

What you told us - Impact of COVID 19 on the NSW Volunteering Sector

In April / May 2020, the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) conducted an online survey of NSW volunteer involving organisations (VIOs). The results are now in and the Department would like to thank everyone that participated in the survey.

What you told us

The COVID-19 pandemic is having an impact on volunteers and their organisations. It is also having an impact on the:

- individuals, families and communities that rely on volunteer-based initiatives
- delivery of volunteer based services, programs and activities as well as volunteer run venues and facilities.

The physical distancing and Public Health Order restrictions put in place to contain the spread of the virus has meant that volunteer organisations have:

- suspended operations where possible
- supported frontline volunteers as part of the required response efforts
- stood down volunteers considered to be in high risk categories in order to keep them safe
- moved programs and activities online where possible.

Before COVID-19

You told us that the most common volunteer based activities, programs or services that your organisations ordinarily provided to the community were focused around the following:

- Community services
- Seniors and aged care
- Young people
- Education and training
- Arts and culture
- Health and wellbeing
- Recreation
- Food and meal production / distribution
- Family services
- Sport
- Museums and heritage
- Disability services
- Mentoring and advocacy.

This reflects a wide range of activities and the diverse nature of the volunteering sector.

Impact of COVID-19 on volunteer activities

Throughout the survey it was made clear that a wide range of impacts are being experienced by volunteer organisations and volunteers alike. The impacts of the pandemic are being experienced in combination, and this is requiring a 'mixed-method' response, where solutions are able to be agile with changes in circumstances, and public health restrictions.

The most common impacts indicated were:

- Closure of facilities, offices and venue(s)
- All volunteer services and activities suspended at this time
- Loss of funding / fundraising opportunities
- Increased health and cleanliness protocols
- Some volunteer services, programs and activities suspended, some moved online
- Change of types of programs, services, activities in response to COVID-19
- Increased pressure on volunteer managers and coordinators
- Loss of volunteers in the organisation
- Increased internet, telephone charges
- Some volunteers stood down, some volunteers continue to deliver services, programs, activities
- Harder to maintain contact with volunteers and paid staff
- Increased IT hardware and software costs
- Where possible organisations are collaborating with other organisations in response to COVID-19.

Very few organisations indicated that COVID-19 has had no impact on their operations.

You also told us that due to COVID-19 you are experiencing a combination of impacts including:

- Loss of income, funding and fundraising opportunities
- Anxiety among volunteers and staff
- Loss of volunteer capacity.

Organisations told us they were not moving activities online due to the nature of programs, services and activities they deliver, and the volunteering could not be done online or remotely. A further compounding issue for many organisations was the lack of hardware and software required.

Organisations were asked how they are managing the risks associated with COVID-19. The most common risk management practices indicated were:

- Physical distancing
- Monitoring Government rules including Public Health orders
- Communicating health and support information to all volunteers and staff
- Increased health and cleanliness protocols
- Vulnerable volunteers and staff have been stood down or are working remotely.

Moving forward, many organisations communicated their concern that many volunteers will not return post-COVID-19, and as a result the sector across the board will have a loss of capacity.

Where volunteer organisations were able to conduct their volunteering either remotely or online they have done so by implementing the following:

- Videoconferencing
- Expanded use of existing website or social media channels
- Online learning and training
- Teleconference meetings
- Live streaming and videos
- Creation of new websites or social media channels for both the organisation and volunteers.
- Provision of IT hardware and software for both volunteers and staff.

Many organisations also expressed a commitment to reimburse volunteers for additional out of pocket expenses when working online/remotely (ie phone, internet, postage etc).

The Way Forward

Moving forward, the NSW Government and the volunteering sector will continue to work together. Drawing on what you told us, we will co-design solutions to help each other rebuild, continuing to communicate and share experiences as we look to the future of volunteering.