

## What is Occupational Health & Safety?

Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) is a legal requirement for all groups, clubs, businesses and organisations to ensure the wellbeing and safety of people, who are employed, volunteer with, are members of, or are clients and patrons of their services.

## What are our obligations under OH&S?

Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (OHS Act), community service groups or organisations must ensure that people are not exposed to any risks to their safety and health as a result of their workplace or work systems. Even those groups or organisations that have no obligations under the OHS Act should aim to meet the same standards to protect their volunteers and members from harm.

Even very small groups in the community have a responsibility to ensure that their members and volunteers are provided with safe working conditions. Managing this aspect of your group or organisation will help you meet your legal obligations and perhaps even reduce your costs.

Employers, community groups and community service organisations must ensure that employees, members and volunteers are given the highest possible standard in workplace health, safety and welfare. This includes:

- A safe work premises / work environment
- Safe equipment or substances
- Safe systems and procedures within which the work takes place.
- The provision of appropriate information, instruction, training and supervision for all staff and volunteers.
- Maintaining a list of volunteers, Staff or members who have specialised certificates such as Manual Handling, Responsible Serving of Alcohol, Workplace and Food Hygiene Procedures, or Construction Induction (formerly known as a Red Card) Certificates. Only certified persons can act in a supervisor's role or perform any of these duties under the OHS Act. Volunteers without these certificates should not perform in or supervise others in these duties.

## What is the process for developing OHS policies and procedures?

The following suggestions may help in the development of occupational health and safety obligations under the OHS Act.

**Remember:** *That even if a small community group is not obligated under the OHS Act, it should do all it can to meet the same standards*

*that obligated community service groups and organisations have under the OHS Act to protect volunteers and members and provide safe and healthy working conditions.*

**Consult your volunteers.** Your volunteers have valuable knowledge and experience and can contribute significantly to the identification and development of safe working practises. Ensure that contributions are included in regular health and safety meetings or invite health & safety feedback through newsletters.

**Be systematic.** Managing your OHS obligations requires that you do a risk assessment (See information sheet). A risk assessment is about identifying hazards and then strategically ensuring that those hazards are eliminated or controlled appropriately. Further information about how to do a risk assessment is available at your Volunteer Resource Centre.

**Train, instruct and supervise.** All volunteers and employees, members and others need to have the appropriate level of skill to do their work safely. Alternatively, they need to be directly supervised by an experienced person. Volunteers must be trained or orientated to their volunteering role before undertaking it. Also ensure that before volunteers begin, they are informed about the following:

- Any health and safety procedures.
- Who they should speak to about health and safety concerns.
- Emergency procedures,
- Existing and potential risks they could face.
- What situations they should remove themselves from.
- The arrangements and procedure for debriefing and counselling after an incident.

**Have an Emergency Plan in place.** As a part of your risk management, your group or organisation needs to identify what to do in the event of an emergency. Your group or organisation needs to ensure that volunteers are trained in these emergency procedures. The plan should include:

- Evacuation procedures for fire, severe storms, floods and other foreseeable emergency events.
- The placement and supplies management of first aid equipment including first aid kits in vehicles.
- A list of responsible persons, particularly those with a First Aid Certificate, who would be the main contact in an emergency.

**A support and recovery process:** Where volunteers have been injured or made ill because of their volunteering role, a group or



# Occupational Health & Safety for volunteers.

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organisation should ensure that they keep in touch with the volunteer to support and encourage them in a return to their volunteering role. Assisting a volunteer on the road to recovery helps them to re-gain their confidence and also ensures you retain their valuable skills and experience. Even though it is not a legal requirement to help volunteers to return to their role as soon as it is safe to do so, it will still be appropriate for groups or organisations to follow the same procedures as would be expected if the volunteer were a Staff member.

## **In conclusion:**

OHS is a very important part of any group or organisation's management policies and procedures. The health and safety of volunteers is critical to the ongoing success of your group's activities. For certain types of community service groups and organisations, managing risk and ensuring the health and safety of employees, including volunteers, is a legal requirement under the OHS Act 2004.

Other information about the various Health and Safety Acts of Parliament can be sourced online, at Victorian Law Today, (<http://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/>), or from your local Volunteer Resource Centre.

**Please note:** The information provided in this sheet is not comprehensive and your group or organisation will need to seek the appropriate legal advice on what obligations they have under the OHS Act.

## **Acknowledgement:**

Worksafe Victoria 2008, *Volunteer health and safety: A handbook for community service organisations*. State Government of Victoria, WorkSafe Victoria Advisory Service, Melbourne.