

# VOLUNTEERING IN AGED CARE SETTINGS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Good Practice During COVID-19 and Beyond Research Report and Compendium of Guides

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## REPORT SUMMARY

Volunteering WA released the final report on the Volunteering in Aged Care Settings in Western Australia – Good Practice During COVID-19 and Beyond project, which was funded by a Lotterywest grant to Volunteering WA and supplemented by contributions from Volunteering WA and Murdoch University.

The report outlines the project approach including a series of research workshops (held in person and online) over several months in 2021 by Dr Megan Paull and Dr Sally Paulin from Murdoch University. The project was designed to facilitate knowledge sharing from those actively involved in volunteering and volunteer management in aged care settings in WA during this COVID-19 period, with a particular focus on residential aged care and the Community Visitors Scheme.

### Context

While the COVID 19 pandemic in Australia has influenced all our daily lives with health issues, restrictions, and lockdowns, one of the most highly impacted sectors has been aged care due to the need to promptly step up and address urgent health, safety and infection control requirements for clients and staff.

The response to the pandemic occurred alongside the reporting of the findings of the Royal Commission on Aged Care Quality and Safety. The Royal Commission made many recommendations to improve aged care provision in Australia including recognising the importance of the contribution of volunteers in addressing social isolation and assistance with client activities.

### Key findings

One key finding is that the arrival of the pandemic highlighted other issues in need of attention. Against the backdrop of the Royal Commission findings, volunteer management, communication, diversity and inclusion, and recognition of volunteers and volunteer managers have emerged as important.

The key findings in relation to managing volunteering in aged care settings during COVID-19 and beyond in Western Australia of this report are:

- **Communications:** Explicit mention of volunteers, volunteer programs and arrangements for volunteers assists them to understand their role, the actions they need to take, and the need to retain or increase their engagement with the organisations in which they volunteer. Volunteers need to know that they have been considered in planning, in risk management and in procedures for such things as infection control and outbreak management. They look for information such as who to contact in the event of an out of hours issue with a client, or if they are required to self-isolate and cannot attend a rostered activity. Examples of good practice which were evident included personal contact from volunteer managers, as well as volunteer newsletters or emails.
- **Health advice and policy:** The volume of health advice and policy changes over the course of the pandemic has meant that it is at times difficult for individuals to keep up with the requirements that apply to them. Volunteers are required to comply with all health advice and policy relating to their volunteer activities, and compliance is easier if these are provided to them by the organisation, including in the form of reminders. An example here is any policy relating to volunteers who visit multiple aged care facilities or sites.
- **Diversity and inclusion:** The need for increased diversity amongst volunteers, including different age groups, was accompanied by specific intentional actions to ensure that diverse individuals are valued and respected. Diversity amongst clients, staff and volunteers may mean that tailored measures are needed to ensure that client and organisational goals are met.
- **Organisational Policies:** Differences between organisations about expectations of volunteers (e.g., access to information about a client's health status) increase the need for explicit policy, and communication of

policies, to clients, staff and volunteers. Organisational boundaries about what volunteers can and cannot do in their volunteer role is one example. Another is how an organisation will implement the recent change to the essential visitor policy where volunteers may be nominated by clients in this role. The need for organisations to be able to change the way they operate in relation to the changing health advice and policy, as well as other contingencies, links back to the need to clearly communicate with volunteers in a timely manner.

### Role of volunteer managers

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities and strengths in volunteering in the aged care sector in Western Australia and highlighted the role of the volunteer managers and onsite co-ordinators.

Many volunteer managers regularly put in additional time and effort to ensure their programs run well, and this carried over into pandemic responses. The need to value volunteer managers as part of valuing volunteer programs emerged as a topic for discussion, with stark differences emerging between organisations. Issues to be considered include: hours of work, workload, onsite supervision where this is separate to the volunteer manager role, reporting, staff help and co-operation, and staff interactions with volunteers.

### Impact of COVID-19

Lockdowns, and other measures introduced as a response to COVID-19 have led to changes in volunteering in aged care settings. The COVID-19 disruptions included moving many activities to be online, and other processes to be re-examined. New forms of volunteering emerged to enable volunteers to keep in touch with clients, and new volunteers were recruited. Some of those recruited to help during lockdown did not continue when lockdown ended. Those volunteers who did return came back to a changed environment and reported they were glad to continue in their roles.

Western Australia has so far avoided the lengthy lockdowns in other locations and many aged care volunteer programs have been able to operate in almost “business as usual” arrangements. However volunteers have identified that they too feel vulnerable in the pandemic, and while they appreciate being able to continue to contribute, they need to be aware of the potential risks. Volunteer managers are acutely aware of the need to encourage volunteer self-care, including the need to look out for those who are experiencing grief, which can be a part of volunteering in aged care.

### Opportunities for future research

This short-term project has highlighted a range of issues in volunteering in aged care settings as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Western Australia. Areas which have emerged as potential opportunities for future research include seeking client views to understand the social and mental health impact of receiving support from volunteers, particularly during the pandemic; exploring the more specialised forms of volunteering such as dementia care volunteering and advocacy volunteering; and looking at the other settings where volunteers add value to the lives of older Australians such as in recreation centres and in health and hospital services.

### Report and compendium content and format

The final report includes a Compendium of seven ‘Good Practice Guides’ for the range of stakeholders involved with volunteering in aged care settings:

- Volunteer managers
- Volunteers
- Potential volunteers
- Onsite co-ordinators and frontline managers of volunteers
- Staff working alongside volunteers
- Senior staff, managers, and board members and
- Policy makers and peaks.

The final report and Good Practice Guides are available at [www.volunteeringwa.org.au/agedcare](http://www.volunteeringwa.org.au/agedcare).

