

# BREAKING BARRIERS:

## Unlocking volunteering opportunities for people with disabilities



## Introduction



There are many technological, attitudinal, cultural, and physical barriers to volunteering for people with a disability. Creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for people with disabilities and empowering them to contribute more fully to the community is not as hard as many people assume.

This document is based on discussions with volunteering organisations and community members with lived experience. It is a summary of common barriers faced with volunteering and some concrete actions that can be taken by volunteer involved organisations seeking volunteers to encourage people with disabilities to volunteer.



### 01

#### Accessible Information and Application Process

People with disabilities find it difficult to access information about volunteering because it is not accessible. Application processes are often overwhelming and complicated.

Easy changes that can be made:

- **Multiple formats:** Ensure information about volunteer opportunities is available in various formats. This could include large print, Braille, digital with screen-reader compatibility, using colours that have high contrast, such as black on white, any colours that are opposite on the colour wheel, or bright solid colours, such as red, orange or yellow.
- **Clear communication:** Use plain language and avoid jargon in information about volunteering opportunities, including on websites, advertisements and application materials.
- **Online accessibility:** Make sure your website and online application forms meet accessibility standards (WCAG).
- **Alternative application methods:** Offer options like phone interviews or in-person assistance with applications, particularly regarding compliance requirements.
- **Be Open:** Ensure that information states clearly that people with disabilities are welcomed.

#### Inclusive on-boarding and training

People with disabilities may need slight adjustments to processes. VIOs need to make it clear they are open to making these changes. Organisations are also cautious about taking on volunteers with a disability because they assume they will not be able to accommodate the disability requirements.

- **Needs assessment:** Proactively ask prospective volunteers if they require any specific accommodations requirements or support during training and volunteering.



### 02

- **Be flexible:** Have a mindset of asking “How would it work for you?”. There may be alternative options for onboarding, including online, in-person, video pre-recording, walking through the steps together, using AI interpreter, or having a support person.
- **Accessible training materials:** Provide training materials in accessible formats and offer alternative training methods (e.g., visual, auditory, hands-on). Make it clear that these options are available during the interview process.
- **Buddy system:** Pair new volunteers with experienced volunteers for peer support.
- **Disability awareness training:** Educate staff and other volunteers on disability etiquette and inclusion best practices. There are lots of resources online about disability etiquette which takes away the fear of not knowing what to say and do around people with a disability.



## 03

### Flexible and supportive environment

Organisations don't feel comfortable offering volunteer positions to people with a disability because they are uncertain about how to go about it.

- **Reasonable adjustments:** Be prepared to make reasonable adjustments to tasks, schedules, or the physical environment to accommodate individual needs. This is often as simple as asking the volunteer how the job description may need to be changed. Use the question “How would it work for you?”
- **Open communication:** Encourage open communication between volunteers, supervisors, and staff to address any concerns or needs.
- **Clear roles and expectations:** Provide clear job descriptions and expectations for each volunteer role.
- **Regular feedback and support:** Offer regular feedback and support to volunteers to ensure they feel valued and will be successful in their role.

### Physical Accessibility

Organisations often think that big changes need to be made to be accessible and so don't readily accept volunteers with a disability. People with a disability may not be able to volunteer because of physical limitations.

- **Be creative:** There may be roles, or parts of roles in the organisation that would suit a volunteer with a physical disability. Be prepared to make changes to existing volunteer job descriptions to make roles more suitable.
- **Building access:** Ensure the physical space is accessible, including ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, and adequate lighting. If these changes are not possible, then talk to the Board or look for funding opportunities.
- **Workstation setup:** Provide adjustable workstations and ergonomic equipment as needed.
- **Assistive technology:** Be prepared to provide assistive technology. There are often free online tools, and the prospective volunteer can provide good guidance on what is needed.



## 04



## 05

### Liability

Organisations may be nervous about accepting volunteers with disabilities because of fear of liability in the event something goes wrong.

- **Volunteer agreements:** While not legally required, having a written volunteer agreement can clarify roles, responsibilities, and expectations and include a liability clause.
- **Insurance:** Ensure appropriate insurance coverage is in place, including personal accident insurance and public liability insurance.
- **Privacy:** Comply with privacy laws when collecting and storing personal information about volunteers, including information about their disabilities.
- **Be prepared:** Proactively identify potential hazards and implement control measures. Consider individual needs and any specific risks related to a volunteer's disability.
- **Safe environment:** Provide a safe physical environment, including accessible entrances, exits, restrooms, and workstations.
- **Information and training:** Provide volunteers with appropriate information, training, and supervision to ensure they can perform their tasks safely.
- **Emergency procedures:** Ensure emergency procedures are accessible to all volunteers, including those with disabilities.

### Transport

Transport can be a significant barrier for people with disabilities who wish to volunteer. Organisations need to consider how volunteers will get to and from their volunteering location.

- **Take out the thinking:** Let people know how to get to the site. Have clear instructions with public transport routes, information on booking wheelchair taxis, and clear instructions on stops and distances. Have this accessible on the website or when information is sent to prospective volunteers.
- **Flexible start and finish times:** Offer flexible start and finish times to align with accessible public transport schedules.
- **Reimbursement for transport costs:** Providing reimbursement for transport costs, especially for those who need to use more expensive accessible transport options can encourage people with a disability to volunteer.
- **Assistance with transport arrangements:** Helping volunteers to plan their journey and book accessible transport.
- **Providing transport:** In some cases, organisations might need to provide transport directly, such as through a volunteer driver or by hiring a community transport service.



## 06



## 07

### Stigma

People may make assumptions about what a person with a disability can or cannot do, limiting the opportunities offered to them. Staff and other volunteers might be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing around someone with a disability, leading to avoidance or awkward interactions.

- **Make staff more informed:** Provide mandatory disability awareness training for all staff and volunteers. This training should cover:

- Different types of disabilities
- The social model of disability (which focuses on societal barriers rather than individual limitations)
- Disability etiquette
- Appropriate language and terminology
- Reasonable adjustments
- **Promote inclusive language:** Encourage the use of person-first language (e.g., "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person") and avoid using offensive or outdated terms.
- **Challenge stereotypes:** Actively challenge negative stereotypes and assumptions about disability. Showcase the diverse abilities and contributions of people with disabilities.
- **Promote positive representation:** Feature people with disabilities in promotional materials, websites, and social media to normalise inclusion and challenge stereotypes.
- **Create a culture of open communication:** Encourage open and respectful communication between staff, volunteers, and people with disabilities. Create safe spaces for people to ask questions and share their experiences.
- **Lead by example:** Leaders within the organisation should model inclusive behaviour and actively promote a culture of respect and acceptance.
- **Just ask:** Fear of the unknown can lead to stigma sticking. People with disabilities encourage us to "just ask" if you're unsure.
- **Consult with people with disabilities:** Involve people with disabilities in the development of policies, programs, and training materials to ensure their perspectives are included.
- **Celebrate diversity:** Recognise and celebrate the diversity of your volunteer team, including those with disabilities.
- **Address discriminatory behaviour:** Have clear policies and procedures for addressing discriminatory behaviour and ensure they are enforced consistently.

## For more information regarding volunteering opportunities in Ballarat contact:

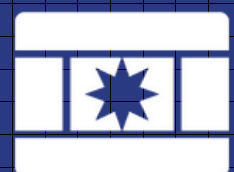
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The Ballarat Foundation acknowledges the Wadawurrung people, the traditional owners of the lands and waterways in our region. We recognise their diversity, resilience, and the ongoing place that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hold in our communities. We pay our respects to the Elders, both past and present, and commit to working together in the spirit of mutual understanding, respect and reconciliation.



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