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TOMORROW
READY

Tomorrow Ready



Spontaneous volunteer project
implementation guide

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Thanks

Thank you to our project partners, in particular Beacon Strategies and the NSW Volunteer Resource Centre network.

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SHPN: (ACI) 150473\
ISBN: 978-1-76000-273-2
Version: V8
Date amended: 13 December 2025

Executive summary

This implementation guide is designed as a practical resource for Volunteer Resource Centres (VRCs), Volunteer-Involving Organisations (VIOs), neighbourhood centres, community groups, emergency services and local governments seeking to effectively prepare for and manage spontaneous volunteers during disasters.

The guide builds on the extensive research and project development work undertaken by the Community Gateway following the flood events of 2017.

With funding from the NSW Office of Emergency Management and in partnership with Red Cross and SES, Community Gateway developed a framework for the management of spontaneous volunteers in 2019.

While community-led volunteering was vital and commendable during disasters, Community Gateway's 2019 research identified critical governance gaps. The absence of structured systems for recruitment, screening, and management created risks for both volunteers and the affected communities.

These challenges intensified during the 2022 flood disaster in the Northern Rivers, where we saw a further establishment of many informal community-led "pop-up" organisations to support response and recovery efforts. Many of these groups operated with goodwill but lacked governance structures, insurance, volunteer screening processes and risk management procedures.

Whilst some of these organisations post flood sought incorporation, many still continue to operate with limited understanding of the national standards of volunteer management, they continue to be under-resourced, have limited safeguards for volunteers or for vulnerable community members.

In response to the 2022 and to build on the research and development work undertaken by the Community Gateway, the NSW Reconstruction Authority funded the Tomorrow ready project. A project to pilot the spontaneous volunteer management framework. The Tomorrow Ready project (January 2023 – April 2024), delivered an evidence-and-place-based framework for spontaneous volunteer management across the Northern Rivers.

Our long-term outcomes were to:

- Increase the community's preparedness and resilience during and after a disaster
- Engage with spontaneous volunteers through recruitment and long-term retention to build a skilled and capable volunteer workforce to support disaster recovery.

- Increase stakeholder collaboration and partnerships between the Community Gateway and other organisations.
- Increase the safety of community members during disaster recovery
- Build an evidence base that supports transferability and adoption of the Spontaneous Volunteer program model in other geographic locations

By leveraging its role as a VRC, Community Gateway successfully recruited, trained, and maintained a volunteer network, ensuring safer engagement of volunteers in disaster recovery efforts.

These projects have highlighted the unique role of VRCs as central hubs for:

- Training VIOs in effective volunteer management practices.
- Recruiting, screening, and placing spontaneous volunteers.
- Coordinating networks across regions to support community resilience.

NSW Reconstruction Authority provided an additional 12-month funding in January 2025 to further develop the framework Tomorrow Ready project and its training resources through a co-design process with VRCs ensuring that it could be adaptable across NSW.

Community Gateway partnered with Beacon Strategies to facilitate codesign workshops incorporating VRCs and VIOs.

This next phase provided an opportunity to work with VRCs to expand the training and support available to spontaneous volunteers, further strengthen governance, safety and resilience in disaster management.

The strength of Tomorrow Ready is that it's one "piece of the puzzle"

- It doesn't replace traditional approaches to disaster and emergency management volunteering.
- It doesn't replace the work of the SES, RFS or local councils
- It's designed to equip volunteers with skills to be able to effectively work with vulnerable people and to develop their leadership skills.
- The uniqueness of Tomorrow Ready is it offers people flexibility to volunteer and to keep them connected, engaged and trained for the next disaster.
- It's a value-add project.

Jenni Beetson-Mortimer

Chief Executive Officer, Community Gateway

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Introduction

About this implementation guide

This implementation guide is a resource for VRCs, VIOs, neighbourhood centres, community groups, emergency services and local governments seeking to effectively prepare for and manage spontaneous volunteers during disasters.

If your organisation is considering supporting your community by engaging with spontaneous volunteers, we recommend starting with the spontaneous volunteer framework to assist you in understanding the key issues to consider before beginning recruitment and integration of volunteers.

This implementation guide is presented in four sections:

Spontaneous volunteering framework

Designed to assist VIOs integrate the Tomorrow Ready program within their existing operations. This section explains the background of the project, defines what a spontaneous volunteer is, and highlights important considerations when developing your own pool of trained and supported volunteers.

Engagement and marketing

This section provides important information on how to engage spontaneous volunteers through a phased model that builds personal preparedness, role clarity, core skills and ongoing connection. It outlines a consistent, inclusive marketing approach that is guided by clear objectives, raises awareness, drives VRC, VIO, volunteer and partner participation, using culturally safe, accessible communications across multiple channels.

Essential training for disaster response

Outlines the essential training modules offered through the Tomorrow Ready project. Training content has been shaped through community consultation, input from emergency agencies and advice from qualified counsellors. This training equips volunteers with skills that support both themselves and disaster-affected communities.

Volunteer management in a disaster setting

Provides effective and pragmatic guidance using best-practice volunteer management principles. This section supports organisations to safely and effectively manage spontaneous volunteers during crises and natural disasters. Topics include onboarding, recruitment, risk management, insurance, supervision, and volunteer well-being.



Spontaneous volunteering framework

Introducing Tomorrow Ready

What is it?

The Tomorrow Ready project is an evidence-based spontaneous volunteer framework that aims to achieve the following key objectives:

- Place spontaneous volunteerism within organisations that have the capability to effectively and safely manage volunteers.
- Ensure disaster-impacted communities are being assisted by volunteers with trauma-informed understanding, so that communities can be linked back into existing support networks.
- Embed leadership skills, self-care and emergency management understanding into volunteer training.
- Advocate for spontaneous volunteers to be protected by adequate organisational insurance.
- Promote screening checks of spontaneous volunteers for community trust and safety.

Who is it for?

This implementation guide is specifically designed for VIOs that are committed to engaging in community support through the recruitment, training, and deployment of spontaneous volunteers during times of emergency or disaster.

Types of VIOs who may consider playing a role in spontaneous volunteering:

- VRCs
- Neighbourhood centres
- Local organisations such as community transport, wildlife charities, land care groups etc
- Disaster resilience and emergent groups
- Emergency services
- Local government

Why?

It is widely known that local communities are often the first responders when disaster occurs. Community and volunteer organisations regularly play vital roles in the response and recovery of a disaster due to their established relationships with local individuals, families, other organisations and emergency agencies.

Since many community organisations often rely on the generous help of volunteers, embedding spontaneous volunteer training within local organisations and through their network of volunteers is a critical way of ensuring more people on the ground have the confidence and knowledge to step up as a spontaneous volunteer.

Furthermore, spontaneous volunteers deserve to have support mechanisms in place to ensure their safety and the well-being of the community they are assisting. By taking on spontaneous volunteers, an organisation can provide appropriate onboarding, volunteer supervision, risk assessment, role assignment, and an adequate level of insurance to cover volunteers.

Mark Pearce, CEO of Volunteering Australia, remarked on natural disasters by saying:

"Sometimes there's forewarning, oftentimes there's not. And the first responders are almost always people within community, who put up their hand and [say] how can I help? What can I do?"

Background and rationale

2017 Lismore flood

In response to the devastating 2017 flood event in Lismore, Community Gateway received funding from NSW Office of Emergency Management to develop a spontaneous volunteer management framework and report. Based on research and findings from local communities, the 2019 report revealed risks in community-led volunteer efforts due to poor governance and lack of safety measures.

2022 Northern Rivers flood



After the catastrophic 2022 Northern Rivers floods, Community Gateway was funded by NSW Reconstruction Authority to develop a place-based spontaneous volunteer management solution that boosts local disaster resilience. This project, called *Tomorrow Ready*, built upon the 2019 framework and leveraged Community Gateway's expertise accumulated over decades as a VRC.

The 2022 disaster saw many volunteer-led pop-up groups form to aid recovery, but most lacked resources, policies, insurance or risk management, putting volunteers and vulnerable people at risk. From January 2023 to April 2024, Community Gateway used its experience as a VRC to recruit, train and support spontaneous volunteers through an evidence-based management framework to improve safety and coordination in disaster response.

Where we are in 2025

Bringing us to today in 2025, Community Gateway proudly expanded the *Tomorrow Ready* project with further funding from NSW Reconstruction Authority – Supporting Spontaneous Volunteers program. This iteration supports the project scaling so that other VRCs and VIOs can participate in upskilling motivated volunteers, establishing crucial points of recruitment and targeting deployment within their communities during a disaster.

Tomorrow Ready benefits

Establishing a spontaneous volunteer program can be a highly rewarding initiative, contributing significantly to community resilience in the face of future disasters.

However, its success depends on thoughtful planning and strategic implementation.

Integrating the *Tomorrow Ready* spontaneous volunteer training into your existing volunteer recruitment and management processes offers a wide range of benefits for your organisation and the community you serve. Not only can it help attract new volunteers and expand the skillset of your existing base, but it also offers a flexible pathway for those who may not be able to volunteer regularly yet want to be ready to help when disaster strikes.

Tomorrow Ready free online training allows you to upskill current volunteers, improve retention by offering meaningful development opportunities, and engage a more diverse group of supporters. By adopting this program, your organisation strengthens its ability to respond quickly and effectively in times of crisis, reduces the onboarding burden during emergencies, and builds stronger partnerships with local networks and emergency services.

Ultimately, it enhances your organisation's visibility, trust, and alignment with broader community resilience efforts, positioning you as a proactive and prepared leader in times of need.

Understanding spontaneous volunteering

What is a spontaneous volunteer?

Spontaneous volunteers, as defined by the Australian Red Cross, are individuals or groups who help during or after an event, unaffiliated with official emergency management systems, and may lack relevant training or experience.

Most often motivated by compassion, a sense of civic duty, or personal ties to the affected area, spontaneous volunteers often arrive quickly and unannounced, eager to help in any way they can. They come from diverse backgrounds and can bring varying levels of skills and experience, though most lack formal training in disaster response or emergency protocols.

A spontaneous volunteer responds to a spontaneous event or disaster, but that doesn't mean they can't begin preparations in advance – in fact we believe this is essential in creating better post-disaster outcomes.

With the Tomorrow Ready project, we aim to prepare volunteers ahead of a disaster, so they can still assist spontaneously, but with training and preparation that promotes individual and community safety. A volunteer with training, knowledge and confidence has a higher chance of volunteering in a safe and effective way that aligns with key emergency agencies, and advocates for the safety of vulnerable community members.

Why use spontaneous volunteers?

Organisations may turn to spontaneous volunteers before, during or after a disaster when the scale of need exceeds their existing capacity. In emergencies such as floods, bushfires, or cyclones, situations can escalate rapidly, requiring immediate manpower for tasks like donation management or clean-up efforts. Spontaneous volunteers can provide critical surge capacity.

Engaging spontaneous volunteers allows organisations to respond more quickly and broadly, especially in areas where formal resources are limited or delayed. With proper coordination and role assignment, these spontaneous volunteers can become an invaluable asset in the preparation, response and recovery phases.

Traditionally, spontaneous volunteers jump into disaster response and recovery unannounced, often with no prior training, and unaffiliated with any organisation. We commend these well-intentioned actions, but we also believe that trained spontaneous volunteers can be more effective and can also support community preparedness prior to a disaster too.

Ways a VIO can participate

Your organisation can engage with spontaneous volunteers in several ways:

- Externally recruit a pool of spontaneous volunteers to provide manpower for your organisation when needed.
- Upskill your existing volunteers so they can confidently step into the disaster space.
- Be a recruitment and training conduit for prospective spontaneous volunteers – then assign volunteers to other VIOs who can manage and deploy them when necessary.
- Work with emergency services to act as a funnel for surge volunteers at the time of a disaster to assist in recruiting, screening, onboarding and role matching.
- Assist other local community groups in training and preparing volunteers to build confidence and capacity.

Spontaneous volunteer role examples

Role	Readiness	Response	Recovery
Distributing emergency info/materials	✓	✓	✓
Supporting evacuation centres		✓	✓
Assisting with clean-up			✓
Packing emergency kits	✓		
Helping run drills or exercises	✓		
Donation sorting and distribution	✓	✓	✓
Community outreach & welfare checks	✓	✓	✓
Transporting supplies or people		✓	✓
Data entry/admin support/social media + coms	✓	✓	✓
Shelter/venue preparation	✓		
Providing emotional support		✓	✓
Minor home repairs/rebuilding			✓

Common challenges

While spontaneous volunteers can provide valuable manpower and local knowledge, their involvement also presents challenges.

Without coordination, volunteers may inadvertently hinder response efforts, create safety risks for themselves or their community, and may place additional strain on limited resources.

Unmanaged volunteer work can easily duplicate efforts from other response agencies or groups, highlighting the importance of well-planned roles and strong communication channels with relevant stakeholders such as emergency agencies, local government and other VIOs. Sending volunteers to work on a task that is already being addressed by another organisation is a waste of time and resources, so maintaining network relationships and working in alignment with official responses will reduce the chance of duplicated efforts.

Effective management is required to safely integrate spontaneous volunteers into the broader response and recovery efforts, to ensure their goodwill translates into meaningful and coordinated support.

Lessons learned

Tomorrow ready's approach to implementation is shaped by the lessons learnt from previous disaster events, pilot phases, and extensive consultation with VRCs, VIOs and community stakeholders.

We know that VRCs are best placed to lead this work because they already act as trusted hubs for volunteer engagement, bring strong local knowledge, and have the systems in place to recruit, screen, train and coordinate volunteers safely. Feedback from co-design workshops confirmed that VRC leadership reduces duplication, improves role clarity, and ensures alignment with national volunteer standards and compliance with checks, insurances and risk management.

The implementation guide will therefore:

- Position VRCs as local coordination hubs, responsible for screening, induction, training and linking volunteers with community organisations and emergency response needs.
- Embed phased training and induction, moving from personal preparedness and role clarity to skills development and ongoing engagement, ensuring volunteers are safe, supported, and effective.

Challenges during the 2017 and 2022 flood events

After the 2017 Lismore flood, spontaneous volunteer groups played a vital role in response and recovery. These efforts reflected strong community spirit, but also revealed challenges, including a lack of formal coordination, governance, and insurance clarity. Some volunteer actions overlapped with emergency services, and gaps in risk management created potential safety issues for both volunteers and residents.

Similar patterns emerged during the 2022 Northern Rivers floods. Many grass roots groups formed quickly and were largely volunteer-led, often without formal screening or risk protocols. In some cases, volunteers began flood recovery work, such as cleaning out homes, without resident consent. Despite good intentions, these actions contributed to further distress for individuals already facing significant trauma.

These experiences highlight the importance of strengthening community-based volunteer management, so informal and formal efforts can work together safely and effectively during future emergencies.

- Provide resources for VIOs, including information packs and training that clarify responsibilities, outline risk protocols, and support consistent practice across regions.
- Sustain engagement between disasters, with VRCs leading community activities that maintain volunteer readiness, strengthen social capital, and retain surge capacity.
- Implement consistent communication, using shared messages to build awareness of safe volunteering, clarify roles, and support both local and statewide coordination.
- Embed continuous improvement, with post-training surveys, evaluation, and communication between VRCs to share learning and refine tools over time.

This approach ensures that the program remains practical, scalable and locally relevant, while maintaining consistency across the statewide network.

Key features of Tomorrow Ready

Objectives

At its core, the aim of the Tomorrow Ready project is to provide a layer of support to communities in the event of a disaster. To achieve this, the goal is to equip volunteers with the support, knowledge and confidence they need to effectively and safely coordinate and mobilise as spontaneous volunteers when the need arises.

Furthermore, we believe volunteers do best when supported by an experienced VIO. Tomorrow Ready sets out to ensure that volunteers are affiliated or matched with an appropriate VIO ahead of time, so they can be covered by insurance, refer back for support, and can be acknowledged for their efforts post-disaster.

Expected outcomes

As we know, most disasters are sudden and unpredictable. Projects like Tomorrow Ready provide an essential layer of preparedness, equipping individuals who choose to become spontaneous volunteers with a clearer understanding of how the disaster response system operates. This includes insight into key agencies involved, the roles volunteers can play, and how to contribute safely and effectively with everyone's wellbeing in mind.

A core focus is ensuring that spontaneous volunteers align with existing emergency management protocols. This helps prevent duplication of efforts and avoids unintentionally disrupting official response and recovery operations. Our goal is to complement, not complicate, the coordinated efforts already in place.

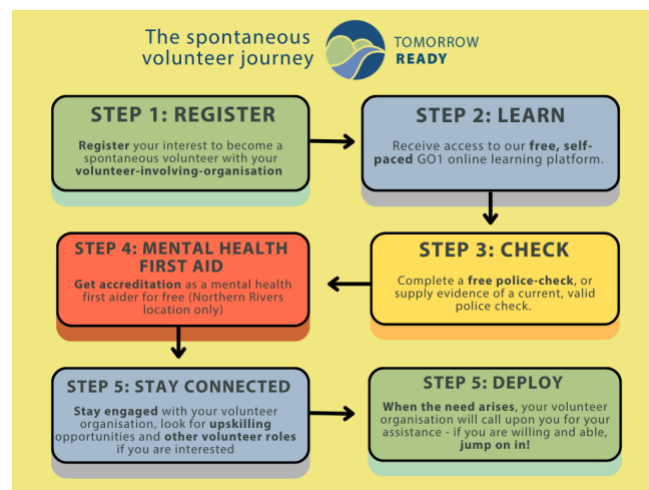
Beyond disaster response, we recognise the broader value of volunteering. Civic participation strengthens communities, builds social networks and capital, and fosters a deeper sense of belonging. We actively encourage individuals to get involved and be part of something bigger, contributing to the resilience and wellbeing of the communities they call home.

VIO support

The Tomorrow Ready project aims not only to support prospective, spontaneous volunteers in upskilling and confidence, but to enhance the capacity of VIOs and

groups to better manage and coordinate volunteers when disaster hits.

What does Tomorrow Ready include?



Online volunteer training

Our Tomorrow Ready online training package has been developed in response to recommendations made in previous iterations of our project and through consultation with VRCs and VIOs across NSW.

Our structured online training program is available free of charge and is hosted on the GO1 online learning platform. Participants can progress through the modules at their own pace, with a recommended completion timeframe of 30 days. The training is designed to take approximately 4–6 hours to complete, depending on the participant's level of engagement with optional external resources linked throughout the course.

Module 1	Introducing spontaneous volunteering and Tomorrow Ready
Module 2	Understanding NSW emergency management
Module 3	Mental health and self-care as a volunteer
Module 4	Leadership skills in disasters
Module 5	Using a trauma-informed approach in a disaster setting
Module 6	Cultural sensitivity – supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The course combines written content, video materials, short quizzes, and reflective thought experiments to engage learners while exploring key topics in disaster response.

More detailed information on our training modules can be found in the *Essential Training in a Disaster Response* manual.

Free police checks

Our Tomorrow Ready project provided free police checks for the first 50 volunteers who signed up and completed the online training. This proactive measure strengthened risk mitigation, built community trust, and ensured volunteer safety. Police checks are a vital safeguard for organisations and the community, helping to verify suitability for volunteering roles, meet duty of care obligations, and maintain the confidence of partner agencies and those receiving support.

Accredited Mental Health First Aid training

We delivered free accredited Mental Health First Aid training for volunteers, offering both the full two-day course and refresher courses for those already accredited. By providing in-person sessions in the Northern Rivers and online delivery, we extended access across a broader footprint. This not only increased the number of trained volunteers but also enhanced disaster readiness by equipping them with the skills to respond safely, support community wellbeing, and sustain their own resilience.

Volunteer-to-organisation affiliation

A core objective of the Tomorrow Ready project is that volunteers who register are affiliated with a VIO in advance. This results in a spontaneous volunteer who has access to organisational onboarding, appropriate insurance coverage, instructed deployment, support network post-disaster, continuing engagement and on-going upskilling opportunities.

Steps towards adopting Tomorrow Ready

Planning and preparation

Identify gaps – complement, don't complicate!

A crucial element of spontaneous volunteering is to avoid duplication of efforts where possible. A thorough needs-assessment in advance can identify what gaps exist in your community, and how your organisation can achieve most impact whilst working in alignment with existing state emergency plans.

You want to complement any existing emergency management protocols in place.

Consider things like:

- What are your communities' biggest risks? Think bushfire, flood, cyclone etc.
- What emergency plans already exist in your area?
- Where are your closest key emergency agencies situated?
- Are there community or resilience groups already established?
- Has your community experienced a disaster or emergency before? If so, how did that play out?
- Do community members feel prepared, or know where to get support before, during and after an emergency?
- What are your strengths as an organisation? Think about the services you offer, and what the community understand about you.

Define goals and objectives

Based on your needs-assessment, you can start to build your goals and objectives. Taking into consideration your organisation's mission and purpose, strengths and limitations, and the resources you may already have in place, determine what you can set out to achieve and what measurable steps you must take to accomplish this. Keep your goals broad

and your objectives specific, measurable and achievable.

Establish clear, measurable objectives for the volunteer program, such as the number of volunteers to recruit, hours of service, or specific outcomes to achieve. Consider planning for evaluations throughout the program to check in against your goals and ensure you can continuously improve your processes.

Establish a leader

Effective coordination of spontaneous volunteers relies on appointing a dedicated supervisor or team leader. This role is central to providing structure, maintaining oversight, and serving as the primary point of contact for volunteers. A well-appointed lead strengthens communication, fosters accountability, and safeguards the wellbeing of both volunteers and the community.

Importantly, the role extends beyond times of crisis. A designated supervisor ensures that volunteers are regularly debriefed, supported, and meaningfully engaged during periods of planning. This ongoing connection is essential to sustaining motivation, building trust, and improving long-term volunteer retention.

When selecting a lead, identify a staff member or experienced volunteer with strong leadership, organisational, and interpersonal skills. Their responsibilities should be clearly defined, and they should receive a thorough orientation to the spontaneous volunteer plan. To be effective, the lead must also be equipped with the necessary resources, support, and authority to make timely and informed decisions in rapidly changing circumstances.

Work within the wider emergency framework

Organisations operating in NSW must be familiar with the NSW Government Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN) and associated disaster and emergency response protocols. EMPLAN outlines the coordinated approach to managing emergencies and defines roles and responsibilities across agencies.

If an organisation intends to utilise spontaneous volunteers during emergencies, it is essential they understand who the key emergency management agencies are in their area and establish communication with them in advance. Integrating into the existing emergency management framework ensures a safe, efficient, and effective contribution, aligning with established coordination, command, and control structures during a crisis.

Build local community networks

CRNs and CRTs

Organisations looking to support emergency response efforts in NSW must clearly identify the unique skills, services, or resources they can offer, ensuring their contribution avoids duplication and complements the work of established emergency services. This includes active participation in Community Resilience Networks (CRNs) and Community-led Resilience Teams (CRTs), which are vital for maintaining situational awareness, ensuring streamlined communication, and fostering collaboration before, during, and after emergencies.

Where no such network exists locally, organisations may consider taking the initiative to establish a CRN to strengthen community preparedness and resilience. Proactive engagement in these structures not only enhances their ability to support effectively but also embeds them within the broader emergency management ecosystem.

Build connections for recruitment

Building strong local networks is key to effectively recruiting spontaneous volunteers before or after a disaster. In times of emergency, recruitment often needs to happen quickly and under pressure. Having pre-established relationships with other local organisations, community groups and emergency services allows for faster communication, wider outreach, and smoother coordination, that aligns with existing response and recovery efforts.

These networks can help:

- Identify potential volunteers quickly, bringing surge volunteers direct to you
- Share accurate, timely information across trusted channels
- Help you direct your volunteers to where they are needed most
- Provide referrals, support, or even training resources
- Ensure culturally appropriate engagement, especially in diverse communities

Getting started

As a VIO, you likely already have established procedures for recruiting and onboarding volunteers.

We recommend completing your usual onboarding process before referring a volunteer to Tomorrow Ready. This ensures the volunteer is aware of any other roles they may be taking on and feels connected

to the organisation that will ultimately support and manage them.

Volunteer journey

Following is our suggested pathway for the spontaneous volunteer journey:

Identify interested volunteers	Determine which volunteers are interested in upskilling to become a spontaneous volunteer and whether your organisation has the capacity to effectively take on a spontaneous volunteer project.
Contact us to enrol	The volunteer (or your organisation on their behalf) should contact us at hub@nrcg.org.au to register for the Tomorrow Ready training program.
Receive access to online training	<p>The online training system and resources have been developed on a licence-based platform, funded during the pilot project.</p> <p>Organisations should note that ongoing use of this platform and training materials will incur a cost once pilot funding concludes.</p>
Commence self-paced learning	The volunteer can begin the self-paced training. Please note that a maximum completion time may apply.
Complete police check	<p>On completion of the training, volunteers must either:</p> <p>Complete free police check through PharmacyID (arranged and covered by the program), or</p> <p>Provide evidence of a current, valid police check.</p> <p>Police checks help organisations mitigate risk, maintain community trust, and meet duty of care requirements.</p>
Training completion	After the police check is verified, the volunteer will be officially recognised as having completed the training and will be updated on any further related training on offer through Tomorrow Ready.

Consider additional training (recommended)	Organisations are encouraged to support volunteers in completing Accredited Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training. This may include the full two-day course or a one-day refresher for those already accredited. MHFA equips volunteers with skills to respond appropriately in stressful situations, support community wellbeing, and sustain their own resilience. In-person courses may be available locally, with online options extending access across a broader footprint.
Maintain engagement	VIO to maintain ongoing engagement with the volunteers, offer additional training when available, and keep them updated if an emergency situations develops. Volunteers may also express interest in exploring other roles beyond their spontaneous volunteer positions.
Deployment during disaster or emergency	When the need arises, you can contact your spontaneous volunteers to determine who is available for deployment and what their capacity is.



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Engagement and marketing

Spontaneous volunteer needs

What does a spontaneous volunteer need to effectively contribute within a disaster context?



Phased engagement approach

In partnership with Beacon Strategies, consultation with the VRCs suggested a stepwise, layered training model, beginning with the most fundamental preparedness need and building upwards:

- **Phase 1**
Personal preparedness
Support volunteers in creating personal and household disaster plans.
- **Phase 2**
Role clarity and process familiarity
Introduce disaster management structures, safe volunteering processes, and expectations.
- **Phase 3**
Skills development
Deliver training in conflict management, trauma-informed care, and rapid risk assessment.
- **Phase 4**
Connection and retention
Maintain engagement throughout the year with communication, refresher training, and community-building emphasised the need for social

connection and recognition in volunteer retention, as well as structured supports such as peer support, buddy systems and debriefing.

How VRC's effectively manage volunteers

- **Maintaining connection** – volunteers require continuity of engagement
- **Volunteer respite** – having a process to 'sub' other supports in, effectively managing people's capacity and avoiding burnout
- **Understanding our own capacity** – need to identify the current rate of volunteering and what might be the forecast, so that we can meet community demand
- **Effective screening processes** – a process to understand people's skills and interest areas, and match volunteering with those expertise
- **Local people** – working with people who are familiar with the local area
- **Targeted training** – ensuring people are trained with what they need to know to support effective disaster response ahead of an event.
- **Coordinating and maintaining connection with trained community volunteers in peacetime**

Challenges for VRCs in managing volunteers

- **Sector expectations and funding uncertainty** - tenuous funding risks creating a reliance on a service that can't be sustained.
- **Ongoing engagement** - keeping people connected and networked
- **Retention / Attrition** - people move out of the area or are aged out of volunteering.
- **Maintaining legislative requirements** - Liability and insurances, risk management
- **Volunteer expectations** - people expect that they will be assigned tasks to operate machinery or will be utilised more than they might be.
- **Volunteers being disaster impacted themselves** - cut off or isolated or have carer responsibilities that they need to tend to before they can provide supports.
- **Communication in disaster time** – telecommunications coverage impacted, messaging may not get through
- **People from out of area** – may not be familiar with the area, with which parts of the region are flood affected, safe escape routes, etc.
- **Community exhaustion & burnout**

Marketing strategy

Purpose

This strategy provides a consistent framework for communicating about the Tomorrow Ready spontaneous volunteer project. It is designed for broad adoption by organisations and project leads, ensuring messages are clear, consistent, and adaptable regardless of local timelines or delivery milestones.

Objectives

- **Awareness**
Build understanding of the Tomorrow Ready spontaneous volunteer project, its goals and its relevance to communities.
- **Engagement**
Attract and motivate VRCs, VIOs and potential spontaneous volunteers to participate in and test the pilot.
- **Visibility**
Showcase the value of project partners and demonstrate how collaboration strengthens community resilience.
- **Advocacy**
Highlight the importance of spontaneous volunteering in emergency preparedness and response and gather insights to inform future approaches beyond the pilot.

Key audiences

Primary:

- VRCs
- VIOs
- Potential spontaneous volunteers

Secondary:

- General public
- Emergency services and local government stakeholders
- Funders (eg NSW Reconstruction Authority)

Core messages

- Spontaneous volunteers are vital to community resilience during emergencies.
- The Tomorrow Ready project builds systems that enable safe, effective volunteering in times of crisis.

- VRCs play a central role in connecting communities and volunteers with emergency response needs.
- Participation in the Tomorrow Ready spontaneous volunteer project strengthens community preparedness, collaboration, and trust.

Branding and tone

- Use consistent logos, templates, and hashtags (such as #TomorrowReady #SSVP #CommunityResilience).
- Maintain a community-focused tone: inclusive, approachable, encouraging and practical.
- Ensure funders and partners are acknowledged in all outward-facing communications.

Diversity and cultural safety

All communications for the Tomorrow Ready project should actively reflect and respect the diversity of the communities we serve. This ensures that messaging is inclusive, accessible, and culturally safe for all audiences.

Principles:

- **Representation**
Use images, stories, and examples that reflect the diversity of communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups, people with disability, young people and older Australians.
- **Cultural safety**
Ensure that communications acknowledge and respect cultural identity, values and traditions. Avoid stereotypes and use respectful, strengths-based language.
- **Accessibility**
Use plain English, avoid jargon and ensure materials are available in accessible formats where possible (translated summaries, easy-read versions, captions on videos etc).
- **Partnership**
Engage with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, CALD community leaders, and disability advocates to co-develop or review messages where appropriate.
- **Inclusive tone**
Keep all messaging welcoming, community-focused, and strengths-based to encourage participation across diverse groups.

Practical guidance:

- Acknowledge country and traditional owners in major announcements, events and printed materials.
- Where possible, provide communications in multiple languages relevant to local communities.
- Include diversity and inclusion hashtags and themes in digital campaigns (such as #InclusiveVolunteering and #CulturalSafety).
- Test communications with a sample of diverse audiences or partner organisations to ensure clarity and inclusivity.

Implementation guidance

Local adaptation

- Each VRC or VIO can adapt strategies (social posts, posters, local media engagement) to suit their community context while maintaining consistent core messages.
- Diversity and cultural safety principles should guide adaptation, ensuring materials are inclusive, accessible, and culturally respectful.

Message consistency

- Always include the project purpose and the value of spontaneous volunteering in communications.
- Use consistent branding, logos, and acknowledgements to reinforce recognition and trust.

Frequency

- Aim for a minimum level of visibility across all communication channels:
 - At least one communication touchpoint every 2 months on digital/social media.
 - At least one formal media or partner communication per project cycle.

SMART objectives

When setting objectives, ensure they are SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-restricted. Try to include SMART objectives that address:

- **Awareness**
Achieve at least 3 media mentions per project cycle.
- **Engagement**
Increase volunteer registrations/EOIs by 15% year-on-year.
- **Visibility**
Generate engagement from identified VRCs and VIOs.
- **Advocacy**
Produce at least 2 case studies annually that demonstrate the impact of spontaneous volunteers.

Risk and issues management

- Maintain a crisis communications protocol with pre-approved statements and escalation pathways.
- Nominate a single spokesperson for external media to ensure consistency.
- Proactively monitor digital and traditional media to quickly address misinformation.
- Build trust by engaging early with local councils, emergency services, and community leaders.

Resource allocation

- **Project lead (accountable)**
Oversees communications strategy, approves external messaging.
- **Communications officer (responsible)**
Delivers social media, media releases, and project updates.
- **Partner organisations (consulted)**
Adapt and share messages within local networks.
- **Project team and stakeholders (informed)**
Receive updates and provide local insights.



Monitoring and evaluation

KPIs:

- Minimum 6 social media posts annually.
- Average 10% engagement rate on posts.
- Minimum 3 media mention per cycle.
- 15% year-on-year increase in volunteer sign-ups.

Reporting

- Quarterly updates provided to governance/management teams.
- Annual evaluation report summarising outcomes, lessons learned, and recommendations.

Digital accessibility compliance

- All communications must comply with WCAG 2.1 AA standards, including plain English, image alt text, captions, high-contrast design, and accessible formats.

Communication channels and strategies

Channel	Tactics & Examples	Responsible Parties	Frequency/Notes
Social media	<p>Strategic advertising through social media. This is effective in reaching beyond existing networks and engaging with people who have a desire to help their community both people already involved and not involved in more traditional forms of volunteering.</p> <p>Announcements, project updates, calls to action, stories from the field, volunteer testimonials, impact infographics.</p> <p>Platforms: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn.</p>	Project team / communications officer	Minimum bi-monthly posts, adaptable to local context.
Print & digital media	Media releases, posters, flyers, newsletters (sector and community).	Comms officer / partner orgs	Media release once per project cycle; promotional materials available on demand.
Partner networks	Encourage VRCs and VIOs to share project messages through their own channels. Provide core messaging points, branding requirements (logos, acknowledgements), and suggested communication themes. Partners adapt content for their communities, ensuring alignment with project objectives. Project team issues quarterly updates and guidance that partners can re-use.	Project team / partner orgs	Ongoing; quarterly updates provided to partners.
Video & multimedia	Short videos, volunteer spotlights, interviews with emergency services.	Project team / partners	Optional – as resources allow, especially during key campaigns.
Events & engagement	Presentations at sector forums, local government briefings, community events.	Project lead / partner reps	As opportunities arise; ensure project branding included.
Collaboration with key stakeholders	Develop a partnership with a well-known ambassador to 'launch' the program. This will help to generate a local media profile but also provided credibility for the program provided in appealing to community members.	Project team / communications officer	Optional – as resources allow, especially during key campaigns.



Essential training for disaster response

Introduction

This section provides an overview of our Tomorrow Ready training, which has been continuously developed and enhanced since the project began in 2019. This targeted spontaneous volunteer training is the product of consultation with community, emergency agencies and VIOs, who have witnessed first-hand the impacts and challenges of disaster, and the process of recovery thereafter.

This manual is designed to showcase what our training covers, and why we think it is important at individual volunteer and community levels. To access the full suite of training modules through our GO1 online learning platform, contact us at hub@nrcg.org.au.

Please note: the platform is licence-based, and while access was funded during the pilot project, ongoing use of the training resources will incur a cost.

Why training matters

Disasters create extraordinary and unpredictable circumstances, and traditionally spontaneous volunteers are the members of community who jump in to assist unannounced, often with no formal training and no affiliation to any organisation.

These volunteers bring vital manpower to the area and are oftentimes first on the scene before other agencies can begin work. But good intentions alone are not always enough – and we believe that a spontaneous volunteer can be given training in advance to make their spontaneous efforts more effective, safe and aligned when disaster occurs.

Tomorrow Ready training ensures volunteers have a basic understanding of the situation they may be entering, who they might be assisting, and the best way they can deliver support. The training provides a bridge between their motivation and the realities of working in a disaster or emergency. It helps volunteers to:

- **Stay safe**
Understand risks, procedures and boundaries.
- **Work well with others**
Fitting into existing teams or systems, and knowing how to communicate and deal with conflict.
- **Support communities**
Recognising trauma, showing empathy, and understanding why consent and respect is important.

- **Look after themselves**
Managing stress, feeling psychologically prepared, and knowing how to ask for help and support.

Volunteer training helps organisations and communities by:

- Providing upskilling opportunities to new and existing volunteers.
- Creating a level of consistency in disaster response where oftentimes there is none.
- Reducing the risk on organisations and vulnerable community members.
- Guiding spontaneous volunteers to work in alignment with official emergency responses.
- Building trust between community and local organisations.
- Demonstrating the need for screened and trained volunteers to be involved in disaster response and recovery.

Whilst we understand that not every spontaneous volunteer in future disaster scenarios will have had relevant training beforehand, Tomorrow Ready essential training aims to ensure that there are, at the very least, more prepared volunteers with leadership skills and understanding of trauma-informed care and self-care than before.

The intention is to build the confidence in enough volunteers, that during any future disaster, these volunteers may become the ones to step forward and help coordinate others, reinforcing good volunteer practices and disseminating their learnings as they go.

Challenges to the management of volunteers in a disaster context.



VRCs can anticipate difficulties in the expectation management of volunteers, reliability, communication, safety, community resilience and sustaining engagement across different phases of the disaster cycle.

Through the co-design workshops, VRCs highlighted potential challenges for VIOs in managing spontaneous volunteers during disasters:

1. Volunteer expectations

Many spontaneous volunteers arrive expecting to be given hands-on, high impact tasks (eg operating machinery, front line support). In reality, health and safety restrictions, insurance, and coordination needs mean their roles may be more limited. This can cause frustration, disappointment, or disengagement if expectations are not managed upfront.

2. Volunteers affected by disaster themselves

Some volunteers are also members of the impacted community. They may:

- Be cut off or isolated due to damaged infrastructure.
- Have carer or family responsibilities that take precedence.
- Experience stress or trauma themselves, limiting their capacity to help.

This creates unreliable availability and fluctuating levels of engagement.

3. Communication barriers

Disaster situations often involve telecommunication outages, patchy internet or damaged power infrastructure. This makes it difficult to:

- Contact and coordinate volunteers.
- Distribute accurate and timely information.
- Manage sudden changes in tasking or safety risks.

4. Out-of-area volunteers

Well intentioned volunteers who travel in from outside the region may lack

- Knowledge of local geography.
- Awareness of flooded or unsafe areas.
- Familiarity with safe routes, evacuation points, or community dynamics.

This can increase safety risks and require more resources for supervision and orientation.

5. Community exhaustion and burnout

After repeated or prolonged disasters, both the community and volunteers can suffer fatigue, compassion burnout or frustration. This impacts morale, retention and willingness to engage in long recovery phases.

6. Timing and volunteer surge management

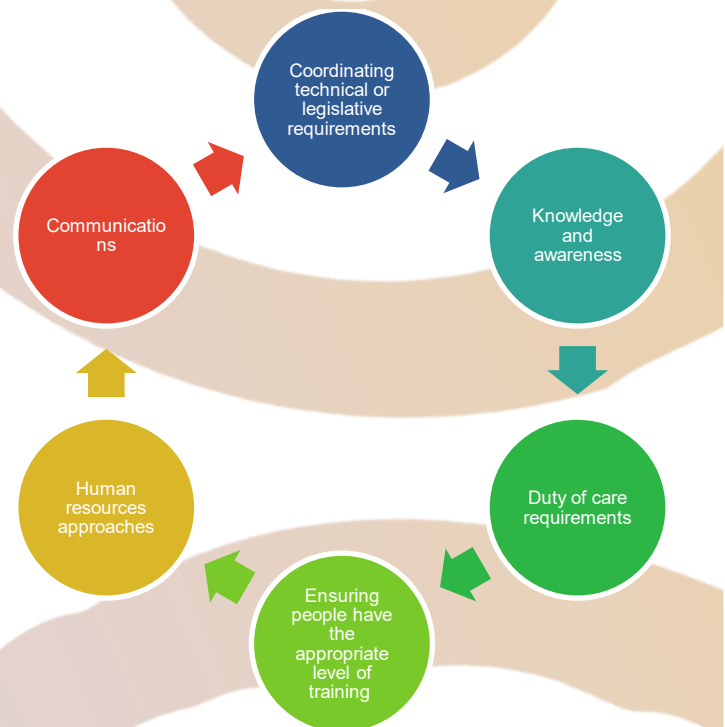
Spontaneous volunteer numbers typically:

- Spike early (often driven by media coverage).
- Decline sharply as recovery moves into longer-term rebuilding.

This creates challenges in absorbing and utilising large numbers of volunteers initially, followed by sustaining volunteer interest for ongoing needs when support is still critical.

Challenges for pop-ups

These findings were supported by the co-design workshop with VIOs, including pop-up disaster response community groups.



The main challenges identified by VIOs and pop-ups at the co-design workshops included compliance and safety obligations, protecting volunteers' wellbeing, managing and retaining people effectively, ensuring clear communications and bridging systemic gaps between agencies. Addressing these issues requires integrated systems, investment in volunteer support, and disaster-ready approaches to ensure volunteers can contribute safely and effectively.

1. Technical and legislative requirements

Volunteer management is increasingly shaped by regulatory and compliance obligations:

- **Risk management**
Organisations need systems to identify, assess and mitigate risks, both for volunteers and the community.
- **Insurances**
Coverage must extend to volunteers, but gaps often exist in liability and personal accident insurance.
- **Background checks**
Police checks and Working with Children Checks (WWCC) are essential but can be time-consuming, inconsistent across jurisdictions and difficult to monitor for renewals.
- **Knowledge gaps**
Not all agencies or volunteers are clear about what checks, policies, or registrations are required, creating compliance and safety risks.

2. Duty of care and safety

Agencies have a legal and ethical responsibility to protect both volunteers and those they serve:

- **Mental health and wellbeing**
Volunteers may face stress, trauma exposure or burnout without structured supports.
- **Trauma-informed approaches**
Especially in disaster response, untrained volunteers may unintentionally cause harm or themselves experience trauma.
- **Hazard exposure**
Volunteers may not fully understand risks such as unstable infrastructure, hazardous materials or environmental dangers.
- **Support services**
Access to EAP (Employee Assistance Programs) or equivalent counselling supports for volunteers is often lacking.
- **Training gaps**
Volunteers may not have appropriate training

in first aid, disaster response, WHS or trauma-informed practice.

3. Human resource challenges

Volunteer management requires the same sophistication as paid workforce management:

- **Coordination**
Matching large numbers of volunteers to roles efficiently is complex, particularly in emergencies.
- **Task Allocation:** Skills-based matching is often overlooked, leading to under-utilisation of volunteer expertise.
- **Unregistered Volunteers:** Some individuals resist formal management structures; finding safe, legal, and useful ways to engage them remains unresolved.

4. Communications and connectivity

Communication is both an operational necessity and a retention factor:

- **Messaging**
Volunteers need clear, consistent, and coordinated information before, during, and after deployment.
- **Connectivity**
Telecommunications can fail during disasters; organisations need backup systems (satellite phones, radios, offline check-in systems).
- **Accessibility**
Information needs to be accessible when power or internet is unavailable, particularly in rural or disaster-affected areas.

5. Cross-cutting gaps

- **Lack of centralised systems**
Fragmentation across agencies leads to duplication, inconsistent standards, and poor information sharing.
- **Equity and inclusion**
Barriers exist for volunteers from diverse backgrounds (eg language, disability, cultural safety).
- **Resource limitations**
Many agencies rely on overstretched budgets, limiting capacity for proper volunteer management frameworks.

Training overview

Module 1

Introducing spontaneous volunteering and Tomorrow Ready

What does it cover?

This module discusses the concept of spontaneous volunteering introduces Community Gateway and the Tomorrow Ready project. Volunteers will also understand more about why we started this initiative and the expertise we bring from our grass roots, community-focused organisation in Lismore NSW.

Key takeaways

- Why we need spontaneous volunteers
- How spontaneous volunteering differs from other types of volunteering
- How the Tomorrow Ready project works

Why does it matter?

Providing an overview of what a spontaneous volunteer (SV) is (and isn't) is important for setting the scene and helps prospective volunteers decide whether this is something they may wish to contribute to in the future. We also introduce our organisation, so that volunteers know who we are and what our experience is – providing reassurance and trust that our project is grounded in lived-experience and sound proficiency in volunteer management.

Module 2

Understanding NSW emergency management

What does it cover?

This module will arm volunteers with the knowledge to understand how a spontaneous volunteer fits into the wider emergency response, who the key agencies are, how they are involved and the general timeline of a natural disaster or emergency. The module contains text-based eLearning, videos and quizzes to engage volunteers and provide a basic level of understanding to help break down disaster and government jargon.

Key takeaways

- What SERM and EMPLAN mean

- Which key emergency agencies are involved
- What REMO, CRN and CRT mean
- How evacuation centres work
- Important apps you can download

Why does it matter?

From consultation with community and emergency agencies, we discovered that volunteers during the 2017 and 2022 flood events noticeably lacked understanding of disaster response protocols. Volunteers were not aware of the official state response to disaster and the delegation of key services in particular areas. Volunteers deserve to have a foundational understanding of these processes, particularly if they are to work in alignment with them. Providing context around CRNs and CRTs also encourages volunteers to be inquisitive within their own communities, to identify who is doing what, and where further opportunities for involvement may be.

Module 3

Volunteer mental health and self-care

What does it cover?

This module focuses on recognising the mental health challenges that can arise in high-stress situations and provides practical strategies for volunteer self-care. With videos from our qualified counsellor Kimberley Smith, this module provides detail on helper fatigue, burnout and vicarious trauma, and gives informed advice on how to equip yourself with a self-care guide.

Key takeaways

- What mental health is, and how it's affected by a disaster
- Why volunteers are at risk
- What self-care means
- How to prepare mentally for challenges ahead
- Self-care practices you can implement

Why does it matter?

Self-care always matters, and particularly so for volunteers assisting in disaster situations. Self-managed volunteers like those who act spontaneously in the event of a disaster are much more likely to lack any debriefing or mental health support post-disaster, which is one reason why Tomorrow Ready advocates for volunteers to work under supervision of an experienced VIO. Providing volunteers with an understanding of the psychological impacts of recovery elevates their capacity to recognise stress

within themselves and their fellow volunteers and gives them a guide to implement self-care.

Module 4

Leadership skills in a disaster

What does it cover?

This module provides volunteers with a foundation in leadership skills to harness during and after a disaster or emergency. Effective and moral leadership is a crucial tool they can tap in to during a crisis.

Strong leadership skills have the power to create direction, motivation and empower decision-making during a chaotic and emotionally-taxing situation.

Key takeaways

- What leadership is and why it's different during a disaster
- Leadership techniques and ethical decision making
- Why transformational leadership is effective
- Communicating in crisis
- Conflict resolution and burnout

Why does it matter?

When we consulted with local community and key agencies after the 2017 and 2022 Northern Rivers flood events, leadership skills were identified as lacking in much of the spontaneous volunteer population. Since spontaneous volunteers are traditionally either self-managed or assisting under the supervision of organisations with limited volunteer-management competency, leadership skills are crucial in creating order in a chaotic situation. Volunteers with enhanced leadership confidence can help coordinate other volunteers and tasks effectively, boosting morale, navigating conflict and providing points of strength in a challenging situation.

Module 5

Using a trauma-informed approach during a disaster

What does it cover?

This module provides volunteers with an understanding of what trauma-informed care means, how they can apply it as a volunteer, and why this

approach genuinely benefits the community they may be assisting with.

Our qualified trauma counsellor Sharmaine Keogh provides videos on identifying trauma and assisting community using trauma-informed principles. The module also contains scenarios to get volunteers applying newly learned concepts and provides additional resources to empower volunteers in continuation of their learning.

Key takeaways

- The meaning of trauma-informed care
- A counsellor's view of trauma-informed principles
- How it applies in 'the field'
- How to respect boundaries and choice

Why does it matter?

As a neighbourhood centre assisting disadvantaged and vulnerable community for 50 years, we see the impact of trauma daily. Add a natural disaster into the mix, and trauma-informed care becomes non-negotiable when providing any form of support to affected individuals and families. Volunteers with these skills will build trust with community easier, learn to identify and prioritise those who show signs of declining mental health, and to understand how best to refer these people back into any existing support networks they are part of.

Following the devastating 2022 floods, accounts emerged of well-intentioned volunteers entering homes without permission. In some cases, volunteers began 'mucking and gutting' properties while residents remained in evacuation centres. For many, returning home to find their belongings already discarded on the roadside compounded the distress and trauma they were experiencing.

This module addresses these issues directly, providing clear guidance on the importance of consent, respecting personal boundaries, and upholding individual choice when supporting disaster-affected communities. By embedding these principles, volunteers can ensure their assistance is both compassionate and appropriate, fostering trust and dignity during recovery.

Module 6

Cultural sensitivity – supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

What does it cover?

This module provides guidance, advice, anecdotes, yarns and real-world examples from respected Aboriginal elders, about how to respectfully and sensitively engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Key takeaways

- Understanding intergenerational disadvantage and trauma
- How to demonstrate respect

Why does it matter?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are recognized as the world's oldest continuous living cultures, with evidence showing Indigenous Australians have lived on the continent for at least 60,000 to 65,000 years, predating other civilizations. This rich heritage is maintained through deep connections to land, traditions, and knowledge passed down through countless generations. Aboriginal people are over-represented in the statistics of people impacted by disaster in NSW.

The regions that were officially declared areas of nature disaster in NSW in 2023/2024 vshow that 36,509 (4.2%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were directly impacted by the floods

The ABS report in regional areas this figure jumps to 6.2%. In the Northern Rivers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities were severely impacted by the floods of 2022 in Lismore, Ballina, Wardell, Coraki, Cabbage Tree Island, Box Ridge and Gundurimba.



Volunteer management in a disaster setting

Introduction

This section, developed by Community Gateway, provides VIOs with detailed best-practice guidance on effectively managing volunteers in a disaster setting.

Best practice framework

All volunteers have certain rights and responsibilities, regardless of their role, be it formal, informal or spontaneous.

The Centre for Volunteering, the peak body for volunteering in NSW, outlines the following rights that all volunteers should be guaranteed:

- A safe and healthy working environment, with appropriate tools and equipment to perform their duties.
- Coverage under personal accident insurance (as an alternative to workers' compensation) and public liability insurance.
- Meaningful and rewarding tasks that align with their interests and are limited to no more than 16 hours per week.
- Clear understanding of the organisation's purpose, including its code of conduct and expectations for their role.
- Opportunities to be heard and to offer suggestions
- Access to grievance procedures and protection under anti-discrimination legislation.

Conversely, VIOs have the right to expect the following from their volunteers:

- A level of commitment and effort comparable to that of paid staff.
- Willingness to provide current police checks and references when requested.
- Participation in any required training.
- Adherence to work health and safety rules.
- Openness to constructive feedback delivered respectfully and diplomatically.
- Acceptance that volunteers may be released in a fair and procedurally appropriate manner.

National standards for volunteer involvement

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering. It has refreshed the *National Standards for Volunteer Involvement* in 2023 to provide a best practice framework that guides volunteer involvement.

This framework outlines 8 key standards that promote the best volunteer experience.

Volunteering Australia understand that not all VIOs have capacity to adopt each one of these standards, but there is value in taking each one into consideration when adopting a spontaneous volunteer project.

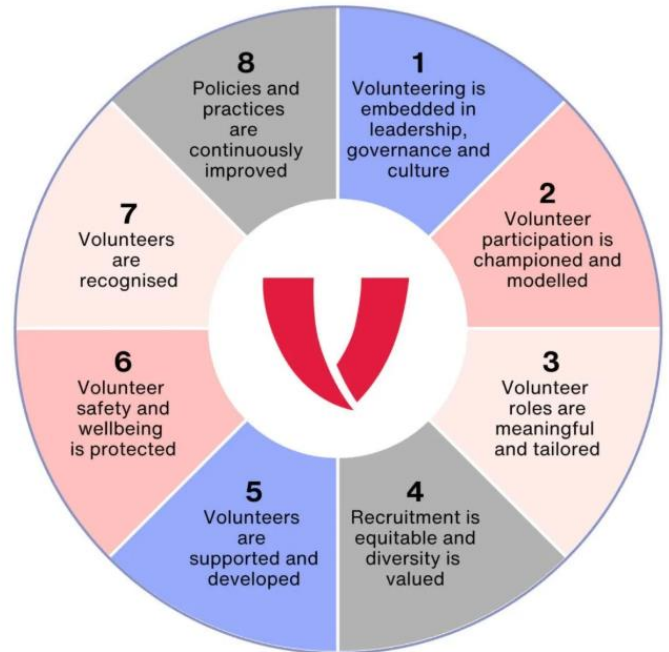


Image courtesy of Volunteering Australia.

Recruitment

Recruiting volunteers can be challenging at the best of times, especially as volunteer numbers have declined generally since COVID-19, as reported by Volunteering Australia in 2022. On the other hand, the flexibility and non-committal nature of informal and spontaneous volunteering has seen an increase; people are willing to step in and help their community in a less structured manner. Spontaneous volunteering has gained significant attention in the media over the last few years, and the increase in climate-related disasters is a likely driver for more interest in this type of volunteering.

Volunteer interest often spikes following natural disasters or emergencies, as community members feel a strong desire to help with response and recovery efforts. However, this initial enthusiasm tends to diminish over time.

Spontaneous volunteer recruitment pathways

Organisations can engage spontaneous volunteers in several ways:

- Upskilling an existing volunteer base.
- Recruiting externally in advance.
- Recruiting during or after a disaster.

Each approach offers unique advantages, considerations, and practical steps for success.

Upskilling your existing volunteer base

Volunteers already connected to your organisation are often the most accessible and reliable group to engage with.

Key advantages

- Their skills and strengths are already known, and a foundation of trust is established.
- Background checks are usually complete.
- They are easier to contact and mobilise quickly.
- They already understand your organisation's values, mission, and processes.
- Insurance coverage is often already in place.
- Volunteers value opportunities to upskill and appreciate feeling recognised and invested in.

Key considerations

- Many may already have significant commitments.
- Some may feel hesitant stepping into unpredictable disaster-response roles.

Action steps

- Develop a plan outlining which disaster roles volunteers could take on, and who would manage them.
- Survey volunteers to assess their interest in spontaneous volunteering.
- Establish a clear communication channel for rapid activation (eg SMS alerts, volunteer portals).
- Promote opportunities through internal channels such as posters, emails, or information sessions.

Recruiting externally in advance

Building a pre-registered pool of potential spontaneous volunteers from the wider community strengthens surge capacity during future emergencies.

Key advantages

- Provides more time to screen, train, and prepare volunteers.
- Builds awareness of disaster preparedness within the community.
- Expands your volunteer base, bringing in diverse skills and experiences.
- Raises the profile of your organisation, increasing engagement with everyday activities.

Key considerations

- Retaining volunteers between training and the next disaster requires ongoing engagement.
- More resources are needed upfront for screening and training, but long-term capacity is greatly improved.

Action steps

- Run recruitment campaigns with a preparedness or resilience theme.
- Establish a simple, user-friendly registration system (online forms, community sign-ups).
- Provide induction sessions and relevant training (eg Tomorrow Ready training modules).
- Develop clear role descriptions and expectations.
- Confirm appropriate insurance coverage for spontaneous volunteers.
- Consider acting as a conduit for other organisations or agencies, referring pre-screened volunteers where surge capacity is most needed.

Advertising channels

- Online platforms such as Seek Volunteer, Jora, or Go Volunteer.
- A dedicated volunteer page on your website with role descriptions and registration forms.
- Social media (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok) tailored to target demographics.
- Local Facebook groups for broad community reach.
- Print media, radio, posters, and flyers in community hubs.

Recruiting during or after a disaster

When disaster strikes, time is limited and demand is high. Spontaneous volunteers may arrive unannounced, eager to help in any capacity. Processes must therefore be agile, efficient, and minimally resource dependent. This ability to quickly expand capacity is often called surge capacity.

Key advantages

- Little or no recruitment effort required; volunteers often present themselves.
- Provides relief to emergency services overwhelmed with volunteer inquiries.
- Volunteer motivation and community spirit are at their peak.

Key considerations

- Limited opportunity for screening and training.
- Insurance, safety, and legal issues must be resolved quickly.
- Emotional readiness of volunteers will vary widely.

Action steps

- Confirm insurance coverage and amend policies as required.
- Set up a visible and centralised registration point (physical or online).
- Use rapid screening and task-matching processes (eg quick ID checks, background questions).
- Provide a concise orientation (eg 10 minute briefing or buddy system).
- Assign low risk, entry level roles such as logistics, donation distribution, or basic admin support.
- Keep detailed records of volunteer participation for follow-up, recognition and future engagement.

Advertising channels

- In most cases, little advertising is required as volunteers will come directly to you.
- If internet access is available, local Facebook groups are effective for wide reach.
- If communications are disrupted, rely on posters, outdoor signage, word of mouth or radio.
- Websites can also be used to embed fast onboarding processes that capture volunteer details and skills.

Onboarding

Most organisations already have established onboarding systems that include interviews, reference checks, screening, and inductions. While these processes remain important, they should be tailored to suit the context of spontaneous volunteering.

In preparedness planning

When recruiting volunteers in advance, consider simplifying your existing system. Focus on essential screening checks, deliver a short induction and provide only the most relevant policies. This avoids overwhelming volunteers with excessive paperwork while still ensuring safety and accountability. A streamlined approach makes it more likely that volunteers will stay engaged and complete the process.

During or after a disaster

Onboarding needs to be rapid, flexible and resource efficient. Volunteers may arrive without notice, eager to help. Consider using tools such as QR codes linked to pre-made registration forms, which capture core details (eg contact information, skills, next-of-kin, and agreement to key policies). Keep orientations brief, a short group briefing or buddy system can be effective, while still communicating safety requirements and organisational expectations.

Document your procedures

Mapping out the onboarding process as a simple flowchart helps ensure consistency, clarity and speed. This should outline each stage, from first contact through to deployment. Having this ready means your organisation can respond confidently when volunteers arrive.

Nominate a coordinator

Identifying a spontaneous volunteer coordinator in advance ensures clear accountability and smoother operations. This person becomes the key point of contact for volunteers, helping to answer questions, monitor wellbeing, and provide support throughout their involvement.

Test your system

Run a practice scenario by walking through the onboarding journey of an imaginary volunteer. Consider how the volunteer might feel at each stage. Is the process clear and simple? Are there points where the volunteer may disengage? Does your system capture enough essential information without creating barriers to participation?

By preparing and simplifying your onboarding processes, organisations can balance the need for safety and governance with the realities of spontaneous volunteering in a crisis situation.

Role design and safety

Establishing meaningful and low risk roles for spontaneous volunteers not only enhances motivation

Example role for a donation coordinator:

Role name	Spontaneous Volunteer Donation Coordinator
Location	Newport Neighbourhood Centre
Time commitment	Approximately 4 hours per day
Reporting to	Volunteer manager
Role overview	Assist with organising and distributing donated food and basic necessities to support community members in need during periods of increased demand (eg post-disaster)
Key responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive, sort, and organise food donations • Distribute donations respectfully and efficiently • Follow supervisor instructions • Adhere to Workplace Health and Safety guidelines • Work well within a team and show respectful behaviour • Practice trauma-informed care principles when working with community members • Prioritise personal and community safety
Requirements	<p>You will be required to read, understand and work in alignment with our organisation's <i>code of conduct</i> policy, <i>privacy and confidentiality</i> policy and our <i>mission and values</i> statement.</p> <p>You will be required to undergo a police check before commencing.</p> <p>Volunteers will receive basic training and may also be required to complete additional role-specific modules, such as safe manual handling.</p>
Duration	<p>Role will have no fixed start or end date and will continue whilst there is demand.</p> <p>You are not required to work hours that do not suit you; however, we ask that you demonstrate reliability and commitment to the hours you agree to volunteer.</p>

and ensures safety, but it also aligns with Standard 3 in the *National Standards for Volunteer Involvement*. This standard emphasises the importance of designing volunteer roles that are purposeful and tailored to individual needs and capacities.

Clear roles and expectations

Having a clear role description prepared in advance allows potential volunteers to effectively 'self-screen'. This means they can understand what the role involves and decide for themselves whether it is a good fit before applying.

Clear role descriptions help set expectations from the beginning and reduce the risk of investing time in onboarding and training volunteers who may later realise the role is not what they expected

Skills matrix

Determining the skillset of your volunteers is a valuable step during onboarding, since it uncovers the rich life experiences within your pool of volunteers. For spontaneous volunteering in particular, this step will allow you to identify in advance the best roles to suit each person and will save valuable time when you are in the throes of disaster.

Conduct brief skills matrix during onboarding to capture volunteer strengths, trades and areas of expertise. Identifying skills not only makes role-matching easier, but it also translates into increased volunteer satisfaction in the long term, since volunteers feel rewarded when their strengths, skills and qualifications are acknowledged and utilised.

If a volunteer has had experience working with vulnerable people before and enjoys socialising, they might be a good match for a client-supporting role. If a volunteer has experience in the trades, or describes themselves as fit and strong, they might enjoy working in a hands-on role or helping to repair places or items.

Screening checks

Spontaneous volunteers have often acted independently to support their communities, without formal connections to any organisation. Sometimes, they join groups that lack the resources to carry out screening checks. As a consequence, most spontaneous volunteers historically have not been formally screened.

While we commend and deeply appreciate the goodwill of those who act on their own initiative during times of crisis, we strongly advocate for police checks, particularly when spontaneous volunteers are recruited in advance.

When recruitment is planned in advance, police checks can and should be completed beforehand. Taking this simple, proactive step when time permits will reduce risks and ensure a safer, more accountable environment for both volunteers and the organisation.

There are several reasons why we advocate for police checks where possible:

- **Protection of vulnerable community members**
Many spontaneous volunteer roles involve contact with vulnerable individuals, such as children, the elderly or people affected by trauma. Police check help ensure that volunteers are suitable for these interactions and do not pose a risk.

- **Maintaining community trust**
Screening helps reassure the public, staff, and other volunteers that your organisation takes safety and accountability seriously. This is particularly important in emergency or crisis situations where emotions and stress levels may be high.
- **Minimising organisational risk**
Unscreened volunteers can pose legal, reputational and operational risks. Police checks form part of your duty of care.
- **Supports a safe work environment**
Knowing that all volunteers have been appropriately screened contributes to a culture of safety and professionalism, helping teams work more confidently together.

There are several ways to conduct police checks. Here are some suggestions, please use at your own discretion:

- **Fastest**
Online submission with electronic ID verification through websites such as nationalcrimecheck.com.au, checked.com.au, or intercheck.com.au.
- **Fast**
Online application combined with in-person identity verification, for example via pharmacyid.com.au.
- **Slower**
In-person application at a Post Office or NSW Police station

Volunteer management system or database

A volunteer management system for collecting and maintaining volunteer information is essential at the best of times, and particularly so for spontaneous volunteers. If your organisation does not currently have one, it is strongly recommended to consider options that will streamline volunteer recruitment, training and coordination.

Volunteer management systems allow organisations to securely track, monitor and progress background checks, compliance documentation and recruitment processes. These systems protect volunteer privacy through encrypted platforms while also streamlining workflow for staff. Choosing a system that can function offline is particularly valuable during natural disasters, where power outages and disrupted communications are common.

Other benefits include:

- Tracking volunteer hours
- Skills matrix to role match easier
- Consistent and centralised communications to volunteers
- Allocate volunteers based on proximity to impacted areas
- Data and report generation
- Scalability to meet surge capacity
- Automation to send digital copies of policies for volunteers to sign

We recommend reviewing any existing in-house systems and their capacity for redevelopment, before considering new platforms which may incur additional costs.

Data to capture

A good volunteer management system should record essential details such as name, contact information, address and emergency contacts. Where possible it is also valuable to capture additional information such as availability, skills, strengths and their accessible location if disaster strikes. This helps identify whether a volunteer may be in a high risk or restricted area during floods or bushfires, and whether they could instead support remotely through tasks like phone calls, administration, or social media.

Data management

In accordance with privacy legislation, you should only

Real experiences in Australia:

- Rural Fire Service (NSW) members after the 2019–20 fires reported mental fatigue and emotional overload. Some continued to relive scenes weeks later.
- Red Cross volunteers in flood-hit Queensland described "invisible trauma" from listening to heartbreaking stories day after day.
- Spontaneous volunteers in Lismore often helped neighbours clean out destroyed homes while facing their own displacement.

use collected information for volunteer coordination purposes, and storage of data must comply with data management policies and procedures.

Organisational policies and procedures

Having a set of relevant policies and procedures in advance of any volunteer role is ideal, since you will be able to provide clarity to volunteers on expectations, behavioural standards, and information on WHS and grievance procedures.

When taking on spontaneous volunteers, whether in advance or after a disaster, you could consider refining your policies and procedures to suit the nature of their proposed roles.

Take into account the time constraints you may face in the event of a disaster, and that volunteers may be expecting to jump into action right away; you want to ensure you cover expectations clearly but also not to overwhelm people with administrative tasks such as excessive form-filling.

Here are some important policies and procedures that relate to volunteering which you may already have established. It is recommended to always provide these to all volunteers, but you could provide more concise versions for emergency situations:

You can get access to free templates for numerous documents including policies and procedures through the knowledge base created by Volunteering Australia: volunteering.freshdesk.com/support/home/

Document	Purpose / importance	Key aspects to include
Role description	Clarifies volunteer duties and expectations	Tasks, time commitment, reporting line, skills needed
Code of conduct	Sets standards for behaviour and interaction	Respect, confidentiality, safety, ethics
Volunteer agreement or liability waiver	Formalises the relationship between volunteer and organisation	Commitment, responsibilities, compliance with policies, awareness of risks involved
Work health and safety	Provides clear instructions on personal and team safety in the workplace	General WHS rules, manual handling, PPE and safety gear
Grievance procedure	Outlines how volunteers can raise concerns or complaints	Reporting channels, confidentiality, resolution process

Work health and safety

Any organisation that involves volunteers and paid workers has a duty of care to provide a safe working environment for its employees and volunteers. The nature of disasters and spontaneous volunteering is ever evolving and at times chaotic, but WHS should not be overlooked during these times.

For spontaneous volunteers, review your current WHS induction process and think about making a simplified version that covers the fundamentals of their role, which briefs them on their duty of care to identify and report hazards and your duty of care to do the same. Think about the types of roles volunteers might have, and address WHS concerns in your briefing, such as safe manual handling, using personal protective equipment (PPE) and managing fatigue and self-care.

Managing risk

Conduct a risk assessment to identify any risks and hazards that volunteers might face, and what your organisation will do to mitigate them. Identifying in advance the types of roles your volunteers can do means you can create a preliminary risk assessment, speeding up your processes amid an emergency.

Having a liability waiver as part of your volunteer agreement informs volunteers of the risks involved in their volunteer activities and asks them to accept responsibility for any potential injuries or losses. This does not eliminate the need for insurances however and should be used in conjunction with appropriate insurance coverage.

Legal and logistics

Insurances

It is recommended that organisations review their insurance coverage early to ensure volunteers and activities are appropriately protected.

Volunteers are not automatically protected under an organisation's standard insurance policies. It is the organisation's responsibility ensure appropriate volunteer insurance is in place.

Volunteers have the right to know whether the work they undertake is covered by insurance or not. Organisations should clearly communicate their insurance arrangements, whether cover is provided or not, from the outset.

Workers' compensation does not apply to volunteers since they are not considered 'workers' under the Workers Compensation Act 1987 (NSW). There are key exceptions to this, notably for volunteers in state government agencies such as the NSW SES, NSW RFS and Marine Rescue NSW who may be entitled to compensation.

Types of insurances available for organisations:

- Voluntary workers' personal accident insurance – protects volunteers from injuries while performing their duties.
- Public liability insurance – protects the organisation from liability for injuries or property damage caused by its activities.
- Property insurance – covers buildings, contents, and other assets against loss or damage.

- Professional indemnity – if volunteers are providing expert advice or services.

Good Samaritan law

Under the NSW Good Samaritan Law (Civil Liability Act 2002) individuals who voluntarily assist somebody in an emergency in good faith do not incur any personal civil liability, even if they inadvertently cause further injury to the person they are assisting. This law is designed to encourage members of the public to provide aid without fear of legal repercussions and covers individuals for acts or omission of action during an emergency.

Protection applies as long as action is reasonable, not reckless, and unpaid. However, protection does not apply if the good Samaritan's own negligence caused the initial injury, if the good Samaritan is intoxicated, or if the good Samaritan is fraudulently impersonating a professional first responder.

While this legislation provides important protection for individuals, organisations should not rely solely on the Good Samaritan Law. It is strongly recommended that organisations secure appropriate volunteer insurance to ensure both volunteers and those they assist are adequately protected.

Supplies and logistics

Depending on what your organisation aims to achieve in disaster response and recovery, you will need to plan ahead for any supplies that will support your spontaneous volunteer efforts. If your volunteers will be working in clean-up for example, you may want to consider having PPE on hand.

ID badges or lanyards are an effective way to identify your volunteers and for the community to identify them – a crucial element when gaining trust with traumatised community members. You can make these in advance, with space to write the volunteer's name.

You could also consider a colour-coding system which identifies which role, or skills that a volunteer has. For example, blue lanyards could indicate someone who is confident in heavy lifting and sorting donations, yellow lanyards for those comfortable working front line with community and red for those preferring roles behind the scenes in administration.

Costing

Estimation of costs required in implementing a spontaneous volunteer program for a 5-year period is listed below. The minimal budget includes a Coordinator, and the ideal budget would include a coordinator and training project officer. The estimated budget includes the cost of the GO1 platform subscription where existing Tomorrow ready training would be made available. It also incorporates costs for a CRM or HRM for the creation of a volunteer database.

Spontaneous Volunteer - Maximum budget		
	1 Yr	5 Yrs
Wages	105,341	526,703
Wages	94,789	473,944
Wage on costs	33,021	165,107
Advertising and promotion	6,000	30,000
Materials design	8,000	40,000
Management Fee	37,440	187,200
Go 1 training platform	6,000	30,000
Insurance	7,800	39,000
Software	15,600	78,000
Business planning and reporting	7,800	39,000
Tenancy and property supplies	9,360	46,800
Overheads and evaluation	6,000	15,000
Workshops and room hire	12,000	60,000
Computer equipment	6,000	6,000
Telephone and internet	2,400	12,000
Motor vehicle and on costs	18,000	90,000
Travel and accommodation	16,000	80,000
	391,551	1,918,753

Spontaneous Volunteer - Minimum budget		
	1 Yr	5 Yrs
Wages	105,341	526,703
Wage on costs	17,381	86,906
Advertising and promotion	3,000	15,000
Materials and design	3,000	15,000
Management Fee	20,400	102,000
Go 1 training platform	6,000	30,000
Overheads and evaluation	6,000	15,000
Workshops and room hire	6,000	30,000
Computer equipment	3,000	3,000
Telephone and internet	1,200	6,000
Motor vehicle and on costs	12,000	60,000
Travel and accommodation	8,000	40,000
	191,322	929,609

Management and support

Volunteer supervisors

Have an established supervisor ready to coordinate spontaneous volunteers. A supervisor will become the main point of contact for volunteers and will provide support and guidance. Volunteers who feel supported are more likely to continue volunteering. It is imperative that volunteer well-being is monitored, successes are celebrated and that concerns can be raised and heard.

Assign clear supervision lines, and ensure your chosen supervisor has all the aspects of a good leader: critical thinker, leadership skills, compassionate, with strong conflict resolution and communication skills.

Retention and recognition

Recruiting and training volunteers is costly in terms of time and resources. It is vital to try and retain your volunteers so that you can allocate your time and resources to other important activities.

Volunteering Australia created an evidence-based strategy for retaining volunteers in 2022, and identified the following aspects that are necessary to retain volunteers effectively:

- Support from paid staff, supervisors or peers
- Volunteer autonomy
- Roles where volunteers can contribute productively
- Managing burnout

While disaster scenarios are often spontaneous and unpredictable, best practice volunteer management should remain the standard. With effective supervision, volunteers can be matched to roles that feel meaningful, offered some autonomy in how they contribute and provided with support when challenges arise. This not only enhances the volunteer experience but also strengthens community outcomes.

Recognition is central to retention. Spontaneous volunteers, particularly those not affiliated with an organisation, often miss out on acknowledgment for their efforts. Yet recognition has a powerful impact: it boosts morale, demonstrates that their contributions are valued and significantly increases the likelihood that they will continue to engage in the future.

Recognition can be simple and sincere, such as thanking volunteers at the end of a shift. It can also be more structured, through social events, certificates of appreciation or highlighting their contributions on social media and community notice boards. Providing opportunities for upskilling or offering additional responsibilities can also show appreciation while deepening their engagement. For outstanding contributions, consider formal recognition such as nominating volunteers for the NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards, which celebrate the dedication of our state's volunteering community.

Importantly, retention efforts should extend beyond the immediate disaster context. Volunteers are the backbone of many charities and community organisations, and those who have a positive experience during a disaster response may wish to remain involved in other capacities. By positioning your organisation as a supportive and rewarding place to volunteer, you can encourage spontaneous volunteers to transition into ongoing roles, strengthening the broader volunteer sector and fostering civic engagement.

Mental health

Volunteering during or after a disaster is rewarding, but it can also be emotionally draining and mentally taxing. Volunteers are often exposed to distressing scenes, high pressure environments and people in deep emotional pain. Many also live in the affected communities themselves, facing their own losses while helping others. These pressures highlight the importance of organisational responsibility in safeguarding volunteer mental health.

Number 5 and 6 of The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement both pertain to well-being; volunteers should equally be supported and have their well-being monitored and protected. A good volunteer coordinator should be able to recognise the emotional demands of volunteer roles and ensure nobody is left to cope alone.

Common experiences for volunteers may include:

- Emotional exhaustion (known as burnout, or 'helper fatigue')
- Sleep issues
- Feelings of helplessness or guilt (especially if lives or properties were lost)
- Vicarious trauma (known as secondary trauma) from hearing and witnessing others' traumatic experiences

Exposure to repeated trauma can also lead to compassion fatigue or burnout, making it essential for organisations to provide structured debriefing, access to counselling or peer support and training in trauma-informed practice.

An additional consideration, particularly for regions that face consecutive or overlapping disasters, is the mental health impact from multiple exposures. Research highlights that repeated exposure to disaster can contribute to acute stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression (Li & Leppold, 2025). With disasters becoming more frequent and severe, spontaneous volunteers are at heightened risk of these effects.

Regular check-ins with volunteers provide an opportunity not only to monitor task progress but also identify signs of stress, fatigue or vicarious trauma. Post-event debriefs help volunteers process their experiences and “decompress” after what may have been an extraordinarily challenging period. Group debriefs can also strengthen the social connections built between volunteers during response and recovery.

Some organisations may consider extending their Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to volunteers, providing access to free, short-term confidential counselling. In addition, organisations should ensure volunteers are aware of accessible mental health services, such as:

- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636
- 13YARN 13 92 76
- Local GP, psychologist or counsellor

Volunteer self-care

Volunteer coordinators play a key role in encouraging self-care by actively promoting its benefits and modelling good practices. Coordinators should remind volunteers to prioritise their physical health by taking regular breaks, staying hydrated and eating balanced meals where possible.

Morning group huddles can be an effective way to share self-care tips, reinforce the duty of care volunteers have to both them and one another, and create space for positivity. Bringing moments of laughter and connection into these gatherings can help sustain morale and resilience during challenging times.

Resources

- <https://nrcg.org.au/tomorrow-ready/>
Tomorrow Ready web page on the Community Gateway website.
- <https://www.volunteering.com.au/>
The Centre for Volunteering – the peak body for volunteering in NSW.
- <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/>
Volunteering Australia – the peak body for volunteering nationally.

Co-design workshops

Thanks to the following organisations who contributed to the co-design workshops facilitated by the Beacon Strategies.

VRCs

- Volunteering Central Coast
- Kempsey Neighbourhood Centre
- Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood Centre
- Hunter Volunteer Centre
- Bathurst information and neighbourhood centre
- Digital literacy foundation
- Hastings Neighbourhood Centre
- Community Gateway

POP-up groups and VIOs

- Hart Transport Services
- Kyogle Together
- Lismore CWA
- Resilient Lismore
- Murwillumbah Core
- Northern Rivers wildlife hospital
- Our Neighbourhood: Federation Bridge to Woolies (Mullum)
- Richmond Landcare
- Tweed Community Resilience Network

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We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work and meet, and offer our respect to their elders, past, present and future.

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