

re-engaging volunteers



During a natural disaster or crisis, volunteers are often the first people deployed to the frontline. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a very different scenario – volunteer programs were suspended, and volunteers asked to stay home. As we bring volunteers back into our organisations, we need to carefully consider how volunteers are supported as they re-engage.



A key consideration during the recovery phase is the re-engagement of volunteers that were stood down during the isolation period.

During the COVID-19 isolation period in Tasmania, an average of 250,000 hours of volunteering was lost weekly.

Volunteering Tasmania has been working with the volunteering sector to understand the issues impacting on Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) and their volunteers during COVID-19.

We know from research and consultations across the state that up to 80% of volunteer programs were suspended to some degree. People experienced a sense of isolation and disconnect as they were unable to participate in their usual community activities.

We also know that as VIOs progress towards bringing their volunteers back, concerns are emerging that require careful consideration to ensure that volunteers are supported as they re-engage with organisations.



What to consider when re-engaging volunteers

We've all been affected by COVID-19 in some way. Most volunteers were unable to participate in their usual activities, and those that were had to do so in challenging situations with changing guidelines.

It's important to consider the potential impacts on individuals when planning to re-engage volunteers, including:

- hesitation to return due to fear of illness or exposing others
- loss of income / financial hardship
- additional responsibilities coping or caring for family members
- isolation due to lack of social contact with limited opportunities to connect with family, friends and social activities
- lack of, or limited access to medical treatments
- concerns about the unknown future
- changed priorities

These factors can impact people's health and wellbeing and prevent their re-engagement with volunteering. Identifying the issues and knowing what resources and supports are available can help organisations to re-engage volunteers.

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Consult

Consulting with volunteers about their experience during COVID-19 provides organisations with valuable information.

- learnings from conversations and the involvement of volunteers in developing and implementing solutions is an important component of social and community recovery. (See resource: *Understanding your Community Post COVID-19*.)
- Working with volunteers to develop a tailored **Volunteer Re-engagement Plan** helps with a smooth transition back to volunteering. This plan allows volunteers to raise any concerns about returning, outline how they'd like to undertake their role, and identify if any supports are needed. (See resource: *Volunteer re-engagement plan*)
- A volunteer may express their concerns about the suspension of their volunteer program and how this was managed by the organisation. An open discussion will help with moving forward and provide the organisation valuable information on how to improve processes.

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Consider

What you can do to provide a safe and supportive environment.

- Reduce risk and address volunteer safety concerns through your **COVID-19 Worksafe Plan**. (See resource: *Return to 'COVID-safe' volunteering*.)
- Provide other opportunities to volunteers where programs are delayed or not re-instated. (See resource: *Reviewing and redesigning your volunteer programs*)
- Support volunteers who choose not to return to volunteering. Ensuring the exit process is respectful and supported. (See resource: *Reviewing and redesigning your volunteer programs*)
- Provide training and workshop opportunities including refresher induction programs that incorporate COVID-19 information. This will help lessen any apprehension about returning to the workplace. Consultations show that many volunteers had limited IT skills, so access to additional training and mentoring in this area could increase capacity.
- Provide social activities and opportunities for regular contact and connection with others (adhering to social distancing requirements).
- Ask volunteers how they are going. Don't assume that people are coping even though they seem to be. Encourage people to take downtime and to stay connected to friends and family. Reassure volunteers that it's ok to take a break from volunteering and to say no to requests. If appropriate, encourage them to seek professional support.

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Communicate

Consultations revealed that the best form of contact with volunteers was face to face or by phone. Contact on a weekly basis was appreciated.

- Ensure that communication is consistent, clear and considerate.
- Operational decisions impacting volunteers should be communicated to volunteers in a timely and appropriate manner.
- If a program is not going to be re-instated, volunteers need to be informed. This ensures volunteers that they valued, respected and a part of the organisation.
- Develop a basic communication plan outlining who you will be communicating to, how often, volunteer contact details and best contact method to maintain consistent contact with volunteers.

Need more help?

Volunteering Tasmania's **Safeguarding Project** is focused on supporting councils and their volunteer communities. As part of the project, we've consulted with three councils regarding their experiences during COVID-19. The summary of findings is available at the link below, where you can also find resources to support councils, VIOs and volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic and into recovery.

See: www.volunteeringtas.org.au/covid-19-informationandresources/

Reach out!

If you'd like to chat about additional resources, please get in touch with us by emailing Amy at amyb@volunteeringtas.org.au

