

Supporting migrant volunteers in your organisation.

The Wimmera has a growing number of people coming to live here from other cultures and countries. Many of these skilled migrants gain employment through the Regional Skilled Migration Initiative, eventually bringing their families out to Australia within a year of settling here. They wish to make Australia “home” and bring up their children here.

Just imagine your own stress, exhilaration, fear and apprehension if you were asked to accept a highly skilled job in a country where you only barely knew the local dialect and did not know anyone other than the immediate members of your family?

This is the situation that many new arrivals to our country face. Whilst the skilled migrant worker is able to network, make contacts and befriend his or her workmates, their spouse is often left at home wondering when their own opportunities might come along to feel at “home”. Many of these people are also highly skilled but need certification to practise their qualifications here in Australia. This can be a lengthy process.

Here at Wimmera Volunteers, we are beginning to see an increase in the numbers of migrants wanting to be involved in the community as volunteers. They are seeking ways of being able to practise their conversational English skills, gain new skills, become integrated into the community and, of course, make new friends.

Small groups and organisations in the Wimmera need to understand how best to support migrant volunteers within their organisations. Encouraging diversity within your organisation by being inclusive of many kinds of cultures and people will give your group a much better grasp of the wider community in which you serve. Diversity adds value by bringing new perspectives, ideas, opinions and solutions into the mix. It is useful for groups to make connections with all the migrant communities here in the Wimmera, to recruit and welcome prospective volunteers.

The following tips will assist your group to ensure that the volunteering experience will be a rewarding and positive one for both your established volunteers and new migrant volunteers.

- Register with Wimmera Volunteers to promote your volunteer roles and mention that you would encourage and welcome migrant volunteers to your organisation.
- Review your procedures for managing volunteers and add any new processes where you identify what might be necessary to support migrant volunteers. This may include matching them to a volunteer mentor to help orientate them in their role effectively.

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- Many new migrants do not yet have their drivers licence. You may decide to assist volunteers by reimbursing them for their taxi or public transport costs to do their volunteering role. You may need to sign an agreement with the volunteer that this will only be for the duration that they are without a vehicle and/or license.
- Hold an information session about volunteering opportunities within your organisation for the community and personally invite members of culturally & linguistically diverse groups, including migrants, to attend. This will breakdown barriers and provide your organisation with more potential to recruit from a wider pool of prospective volunteers.
- Make sure your recruitment and registration procedures, training materials and information are in clear, easy-to-understand English. Many migrants are actually quite fluent in spoken and written English, but their conversational “every-day” English can, sometimes, pose a barrier. Encourage mentors to work alongside new migrant volunteers for a time as this will help them become familiar with our style of speaking and the kinds of words we use.
- Hold a brief orientation session for your regular volunteers to know what to expect from migrants working along side of them within the organisation. The Migrant Mentor Program, based in Horsham, may be able to assist in this role. Don’t assume that migrants will fully understand and wish to adopt all our customs and values even though they have moved here.
- Review the skills already within your volunteer pool and consider establishing a volunteer buddy system to support new volunteers.
- Be respectful of cultural traditions and practises that may seem nonsensical or alien to you. Different cultures will have festivals, religious rites, holidays, standards of dress and ideas about gender roles that may at first seem confusing and very different. Be prepared to be inclusive and welcoming and work with the migrant volunteer to find consensus whenever possible, if there are any difficulties.
- Ensure that migrant volunteers are matched to a suitable volunteering role and are given a clear position description with agreed upon duties and responsibilities. Highly skilled migrants will need to be informed that finding voluntary work within the scope of their previous professional training in their mother country cannot be guaranteed.
- Be very clear about what you can offer the volunteer in terms of character references, work experience and formal English conversation lessons and what you cannot. Your group or organisation may decide that volunteers will only receive a character reference for job search purposes after they have contributed a certain number of voluntary hours to your organisation. Ensure this is written into any agreements with the migrant volunteer.

Wimmera Volunteers can provide further assistance and advice on working with culturally and linguistically diverse volunteers. Please drop in to see our extensive library of resources on volunteering and volunteer information or speak to the Volunteer Management Program Project Worker about your organisations volunteering needs. Office hours are 8:30am to 5:00pm Mondays to Fridays.