

Why does our group need a Volunteer Policy?

Volunteers make significant contributions to our communities, directly or indirectly affecting our quality of life. They are a vital resource which deserves to be managed effectively for the benefit of all.

Before any group or organisation decides to utilise volunteers, it must be clear about why volunteers are being involved and what can and cannot be expected of those volunteers.

By putting time, energy and resources into policy writing, organisations give recognition to the value of their volunteers. An important way of encouraging volunteers to remain with your group or organisation is to recognise their value in and through the policy writing process.

The time and commitment required to produce a volunteer policy may seem daunting to many rural volunteer groups because they are run solely by volunteer effort. However, the process is important and valuable and will enhance both the purpose, mission and service delivery of your group or organisation.

Volunteer Resource Centres are an excellent source of information and advice on policy development for these types of groups. Some smaller volunteer groups are affiliated with larger organisations or peak bodies. This could mean that assistance on policy writing is readily available or a copy of a volunteer policy already exists. This policy can be amended to suit the needs of the smaller group.

What is policy?

Policy can be best described by the following statements.

- A policy provides the philosophy and principles of practise for any given situation to be addressed within an organisation.
- It is a framework for decision making.
- Policy is a set of principles guiding action towards predetermined ends.
- Policies prescribe limits and pinpoint responsibilities within an organisation.
- Policies reflect the values of an organisation and must be similar to its mission statement.
- Policy documents are usually broad and general in content.

A policy on volunteering will provide a framework of principles, beliefs and values which ensure both satisfying and safe involvement for the volunteer and effective service delivery to the community.

Note: There is a distinct difference between a policy and a procedure. This will be reflected in how they are written. Essentially, the difference is:

- **Policies** tell people “what to do” and “why we do it”.
- **Procedures** tell people “how to do it and when”.

Procedures give direction on daily operations conducted within the framework of policies. Procedures are regularly refined and changed, whereas good policies, once written, do not change quite as often.

The Development of Policy:

Policy formulation may require the input of some or all of the following people in your group or organisation:

- Committee of Management
- Peak body or organisation.
- Members
- Staff
- Volunteers
- Clients

Policies are developed via a process of consultation and collaboration to determine the best and clearest wording possible. Avoiding ambiguity and confusion is an important part of the policy writing process, so expect to have a few drafts before the final policy statements (and the accompanying procedures) are ratified by the membership of the group.

Policies and procedures are living documents which are regularly reviewed, edited and changed with the agreement of the entire membership.

It is also important to clarify whose interests are paramount; the clients, members or volunteers. Having a policy statement which reflects this interest will assist in the development of subsequent policies.

Policies “connect” the work of Staff and volunteers to the vision and mission of the group or organisation and its peak body if there is one.

Policies in your organisation will:

Formalise decisions: All organisations make policy decisions regularly. Writing a policy may be a simple matter of formalising decisions already being acted on.

Give status to decisions: By writing it down the decision becomes formal and its importance to the group is enhanced.

Policy Writing

Determine actions and sets boundaries: Many policies are developed when it becomes apparent that a position statement is required after a crisis or incident. A Risk Assessment (*See information sheet*), will ensure that many policies can be developed and implemented before such crises occur. This means that writing policy becomes a part of the risk assessment process.

Clarify responsibilities: Clear guidelines on the respective roles of paid Staff and volunteers will facilitate better working relationships and accountability between the two. If paid Staff understands and values the contribution of volunteers, it is more likely that volunteers will be retained for longer. Volunteers feel a strong sense of worth and value when they belong to a team which includes paid workers.

Provide a structure: Effective management defines and determines the appropriate lines of communication and chains of responsibility. It assists volunteers to know to whom they are answerable in the day to day delivery of their service.

Ensure continuity over time: As Staff and volunteers change, groups can remain active and viable through consistent application of standards as defined within a policy document.

What should a policy on volunteers include?

The following position statements will need to be included in a well-rounded policy on volunteers.

- Why volunteers are being involved in the work and mission of the group or organisation.
- What volunteers can expect of the organisation.
- What the organisation can expect of the volunteers.
- The place of volunteers in relation to organisational structures and decision making.
- Principle of equal opportunity.
- Interview process and screening of volunteers.
- Orientation and training.
- Evaluation and review of volunteer efforts.
- Insurance cover.
- Payment of out of pocket expenses.
- Working conditions including an Occupational Health & Safety statement.
- Industrial considerations.
- Record keeping.
- Review of policy document.
- Support mechanisms.
- The relationships between paid and unpaid staff.
- Grievance and disciplinary procedure.

- The rationale for Police and Working with Children checks if they are required.
- Organisational specific policy eg volunteer must be a member of the organisation, or volunteers may have free admission (eg. volunteers active in the preservation of a museum may have free admittance).

Note: When writing policies, it is helpful, in most instances, to use the principles which apply to paid workers as a guide for developing a volunteer policy. Whilst the differences between paid workers and volunteers must remain clear at all times, many general policies relating to health & safety, risk and other human resource matters remain the same for both workers.

In Conclusion:

A well written and mutually agreed upon Volunteer Policy will serve to recognise, value and determine the quality and effectiveness of volunteer effort within a group or organisation regardless of its size or number of volunteers.

Volunteer Resource Centres can be of assistance to smaller rural groups in the development of their policy statement on volunteers and members.

Note: This information sheet was first published by Wimmera Volunteers in October 2008. It has been revised for inclusion in the Volunteering Toolkit.