

✓ Confidentiality

What is Confidentiality?

Confidentiality is a serious consideration when working with others. Just like in the workplace, the very nature of volunteering means that people can sometimes be put into situations where they will be exposed to lots of very personal information from co-volunteers and members of the community.

Being 'confidential' means to keep other people's business just that – confidential! It is a responsibility of volunteers, paid staff and volunteer coordinators to make sure that any information they know about other people, which could be considered personal, is not disclosed, unless specific criteria or circumstances are met.

It is important to be aware that confidentiality can have different meanings according to different relationships. A group or organisation will have a standard of confidentiality for volunteers, for staff and for members of the community which will be slightly different to the standard required of volunteers towards clients and towards the group or organisation (for further information on this, specific to your group or organisation, seek assistance from your Volunteer Resource Centre).

Confidentiality also forms a part of the duty of care (see tip sheet) you have towards other people. It's about protecting people from rumour, gossip, manipulation and threats. It's also, very much, about building confidence and trust between people in the community. It's always a good thing to know you can share your information with another, knowing they won't divulge that information to anyone else without your permission.

What sorts of things are included under the term 'Confidential Information'?

Some things that could be considered

confidential may include obvious things such as name, address and telephone number, age and birth date, religion, medical information, political views; as well as legal and financial circumstances. Other factors that impact on confidentiality could include a person's family situation and personal history, including their employment history or if they have had a criminal record. Sexual orientation and habits, social life and personal habits are also included.

What do we need to do to ensure we are being confidential in our group or organisation?

Volunteer involving groups and organisations should advise prospective volunteers about the level of confidentiality they are expected to adhere to. It is also important that the volunteer understands and agrees to the potential consequences in the event of a breach of confidentiality.

It is also important for volunteers to keep the information and records of the group or organisation confidential. A clause in a volunteer code of conduct (see tip sheet) should include an agreement by the volunteer to maintain confidentiality as they perform their volunteering role.

What are the basic 'rules' of Confidentiality?

The basic rules of confidentiality are:

- Keep information that could identify someone private. Remember that different people might consider different information as confidential.
- Anything that is considered confidential should not be passed onto anyone outside the group or organisation.
- Only information that is *essential* to meeting the best outcome needs of other individuals should be passed onto

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managers, the president of an organisation or group, or a case worker. This is called 'on a need-to-know basis'. A volunteer can be helpful in ensuring this happens but it is still important they *only* provide the information necessary. This is not about slander or gossip – it is about caring for others, for their needs and circumstances, and being sensitive to what levels of information *must* be shared in order to meet outcomes.

- Information should be passed on only with the permission of the person concerned.
- The rules of confidentiality do not end when the volunteer finishes their volunteering role; the rule extends across the lifespan of the people involved outside of any time and obligations given or met by the volunteer.
- Volunteers should be mindful of protecting their own personal information when working with clients, staff, members of the public and other volunteers. The disclosure (see tip sheet) of personal information is important only if it will impact on the volunteer's role, but other kinds of personal information will require a certain level of confidentiality as well.

Is it ever OK to break confidentiality?

Whilst it is very important to maintain confidentiality, there is a need to make sure people are kept safe from any kind of harm. For this reason there are three instances when a breach of confidentiality is required and acceptable. These are:

- If the volunteer is involved in legal proceedings where they are required, by law, to divulge specific information.
- If there is a threat of injury or harm to people.
- For the mandatory reporting of the abuse of children aged 16 years old and under.

In conclusion

Confidentiality is not difficult to understand in principal, however, it is actually quite difficult in practise! People generally enjoy sharing 'juicy information' about others. This is mere gossip. The concept of confidentiality is to protect the vulnerable and ensure people are respected and cared for, rather than put into positions where their reputation may be compromised. This builds trust between people; which goes on to strengthen the communities they live.

The information contained in this information sheet is generic. Please contact your volunteer resource centre if you require further assistance.