

Joint policy statement: Addressing the pandemic insurance gap for volunteers

The problem

Overall, two in three volunteers stopped volunteering between February and April 2020.ⁱ With restrictions easing in most areas, many organisations want to restart volunteer programs and bring volunteers back to the workplace, in many cases to help meet increased demand for their services.

Organisations are hesitant to bring volunteers back because of the lack of insurance cover for COVID-19 related claims. Corporates will not be prepared to restart their employee volunteer programs without an assurance on this point.

This is an estimated 12.2 million hours of lost volunteer hours per week. This means less services for the community and flow on effects for the wellbeing for an estimated 4.5 million people who have previously volunteered.ⁱⁱ

Organisations owe volunteers a duty of care to provide a safe workplace, either under statutory work health and safety provisions or under the common law.ⁱⁱⁱ

As volunteers are not (typically) covered by Workers Compensation, some volunteer-involving organisations take out Voluntary Workers Personal Accident Insurance.^{iv} But this insurance does not cover volunteers for illness (only injury), so does not cover them for COVID-19. If someone contracts COVID-19 while volunteering, they can incur out of pocket medical expenses^v and loss of income (from being unable to undertake paid work and not having access to paid leave), and may even go on to suffer longer-term or even permanent disability.^{vi}

Throughout the pandemic, many volunteers have continued to work in essential or permitted services (for example, aged care, emergency relief and as community leaders in ethnically diverse ‘hotspot’ areas) despite these potential risks. This is not fair; volunteers should not be worse off than paid staff for giving freely of their time at the front line during a pandemic.

We welcome recent Federal^{vii} and Victorian^{viii} government announcements providing some support for people without paid leave, but these do not fully address the problem. Not all volunteers who lose income because of COVID-19 will receive these payments or be fully compensated for loss of income, and they do not cover out of pocket medical expenses volunteers may incur as a result of contracting COVID-19.

Solution

We are calling on all Australian governments to ‘have the back’ of Australia’s volunteer workforce in the COVID-19 crisis by overcoming the pandemic insurance gap.

We are keen to work with Government and suggest several options that could be explored and which, if shared across governments, will be low cost:

- Expand existing (State-run) Workers Compensation schemes to cover volunteers for out of pocket COVID-19 related illness and expenses. Some emergency volunteers (country fire volunteers, for example) are covered so there is precedent for this approach
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- Create a Government-backed indemnity or contingent liability fund for COVID-19 payments to volunteers, subject to defined criteria (a cap of \$10,000 per volunteer and excluding losses because of wilful disregard of medical directives, for example)
- Develop a longer-term solution such as a volunteer insurance product that includes certain illnesses.

If volunteering is to recover as we learn to live with COVID-19, a major effort by the volunteering sector and governments will be required, including the need to invest in the capabilities and capacity of organisations to re-engage volunteers, recruit and train new volunteers and adapt volunteer programs to the conditions of the ongoing COVID-19 environment.^{ix}

The immediate and critical issue is the need to overcome the volunteering protection gap.

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References

ⁱ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/research-briefing-the-experience-of-volunteers-during-covid-19>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/research-briefing-the-experience-of-volunteers-during-covid-19>

ⁱⁱⁱ For overview see Part 3, Volunteer Safety, National Volunteer Guide, Justice Connect <https://www.nfplaw.org.au/volunteers>. Note also Standard 6 of the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/National-Standards-Documents-FINAL-3004.pdf>

^{iv} Public liability insurance does not provide cover for volunteers. Often organisation can 'package' volunteer personal accident insurance with their public liability and directors and officers insurance <https://business-insurance.aon.com.au/associations/volunteering-australia>

^v Medicare is not available to all volunteers. Medicare does not always provide 100% cover and these gaps are uninsurable See <https://business-insurance.aon.com.au/medicare-insurance-gap>

^{vi} There is growing medical evidence of long term and permanent ill health, including mental ill health, eg <https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/what-are-the-long-term-health-risks-post-covid-19>

^{vii} <https://coronavirus.fairwork.gov.au/coronavirus-and-australian-workplace-laws/temporary-changes-to-workplace-laws-during-coronavirus/paid-pandemic-leave-in-some-awards>

^{viii} <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/covid-19-worker-support-payment>

^{ix} For a full discussion of the actions needed to reinvigorated volunteering, see the Volunteering Australia and State/Territory volunteering peaks submission to the current Senate inquiry into COVID-19 <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Submission-to-Senate-Inquiry-into-COVID-19-FINAL-.pdf>
