

# ✓ Screening Volunteers

This information sheet will assist organisations and groups to develop a screening process which is fair to volunteers as well as providing protection to vulnerable clients.

Screening volunteers prior to induction is an important part of the risk management process. Organisations and groups, regardless of their size, need to assess the potential risks in all volunteer roles, particularly if the roles involve working with vulnerable clients in the community.

Risky situations happen rarely; however it is Best Practise to ensure that any “Worst Case Scenario’s” are considered for each volunteer role your group or organisation provides.

All volunteer involving groups have a responsibility to make sure that client groups and volunteers are not put into situations which could jeopardise the good work the group does in the community. Volunteers who work directly with vulnerable people need to meet the highest possible standards for professionalism, integrity and ethics.

**Assess risk:** Think about the situations where there is potential for any kind of physical or psychological harm to both client and volunteer. You need to minimise these risks.

Writing clear policies and procedures for people to follow will minimise these risks. Make sure Staff and volunteers can easily find and read these policies and procedures and are supported and trained in following them.

Develop Volunteer Position Descriptions and make them clear enough so that the potential for abuse of vulnerable persons is eliminated or significantly reduced.

**Inform volunteers about your screening process:** Volunteer Position Descriptions need to state if there is a screening process for volunteers. If prospective volunteers know they will be screened they will be more accepting and comfortable with the process. It will also assist people to “self select” out of your program.

It’s also a good idea for volunteer recruitment advertising to indicate if there is a screening process prior to acceptance.

Essentially, this is simply good manners, by informing prospective volunteers of your organisations process.

**Interview the volunteer:** The interview process need not be complex, depending on the volunteer role you are filling. Interviewing volunteers is an opportunity to get to know if they will be a good fit for your activities and mission.

It is a good idea to develop a volunteer induction kit which can include information sheets on the screening process, disclosure, confidentiality and so on. This kit can be as comprehensive as your group decides. Volunteers will take this kit as their personal information resource to refer to as necessary.

**Get appropriate information:** Most volunteers expect to fill out forms which give their personal contact information. However, some volunteer roles may require further information such as medical clearance, driver’s license and criminal record. Permission must be sought from the volunteer in writing to obtain this information. Ensure that it is held in the strictest confidence and in a secure way.

Volunteers who disclose medical conditions which could affect their ability to carry out volunteer work must be informed in the initial interview that their medical condition could preclude them from volunteering in a particular role. For example, a volunteer may tell you they have a bad back so it would not be appropriate for that volunteer to be placed in a position that requires a lot of heavy lifting.

This process gives the volunteer opportunity to reconsider the role and also to work with your organisation on finding alternative options. Doing this may make the difference between retaining an enthusiastic volunteer or losing their interest altogether.

**Police Checks and Working with Children Checks:** Certain groups and organisations will be obligated under Australian law to ensure those working with vulnerable client groups, such as children, disabled or elderly persons, are cleared to do so. Prospective volunteers must be advised if Police checks and Working with Children Checks are required before they can engage in volunteer work.

Volunteers will need to provide their 100 points identification documentation and submit the application form. You will also need to advise them if there are fees and charges for this process or if your group or organisation covers these costs.

A disclosable outcome on a National Police Certificate does not mean that a volunteer is automatically unsuited for a role. Further investigation may show that the record was for a misdemeanour which has no direct relevance to the volunteer position at all. Your group may like to ask for referees from the volunteer in these instances to ensure that they are of good character and will perform their duties to the highest standard despite the flagged outcome. Do not however, place volunteers with criminal records into positions

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where it is illegal or negligent to do so. This area can become very “grey” at times and it will generally fall to the informed discretion of the Volunteer Manager whether an individual is cleared to be engaged as a volunteer or not.

National Police Certificates are sent directly to the individual. They will need to present their certificate to your Volunteer Coordinator or to another appropriate person in your group.

Prepare for the event of a disclosable outcome being flagged on a prospective volunteer’s police check, by developing a clear pathway for processing the volunteer, but which maintains the highest standards in confidentiality and fairness.

Review and re-conduct Police checks at regular intervals for all Staff and serving volunteers and have regular follow-up interviews with volunteers to evaluate their work and concerns.

**After screening:** Not all volunteers will be a “good fit” for a role or for the group or organisation. If there is anything in the person’s application, interview, references or Police or Working with Children Check that demonstrates they are not suitable, it may be appropriate to decline their application to volunteer. Make sure you advise them in writing why their application to volunteer has been rejected. Offer them the opportunity to contest the decision and provide them with your grievance or dispute procedure for this process.

You can re-direct the volunteer into an entirely different role within your organisation or perhaps even create a new role so long as this does not replace a paid position. If this is not possible, refer them to a Volunteer Resource Centre for assistance in finding alternative opportunities.

Once a volunteer is cleared and accepted, ensure they understand that their volunteer work will be evaluated and that they understand their rights and responsibilities. Volunteers should attend all training and orientation sessions where applicable or mandatory to do so.

**Training:** Make sure your volunteers understand the following about your organisation or group:

- Occupational Health & Safety procedures;
- The level of confidentiality required;
- The process for disclosure of information;
- The policies and procedures you have in place to protect vulnerable clients.
- Grievance and dispute resolution procedures.

New volunteers may need to be mentored in the early stages of their engagement. It can be helpful to place new volunteers alongside long-

serving volunteers - or Staff - to orientate them into their role.

**Reporting incidents:** Your group should have a clear pathway for Staff and volunteers to report incidents or make complaints in a fair and confidential way.

Procedures must be in place, which investigate complaints fairly and ethically. Ensure everyone in the organisation understands your dispute resolution and/or grievance procedures.

If your group works with vulnerable clients such as children or the elderly, inform your volunteers of their obligations to report any known or suspected abuses done to vulnerable clients. They will need to know who they can talk to about these concerns and what their legal responsibilities are should the reported abuses go before a court.

**Conclusion:** An effective screening process will provide your group or organisation with better outcomes for everyone. Volunteers will be better informed, appropriately assessed and clients will be confident that services are delivered to the highest possible standard.

The process need not be complex but should ensure that adequate assessments have been conducted on volunteers prior to beginning their volunteer work.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but by following a clear process for screening and interviewing prospective volunteers, they will more likely remain with your organisation over the long term. This kind of transparency can help your organisation or group attract quality volunteers. This is because people are more willing to be involved when they are confident they will be treated fairly and professionally as equal members of the team.

Volunteers feel respected and valued when their contribution, time and skills are taken seriously and are thoughtfully considered in the light of the services you provide in the community.