

# Working with Older Volunteers



Older volunteers can share a great deal of life experience, skills, and institutional knowledge with volunteer-involving organisations.

“The Silent Generation” or “Traditionalists” (those born prior to the “Baby Boomers” from 1945), come from a generation where long term commitment was more the norm than it is today. These are the volunteers we are seeing getting awards for 20, 30 or 40+ years of volunteering service for the same organisation, and are more likely to believe that sacrifice or duty is part of volunteering.

Older volunteers often find a great sense of pride in their volunteering, reporting the following personal benefits:

- gives them enjoyment
- contributes to their self-esteem and sense of self-worth
- helps reduce loneliness and improves mental health
- keeps their minds active
- provides opportunities to learn new skills
- helps them feel connected to and needed by their community
- makes up part of their identity.



## Insurance

It is important to be aware of any upper age limits on your organisation's relevant [volunteer insurance policies](#). Some policies may not cover volunteers at all (or provide limited coverage) after they reach a certain age.

There is no legal reason for upper age limits to be in force if volunteers are still able to carry out the duties of their role to the required standard. There is also

a risk that organisations could be found in breach of the [Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act of 1991](#) if they discriminate against a volunteer due to age where the volunteer has capacity to perform the required tasks of the role or where another role could reasonably be found within their abilities.

Organisations with older volunteers or that are considering recruiting an older volunteer, are encouraged to discuss their insurance and risk management needs with their insurance provider. It may be possible to negotiate an increase to a policy's upper age limit although this may involve an increase in premiums or a requirement to demonstrate due diligence in managing risks (such as viewing the [annual medical certificate of drivers over the age of 75 years](#)).

## Barriers for older volunteers to continue volunteering

### Changing health and mobility:

As volunteers get older, changes to their health and mobility can impact their ability to continue to volunteer reliably and/or safely.

### Changing volunteer environment:

Organisations have increased legal responsibilities to implement stronger risk management and compliance measures which some volunteers, especially older volunteers, can find frustrating and be viewed as “red tape”.

### Changing technological environment:

Technology use has transformed the way volunteers search for volunteering opportunities and perform their roles. Some traditional volunteer roles may not exist at all or require the volunteer to undertake significant reskilling to continue.

### Discrimination and organisational attitudes:

Discriminatory perceptions about older people from younger volunteer managers and supervisors, or a lack of skills in creative thinking or change management, can also pose barriers to older volunteers contributing to the organisations in a meaningful and mutually beneficial way.

### Out of pocket expenses:

Some older volunteers report that a lack of reimbursement from organisations for out of pocket expenses or transport costs have limited their capacity to volunteer as much as they would like.

## Risk management and policy framework

A good organisational policy and procedure framework will assist organisations to clearly outline what is expected, negotiate for accommodation of personal needs if necessary, and manage risks appropriately including those associated with older volunteers.

### Role/position descriptions:

What are the mandatory requirements of the role? What is negotiable?

### Recruitment and screening processes:

What evidence does the organisation gather when making a decision whether to select a volunteer? (e.g. application form, interview, referee check). Under what circumstances would a volunteer be deemed unsuitable for the role? Are there other roles that applicants/volunteers could be referred to if not appropriate for this particular role? Can information on suitability be gathered in a way that is considered less formal (such as filling in a form while having a conversation)?

### Code of conduct/volunteer agreement:

What must the volunteer do in order to competently perform the role? Under what circumstances might the volunteer be found unsuitable or managed on their performance?

### Health and safety:

What assessments have been done and measures implemented to mitigate or minimise risk (to the volunteer, the organisation and others)? Are volunteers actively encouraged to voice any concerns they have? Has the organisation created an environment where the volunteer can safely request leave or altered duties if they notice changes to their health or abilities which may affect their volunteering?

### Orientation and training:

How is the volunteer informed of the appropriate practices to perform their role to the required standard and to ensure their own and others' safety? What should they do/who should they talk to if they have a question or concern?

### Retention and recognition:

What reimbursements, meals or allowances can the organisation afford to provide in order to reduce the impact of out-of-pocket expenses for volunteers on low incomes (including many older volunteers)? How is the volunteer's role and contribution recognised within the organisation?

### Consultation and review:

How does the organisation check in with the volunteer to ensure they are still able to perform the role? How does the organisation seek to include established volunteers in discussions regarding organisational changes that impact on their work in a respectful way?



## Tips

### Individuality:

The health and abilities of older volunteers can vary a great deal between individuals. Sometimes a 90 year old volunteer is more agile than a 60 year old. A volunteer program that is able to assess capacity of individual volunteers with good volunteer management policies and practices will more effectively manage risk, get better outcomes, and achieve higher satisfaction levels from their volunteers.

### Flexibility:

If a volunteer can no longer continue in a role the way they have been, consider whether reasonable adaptations can be made for them to continue, or whether an alternative role can be identified that will meet the organisation and the volunteer's needs (whether within the organisation, or with another organisation).

### Intergenerational volunteering:

Identify projects and activities where younger volunteers can work with older volunteers in mutually beneficial ways to upskill older volunteers, provide learning opportunities for younger volunteers, and assist with creating a sustainable volunteer workforce for your organisation. E.g.

- Younger volunteers recording the experiences of older volunteers to document the organisation's rich oral history through videos, website pages, coffee table books, etc.
- Younger volunteers teaching older volunteers about using computers and information technology to become more efficient in their roles or use social media to promote the organisation more effectively.
- Older volunteers with more knowledge mentoring or pairing up with younger volunteers who are more physical capable (such as for trades, maintenance or gardening projects).

**Transition:**

If a volunteer is no longer able to perform meaningful work that continues to benefit the organisation, it is not respectful of the volunteer's time or a viable use of the organisation's limited resources to continue their volunteer engagement. Consider ways to honour the volunteer's contribution and dignity while transiting them from an active volunteer role in the organisation. An effective transition will support the volunteer's adjustment to their changing status by acknowledging the contribution of the volunteer while clearly communicating what the change to their volunteering status means. Ways to honour long term older volunteers include awarding Emeritus or Ambassador Status and/or presenting Life Membership. Organisations can decide with the volunteer what ongoing involvement (if any) is appropriate such as:

- continued attendance at important organisational events
- presenting annual awards to other volunteers
- having their contribution acknowledged on their website and/or annual report
- providing them with opportunities to give speeches about the history of the organisation
- chairing a volunteer reference group.

**Compassion and purpose:**

Good practices and clear communication can assist older volunteers to continue to contribute and benefit from volunteering as long as possible. They also increase the likelihood that retirement or transition (if necessary) will occur with respect and reduce the potential for pain. However, if a volunteer needs to retire due to reduced capacity, they may be grieving their loss of health, social connection, self-esteem and sense of identity. Reluctant transitions can be distressing for all concerned. Difficult decisions are sometimes necessary for your organisation to focus on its purpose and to utilise its resources to continue the work it is responsible for.

**Further reading**

[ASIA: Community and Volunteering, \(2018\)](#)

[Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act 1991](#)

[Queensland Anti-Discrimination Commission Incapacity and Work factsheet](#)

[RACQ Older Driver Programs](#)

[Managing Older Workers: What can we learn from managers of older volunteers? Dr Megan Paull](#)



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