

This fact sheet covers:

- ▶ your organisation's responsibility for the safety of its volunteers
 - ▶ your organisation's responsibility for the actions of its volunteers, and
 - ▶ ways to minimise the risk to volunteers and others.
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Your organisation is legally responsible for the safety of its volunteers and may also be legally responsible for the actions of volunteers that cause injury or loss to others.

Your organisation has a legal obligation to provide and maintain a safe working environment for its volunteers. There are also laws which provide that, in certain situations, your organisation may be held legally responsible for the actions of its volunteers.

Therefore, it is crucial for your organisation to have good volunteer management practices, policies and insurance in place.

1. Safety of your volunteers

Your organisation has a legal obligation to provide and maintain a safe working environment that is without risk to the health and safety of its workers, including its volunteers, so far as is reasonably practicable to do so.

This obligation is prescribed by Queensland's work health and safety legislation, namely, the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Qld) and the *Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011* (Qld) (together, **QLD WHS Laws**).

The QLD WHS Laws set out various duties that organisations and individuals must comply with in the workplace that are regulated and enforced by Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (**WHSQ**). WHSQ may prosecute organisations and individuals who do not comply with WHS duties under the QLD WHS Laws.

The QLD WHS Laws apply to 'people running a business', essentially, organisations that have employees. They do not apply to organisations that only engage volunteers and have no employees or contractors (**volunteer associations**).

However, in addition to QLD WHS Laws, under the common law of negligence (established by the courts), not-for-profit organisations owe a duty of care to their volunteers to take reasonable steps to avoid foreseeable harm, injury or loss. So, even if your organisation is a volunteer association, it has an obligation under common law to provide a safe working environment.

Organisations and officers of those organisations can satisfy this duty by:

- identifying any risks that their volunteers face
- assessing the level of risk they may face, that is, how likely it is that something will happen and the seriousness of that risk, and
- implementing a process that will eliminate the risk or, if the risk can't be eliminated, implementing a process that will minimise the risk as far as possible.

For more information about risk management, see Section 3 below.

EXAMPLES

Driving a client to an appointment – it is important to ensure the vehicle is road-worthy, has appropriate insurance and the volunteer has been trained in proper lifting and handling techniques if the client requires assistance in and out of the vehicle. The volunteer may also need training in relation to dealing with medical emergencies that may arise while transporting the client.

Collecting roadside donations – the safety risks for volunteer collectors include injuries caused by vehicles, tripping or slipping, sunburn, heat exhaustion, fatigue and verbal abuse which may potentially result in psychological harm. The organisation should provide a comprehensive briefing about the potential safety risks and strategies for their avoidance.

RELATED RESOURCES

For more information about whether or not the QLD WHS Laws apply to your organisation, key duties under these laws and what is required of your organisation, go to Not-for-profit Law's Work Health and Safety guide on the Information Hub at www.nfplaw.org.au/OHS.

For more information on the common law of negligence and the standard of care your organisation needs to meet, see Not-for-profit Law's Negligence guide at www.nfplaw.org.au/negligence.

2. Legal responsibility for actions of volunteers

When could our organisation be liable for a volunteer's actions?

In some circumstances, your organisation could be held liable (legally responsible) for the actions of its volunteers.

The *QLD Civil Liability Act 2003* (QLD) (**the QLD Civil Liability Act**) sets out a special protection which provides that volunteers are not personally liable (legally responsible) for civil liability which arises as a result of anything they have done (or not done) in good faith and without recklessness, while doing community work that has been organised by a community organisation. Civil liability refers to liability arising out of a civil proceeding, which is a legal action between two citizens. For example, compensation for personal injury, property damage or financial loss as a result of negligence.

In most other Australian States and Territories, civil liability incurred by a protected volunteer is automatically transferred to the community organisation (so that the organisation itself would have to pay any compensation). In QLD however, there is no such automatic transfer. The QLD Civil Liability Act

is in fact silent on whether the organisation itself takes on the volunteer's liability and there is no clear case law on this, so the legal position is not yet settled. It is possible that liability might transfer from the volunteer to the organisation under the legal principle of 'vicarious liability', where one party becomes liable for the actions of another (the usual example is that an employer is vicariously liable for its employees), but it is not clear whether this principle applies in the volunteering context.

However, regardless of this lack of clarity, the community organisation could be liable for damage caused by a volunteer who was acting in good faith if the organisation was in breach of a 'non-delegable duty of care' – which is a common law duty owed by the organisation itself, rather than the volunteer, to the person who suffered the damage. The organisation's duty of care may include providing adequate training, equipment or supervision to volunteers. So, for example, if someone is injured by a volunteer because the organisation failed to give the volunteer appropriate safety training, the organisation could be liable to pay compensation to the injured person.

This is a complicated area of law and your organisation should seek legal advice about its own potential liability in such circumstances.

Note there are certain exceptions to the special protection for volunteers, discussed further below (see Step 6).

NOTE

If your organisation has volunteers operating in another state or territory, generally they will be subject to the laws in that jurisdiction. It does not matter that the volunteer is resident in Queensland or that the community organisation is registered in Queensland. Determining which law a volunteer will be subject to can be complicated and may require legal advice.



Liability under the QLD Civil Liability Act

There are 6 steps your organisation can follow to assess whether or not a volunteer might gain the benefit of protection under the QLD Civil Liability Act. In summary, a volunteer will gain protection if:

- the work is being done by a 'volunteer' (as defined under the QLD Civil Liability Act)
- your organisation is a 'community organisation'
- the work being done by the volunteer is 'community work'
- the community work being done has been 'organised' by the community organisation, or the volunteer is an office holder
- the volunteer's action (or failure to act) was done in 'good faith', and
- no exception applies.

If the above steps do not all apply, the volunteer may be personally liable for their actions. Each of the steps is outlined in more detail below.

STEP 1 - Has the community work been undertaken by a 'volunteer'?

The QLD Civil Liability Act defines a 'volunteer' as an individual who does community work on a voluntary basis or donates food in certain circumstances. A person is considered to work on a 'voluntary basis' if he or she receives no remuneration for the work other than reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses.

A person doing work under court ordered volunteering is not a volunteer under the QLD Civil Liability Act definition.

EXAMPLE

Fred is employed as a gardener. Fred volunteers his services to Community House Inc (a Queensland incorporated association) for one day a month. Fred drives to Community House and every so often buys plants for its garden. Community House pays Fred for petrol and the cost of the plants. Fred is regarded as a volunteer for the purposes of the QLD Civil Liability Act whilst performing services for Community House Inc because the only remuneration he receives is reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses.



STEP 2 - Is your organisation a 'community organisation'?

The QLD Civil Liability Act defines a 'community organisation' as:

- a corporation
- a trustee acting in the capacity of trustee
- a church or other religious group
- a registered political party as defined under the *Electoral Act 1992* or the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (Cth)
- a public or other authority as defined under section 34 of the QLD Civil Liability Act, or
- a parents and citizens association formed under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*, chapter 7.

Regulations to the QLD Civil Liability Act can also specify ('prescribe') that certain types of entities are 'community organisations', but there are no such regulations as at October 2017.

STEP 3 - Is the work being done by the volunteer 'community work'?

Community work is broadly defined as work that is not for private financial gain and that is done for a charitable, benevolent, philanthropic, sporting, recreational, political, educational or cultural purpose (and includes making donations of food).

The protection under the QLD Civil Liability Act applies to a volunteer when he or she is undertaking 'community work', i.e. the focus is on the purpose of the activity the volunteer is performing, not the overall purpose of the organisation. Whether a volunteer is performing 'community work' will depend on what work the volunteer is actually doing, rather than the objects of the organisation they are doing the work for.

Some of the fields of community work set out above have a technical legal meaning (e.g. charitable purposes). You may need to seek legal advice about whether the work falls into one of these categories. For further information on what types of activities may be considered to be charitable, refer to Not-for-profit Law's Information Hub page on Registering as a charity at www.nfplaw.org.au/charity.

STEP 4 - Is the volunteer an office holder or has the community work been 'organised' by a community organisation?

A volunteer is protected if he or she carries out the community work as an office holder of the organisation (for example a director or secretary), or if the community work undertaken is 'organised'

by the community organisation. The definition of 'organise' includes 'to direct and supervise', but this is non-exhaustive and may extend to situations where there are no specific directions or supervision given, for example, where volunteers are given general discretion to organise a fundraising event. However, the protection does not extend to spontaneous acts of volunteers or activities the organisation has not authorised. (See also the exceptions at Step 6 below: the volunteer will not be protected if he or she acted contrary to instructions or outside the scope of the activities authorised by the organisation.)

STEP 5 - Were the volunteer's actions (or failure to act) done in 'good faith'?

The volunteer's actions (or failure to act) must have been done in 'good faith'. Generally, to act in good faith is to act honestly and without fraud. Where a volunteer endeavours to act in the best interests of the community organisation and is not involved in any dishonest or fraudulent behaviour, it is likely the volunteer is acting in good faith.

EXAMPLE

'in good faith'

A volunteer attends a community sports day to assist with minor first aid. A child falls and fractures their arm, and as a result of the volunteer's care, their injury is worsened. The volunteer will be acting in good faith if they were trying to help the injured person and believed that was the correct first aid action. However, they will not be acting in good faith if they gave this assistance in order to impress their friend, when they knew they had no idea of what first aid action to take.

STEP 6 - Does an exception apply?

Even if a person is a volunteer and they have been undertaking community work organised by a community organisation, there are exceptions set out under the QLD Civil Liability Act. In general, a volunteer will not be protected where:

- the volunteer knew or ought to have reasonably known that he or she was acting:
 - outside the scope of the activities authorised by the community organisation concerned, or
 - contrary to instructions given by the community organisation
- the volunteer was intoxicated (i.e. under the influence of alcohol or drugs) and failed to exercise due care and skill when doing the work
- the volunteer was required under a written law of the State to be insured against the liability, or
- the liability would be covered by a CTP (compulsory third party) insurance policy under the *Motor Accident Insurance Act 1994*, or be recoverable from the Nominal Defendant under that Act.

There are specific legal definitions and interpretations of many of the terms used in these exceptions (e.g. 'ought reasonably to have known', 'drugs' and 'alcohol'). If potentially relevant, your organisation may need to seek legal advice about these issues.

A volunteer will not be protected from liability for *criminal actions* (actions between a person and the state) while volunteering. These include traffic infringements as well as more serious crimes. For example, if a volunteer physically assaults someone while they are volunteering, this may result in criminal charges and possible criminal compensation. The QLD Civil Liability Act won't protect the volunteer from criminal liability in this situation.

EXAMPLE

A person volunteers at a community sports day and is instructed to assist with refreshments only. The volunteer starts to help with marshalling participants without instructions to do so. An injury occurs as a result of the volunteer's marshalling activities. As the volunteer was not acting according to instructions, it is likely that an exception under the QLD Civil Liability Act applies and that the volunteer will not be protected from liability.



What could our organisation be liable for based on QLD Civil Liability Act provisions?

To summarise, the QLD Civil Liability Act provides that, if a volunteer is protected (that is, all of the tests set out above have been met) the volunteer will not be personally liable to pay any compensation to anyone whom they may have caused personal injury, property damage or financial loss, as a result of their own actions or failures to act. The QLD Civil Liability Act does not state whether the organisation itself becomes liable on a volunteer's behalf. However, under the common law, if an organisation does not fulfil its own duty of care and this leads to a volunteer causing injury or damage, it could become liable.

What happens if our organisation (or a volunteer) makes an apology or expresses regret?

Under the QLD Civil Liability Act, a volunteer or community organisation may make an apology to another person about an incident without fearing it will be construed as an admission of liability in a claim or proceeding arising out of the incident.

The QLD Civil Liability Act specifies that an apology is an expression of sympathy or regret, or of a general sense of benevolence or compassion, in connection with any matter, whether or not it admits or implies an admission of fault in relation to the matter. The QLD Civil Liability Act expressly states that an apology:

- does not constitute an express or implied admission of fault or liability by the person in connection with the matter
- is not relevant to the determination of fault or liability in connection with that matter, and
- is not admissible in any civil proceedings as evidence of the fault or liability of the person in connection with that matter.

Note that there are some exceptions to this, such as in cases of defamation, unlawful sexual misconduct and unlawful intentional acts causing person injury.

3. Managing the risk

Your organisation could potentially be liable for the actions of its volunteers and for any injuries that its volunteers experience as a result of their volunteering. Therefore, volunteer risk management procedures and insurance are very important risk management strategies.

As a part of your risk management strategy, we suggest that your organisation:

- creates a safe physical environment and has appropriate safety policies and training in place
- ensures safe procedures when providing goods or services to the public
- implements staff and volunteer safety guidelines, which include incident reporting procedures
- creates safety instruction manuals (where appropriate)
- consults with your volunteers about these safety guidelines and the importance of them sticking to their authorised duties (you can include this in their volunteer agreement and discuss these issues in their induction)
- provides your volunteers with copies of written policies and/or instruction manuals
- conducts regular training, including refresher training, on safety issues
- undertakes regular risk assessments to identify potential risks to health and safety and takes steps to eliminate these risks. Ideally these risk assessments will be for each different activity undertaken by volunteers and each site where volunteers undertake work. If the work or site changes, any new risks associated with the change should be considered.
- clearly defines the role and tasks of your volunteers in a written document (volunteer position description) and specifies any prohibited actions (e.g. giving clients medical advice),
- reviews your insurance policies to make sure they adequately cover injuries to and actions of your volunteers, and
- from time to time, checks that the above processes are being implemented. Are your volunteers following these processes? Are these processes being enforced?

FURTHER READING

Safe Work Australia (the national WHS policy body) has published resources relating to work health and safety of volunteers, including an [Essential Guide to Work Health and Safety for Volunteers](#) and an [Essential Guide to Work Health and Safety for Organisations that Engage Volunteers](#).

WHSQ has published numerous resources relating to workplace safety and minimising risk. These can be located at www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/forms-and-resources.



RELATED RESOURCES

For a Sample Volunteer Position Description, go to the Information Hub at www.nfplaw.org.au/volunteers. For a checklist covering what to do when an incident or accident happens in your organisation, go to our Not-for-profit Law Incident and Accidents checklist on the Information Hub at www.nfplaw.org.au/negligence.



Can we get our volunteers to agree to reimburse our organisation for any compensation payable as a result of their actions?

The QLD Civil Liability Act is silent on the effect of these types of agreements (known as indemnity agreements), but contains a general provision which allows parties to enter into a contract which makes 'express provision for their rights, obligations and liabilities'. However, if your organisation asks a volunteer to sign an indemnity agreement, note that it may not protect your organisation from liability in all circumstances, especially where there has been gross negligence or breaches of specific laws.

Insurance considerations

Insurance is a way of managing risks your organisation can't avoid or minimise, by paying another party (the insurer) to bear the costs if certain risks eventuate.

Common types of insurance include:

Protects:	Type of insurance:
Volunteers	Volunteer personal accident insurance
Employees	Workers' compensation insurance
Committee members	Directors' and officers' liability insurance
Members of the public	Public liability insurance
Experts or advisors	Professional indemnity insurance
Property and assets	Building and contents/occupiers/fraud insurance
Selling goods or products	Product liability insurance
Vehicles	Motor vehicle insurance

Volunteers often fall between the gaps as they are not covered by an organisation's insurance policies when they suffer injuries in their role unless the organisation holds specific insurance for this purpose. It is important to remember that:

- workers' compensation insurance does not cover volunteers (except in rare circumstances), and
- public liability insurance will usually cover injuries a volunteer causes to others but may not cover injuries caused to volunteers.

SCENARIO

A volunteer serving food at a local fundraiser does not properly cook the chicken, which results in a significant number of people contracting food poisoning and ending up in hospital, including the volunteer. The organisation's public liability insurance will cover members of the public who attended the fundraiser, but not the volunteer.

TIPS

- check your organisation's existing insurance policies to find out whether your volunteers are covered. If in doubt, pick up the phone to your insurer.
- consider taking out a volunteer personal accident insurance policy to make sure your volunteers are covered for any injuries they sustain while volunteering.
- check age limits under your policies and, if necessary, negotiate with your insurer to extend coverage to all of your volunteers.
- let all volunteers know what they are covered for and what they are not and the process for making a claim. If there are any extra costs payable, make sure you are clear about whether the organisation or individual will have to pay.

CAUTION

Insurance should not be the cornerstone of your organisation's risk management strategy. Ultimately, it should be relied upon as a matter of last resort and other measures should be implemented with the goal of never having to make a claim. Insurance can cover any costs arising from a claim but it cannot restore any damage caused to your organisation's reputation or culture.



RELATED RESOURCES

For more information on insurance and risk management, including volunteer personal accident insurance, read our Not-for-profit Law's Risk Management and Insurance guide on the Information Hub at www.nfplaw.org.au/riskinsurance.



Resources

Related Not-for-profit Law Resources

- Insurance and Risk www.nfplaw.org.au/riskinsurance

For more information on insurance and risk management, read our Risk Management and Insurance guide.

- Negligence www.nfplaw.org.au/negligence

For an overview of the common law of negligence, see our Negligence guide.

For a checklist covering what to do when an incident or accident occurs, go to our Checklist: Incidents and accidents.

- Volunteers www.nfplaw.org.au/volunteers

For more information on child safety issues, which are not covered in this resource, read our fact sheet on Engaging and working with youth volunteers.

Legislation

- [Work Health and Safety Act 2011 \(QLD\)](#)

- [Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 \(QLD\)](#)

- [QLD Civil Liability Act 2003 \(QLD\)](#)

Other Related Resources

- Workplace Health and Safety Queensland, Office of Industrial Relations
<https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/>

- Safe Work Australia www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au

Safe Work Australia has published information for volunteer organisations on workplace safety including [The Essential Guide to Work Health and Safety for Volunteers](#)

- Volunteering Australia www.volunteeringaustralia.org

Volunteering Australia has published a suite of resources for volunteer managers including [Running the Risk? A Risk Management Tool for Volunteer Involving Organisations](#).

For information about the question to ask in relation to your insurance policies, go to the [Conversation Guide](#).

A NFP Law Information Hub resource. Access more resources at www.nfplaw.org.au

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