Principle 1**
Volunteering benefits the community and the volunteer.

**Intention:**
To break down the stereotypical view of what motivates volunteers.

- The activity of volunteering is not an end in itself; rather it is an activity that has some positive outcome for the community.
- The traditional view of volunteering assumes volunteering is motivated by pure altruism.
- The more contemporary view is that people engage in volunteer work to achieve a positive result for the individual and the community.

**Principle 2**
Volunteer work is *unpaid*.

**Intention:**
To emphasis volunteering as a freely chosen act of citizenship, and is undertaken for the greater good (beyond one’s self and family); without any expectation of payment.

- Confusion often arises due to the related statement in the Volunteer Rights document:
‘Volunteers should not be out of pocket due to their volunteering activity.

- Volunteers may still receive flat allowances or honorariums to the value of the amount deemed to be spent on their volunteer activity (fares, telephone etc.); and may also be reimbursed for the expenses incurred on behalf of the organisation for which they work; or receive a small living allowance when volunteering overseas.
- Under the tax law, flat allowances (for example $50.00 per day) may be constituted as income / ‘Under Award payments’ and should be declared for taxation purposes.
- Such instances may leave organisations open to industrial confrontation and workers' compensation claims.
- Honorariums may also create a tax liability unless the amount covers ‘reasonable’ expenditure.
- Reimbursements should not exceed the actual amount spent by the volunteer, and should be paid on receipts for the original expenditure.

**Principle 3**

Volunteering is always a matter of choice.

**Intention:**

To emphasis the rationales of volunteer work and distinguish it from other forms of unpaid work / obligations.

- ‘Freely choosing’ to volunteer allows citizens a way to contribute and participate in their society, without being required to do so by law (voting or carrying out a community service order); or by other unpaid work obligations (household work, caring duties, student placements, work experience); or to earn a living. Freedom of choice distinguishes volunteering from other duties of citizenship and other types of unpaid work.
- The strength of volunteering depends on the active participation of volunteers and does not preclude individual motivations. In other words, people often make choices about volunteer work in the same way that they make choices about paid work.

**Principle 4**

Volunteering is not compulsorily undertaken to receive pensions or government allowances.

**Intention:**

To ensure that the fundamental principle of choice and free will is not undermined, by the political need to make social participation compulsory in some form.

- ‘Compulsory volunteering’ is a contradiction in terms, as ‘voluntary’ and ‘compulsory’ are opposite in meaning.
- Volunteering is an activity engaged by people who have chosen to create, develop and support community organisations.
- The value of volunteering to the community rests in its voluntary nature. Australia's robust
Volunteering Gold Coast

not-for-profit sector provides opportunities for community involvement.

- Economic status is not a selection criterion of volunteer work.
- Often unemployed persons or income support recipients exercise their rights as citizens to become involved in not-for-profit organisations.
- Superficial understandings of volunteering may lead people to believe that the defining feature of volunteering is how it can be used. This misunderstanding has sometimes led to people harnessing volunteering as a way to receive income support or to meet their obligations to the community.
- Disruption in the meaning of volunteering occurs when one of its basic tenets—freedom of choice is disregarded—is irreparable.
- The undervaluing of the importance of volunteering as an exercise of free ultimately weakens and undermines volunteering.
- Where an income support recipient voluntarily undertakes volunteer work as provided for under the Social Security Act, the receipt of income support is not deemed to be payment for volunteer work. Rather income support should be seen as the economic safety net under which no one should fall.

**Principle 5**

Volunteering is an activity performed in the not-for-profit sector only. (Informal methods of volunteering recognised 2015).

**Intention:**

To ensure that volunteer effort always contributes to a social benefit rather than privately held capital and resources.

- In 1996, one of the defining characteristics of volunteer work is that, unlike some other forms of unpaid work, it occurs in or through not-for-profit organisations. This element of the definition is one of the contentious areas within volunteering. Those in favour of this definition argue that it is exploitative for volunteers to work for a private company. Opponents of the definition expressed concern that it would prevent volunteers from working in for-profit organisations where the greatest need lies, such as private nursing homes.
- Attempting to define volunteering by nominating the roles volunteers take is not considered to be useful or even possible. Many roles are performed both by volunteers and paid workers such as career and volunteer fire-fighters. It is more significant to focus on what makes volunteering different from other forms of paid and unpaid work.

**Principle 6**

Volunteering is not a substitute for paid work.

**Intention:**

To emphasise that while volunteer work may provide a number of desirable opportunities to the
individual, it cannot provide income.

- The primary goal of those seeking paid work is to receive an income. How this is achieved depends on their level of education and experience, skills, job availability, choice and other factors. Individuals need some level of income security to survive. An equally important consideration in the search for paid work is to find satisfaction within the type of paid work gained.
- While volunteer work can provide some levels of job satisfaction and the opportunity to develop or use skills, it cannot provide an income. As a community we should not view volunteering as an alternative to paid work for those who, for one reason or another, cannot find the paid work they desire.

**Principle 7**

Volunteers do not replace paid workers nor constitute a threat to the job security of paid workers.

**Intention:**

To emphasise that volunteer work and paid work are essentially different. To ensure that volunteers are not exploited by placing them in role with an organisation, where the role was formerly paid; and to safeguard the relationships between paid and volunteer staff within the organisation; and to ensure the critical support of both the paid staff and organisations representing them.

- There are 700,000 not-for-profit organisations in Australia and around 34,000, employ paid staff.
- A substantial number of not-for-profit organisations provide services through volunteers.
- Some volunteer roles may be similar to those of paid staff however; there will always be substantial differences.
- Volunteer positions are designed to provide people who want to volunteer with an opportunity to offer their skills and time to in a way that suits them, while benefiting the wider community in clear and immediate ways.
- Paid positions may be created so that organisations can acquire particular expertise, skills and experience in order to achieve specific outcomes, often within a set time frame.
- A position in an organisation that is a permanent full time role or a paid job in other organisations or subject to an Award or special conditions is generally not a volunteer role.

**Principle 8**

Volunteering is a vehicle for individuals and/or groups to address human, environmental and social needs.

**Intention:**

To have volunteering recognised as an important source of advocacy and as a vehicle for social change.
The organisations within the not-for-profit sector provide services that supplement or are an alternative to those provided through the private and public sectors.

The not-for-profit sector also provides competition to business and government and can act as advocate or watchdog. A robust not-for-profit sector helps to ensure that solutions to complex social problems have full community input and support.

**Principle 9**

Volunteering is a legitimate way in which citizens can participate in the activities of their community.

**Intention:**

To show that volunteering enables people to express social concern and make a social contribution.

- Regardless of their socio-economic status, education, cultural background, age or gender, every individual has the right to a voice and to make a contribution to their community.
- Volunteering enables agency for people, who may be unable to use more formal avenues of engagement or advocacy; and to exercise this right by giving all people the opportunity to engage with and influence the community.

**Principle 10**

Volunteering respects the rights, dignity and culture of others.

**Intention:**

To ensure that volunteering action does not have a negative impact on the rights of others in the community.

- The purpose of volunteering is to provide a benefit to the community and the volunteer.
- This is only achieved through volunteer-involving organisations and volunteers recognising and respecting the rights of all individuals.
- Volunteering promotes human rights and equality.