

Volunteering Australia

Definition of Volunteering 2015

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

Explanatory Notes for Definition

Volunteering is part of the wider concept of civic participation. These notes clarify what Volunteering Australia considers volunteering is, but also lists a number of somewhat similar activities or areas that are outside of volunteering. These may also act as pathways for people to become volunteers.

The term 'volunteering' covers a wide diversity of activities in Australian society. It includes formal volunteering that takes place within organisations (including institutions and agencies) in a structured way and informal volunteering, acts that take place outside the context of a formal organisation.

While the vast majority of volunteering is undertaken by individuals, entities also donate employee time and this is included within this definition of volunteering.

Consideration of the term volunteering needs to also note best practice guidelines. Volunteering should not be exploitative, or be used to replace paid employment. While volunteering provides substantial benefits to society, importantly it also provides significant benefits to the volunteers themselves. The personal benefits of volunteering need to be recognised and fostered. Further information regarding best practice and the appropriate involvement of volunteers in organisations and more widely is available on the VA website.

Without Financial Gain

- Volunteers can receive reimbursement of out of pocket expenses.
- Volunteers can be rewarded and recognised as part of good practice. While this process may introduce an element of financial or material benefit to the volunteer it does not exclude the activity from being considered volunteering.
- Volunteers may receive an honorarium, stipend or similar payment as recognition for voluntary services or professional services voluntarily rendered, in accordance with Australian Taxation

Office rulings. Based on the nature of such payments and the recipient's circumstances, the receipt of this type of payment does not preclude the person from being considered a volunteer.

For the common good

This definition aligns with the United Nations view that volunteering 'should be for the common good. It should directly or indirectly benefit people outside the family or household or else benefit a cause, even though the person volunteering normally benefits as well.'¹ Volunteering is often considered as contributing to community wellbeing and volunteering activities cover all sectors of society, leisure and hobby areas and include, but are not limited to:

- Animal-related including animal welfare
 - Arts/heritage/culture
 - Business/professional/union
 - Education and training
 - Emergency services
 - Environment
 - Faith-based
 - Health
 - International aid/development
 - Law/justice/political
 - Parenting, children and youth
 - Sport and physical recreation
 - Welfare/community
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- Activism can be considered volunteering. This definition is aligned to the current UN position on volunteering that states: 'When people participate in peaceful activism, for or against animal research or building of a dam, both sides seek what they consider to be beneficial outcomes. They are included in our definition. Activities involving or inciting violence that harm society and actions not corresponding to the values attributed to volunteerism are not included in our definition'.¹
 - Volunteers cannot be exploited for profit.
 - Volunteering can include the concept of reciprocity such as participating in groups where a reciprocal exchange of help/services is undertaken for the benefit of others as well as the volunteer.