

# VOLUNTEERING: BUILDING A STRONGER COMMUNITY

Discover different types of volunteering and find out how doing your little bit can help.





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# Volunteer? Yes!



Sydney, Australia: Oxfam Trailwalker volunteers help participants find their way along the Sydney bushland trail. Photo: Morris McLellan/OxfamAUS.

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**Does your community need you? One day you might see something happening in your neighbourhood, at your child's school, or in the news, and ask yourself: Is there something I can do to contribute? Volunteering is a great way to get involved and give back to your community.**

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Behind every strong community, you will find a network of selfless, supportive, altruistic volunteers, donating their time and talent to important causes. Do you have time, resources or knowledge to share?

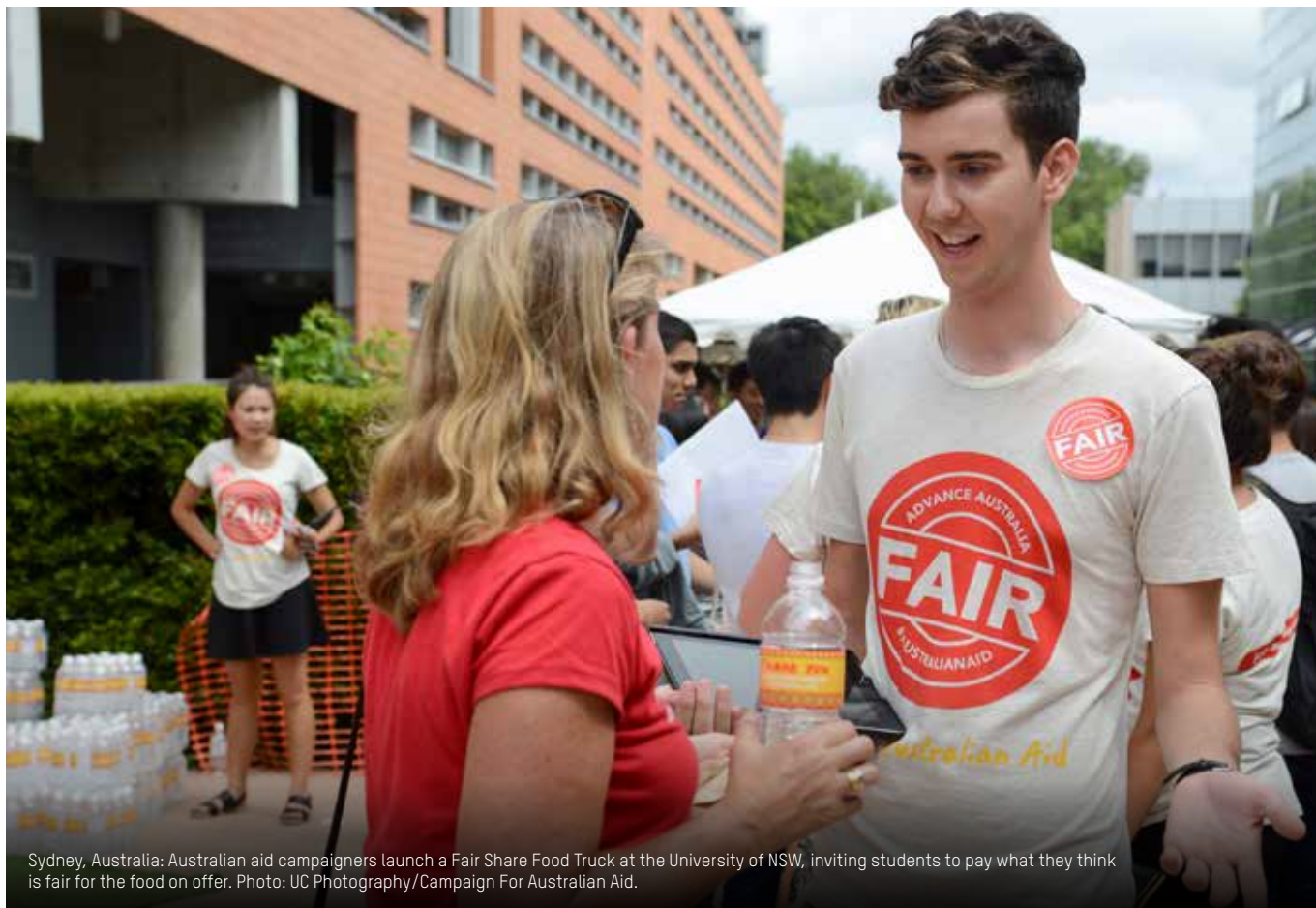
Why not be part of your community volunteer network? In our busy daily lives, it can be hard to find time to dedicate to other people or causes. However, any volunteer participation — great or small — is valuable. Sometimes, small contributions lead to huge changes.

Which social or environmental issues move you to action? What type of work would you gladly do without financial gain? Do you want to improve the lives of others?

We encourage you to explore the volunteering opportunities that are available in your community. What are you most passionate about? Volunteer with a group or organisation that suits your concerns, skills and schedule.



## Why should I be a volunteer?



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### Volunteering has become a popular phenomenon in Australia, for people of all ages and interests.

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We all have something to contribute. When we donate our combined knowledge, experience and time to the greater good of the community, we can transform society and build a better world for those who need it the most.

Volunteering enhances social progress by:

- improving citizen participation.
- fostering social cohesion.
- improving the quality of life within society.
- promoting essential values, such as justice, respect and cooperation.
- protecting the interests of socially disadvantaged individuals and groups.



Volunteering will make you see things from another perspective, and perhaps re-assess your priorities. In any case, when you volunteer in your community, you will experience a newfound sense of solidarity, participation and altruism — a feeling of being part of a whole.

## Where do I start?



Adelaide, Australia: Sahn Tran came to Australia from Cambodia as a refugee. He volunteers at Oxfam Trading warehouse, where he helps to pack goods and has devised several time-saving systems. Photo: Lara McKinley/OxfamAUS.

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**Getting started on your volunteer adventure is quite easy. When you decide to do any kind of volunteering, we advise you to follow these steps.**

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- Reflect on your motivations and concerns. What do you hope to get out of volunteering?
- Assess your capacity to volunteer. How many hours or days per week can you realistically offer?
- Decide between short-term and long-term projects. Some organisations need stability from their volunteer team to plan projects. Can you make a long-term commitment?
- Find a cause or activity that attracts and interests you. Volunteering can be hard work. Make sure that you dedicate your time and resources to a cause or activity that is important to you.
- Research the organisations that work in your area of interest. Compare big volunteer organisations and small community-based networks to find the group that best suits your interests.
- Define the skills and knowledge that you can contribute. Once you have found the right organisation, let them know what skills you can offer and what tasks you would like to do.

# A volunteer program for me

Volunteers participate in all corners of your community. Every volunteer role requires a specific set of skills or aptitudes. Once you start looking, you are sure to find a niche that suits your experience and knowledge – there's something for everyone. To start, you should know that NGOs are not the only type of organisations that need volunteers. Any non-profit organisation, whether in the form of an association, group or foundation, is likely to have a volunteer network. Shall we begin?



Perth, Australia: More than 40 people marched with buckets of water on their heads, calling for an increase in Australian aid. Photo: Tony McDonough/OxfamAUS.

## Types of volunteering

### 1. Social action volunteering

Social action volunteers contribute to a range of organisations and programs, working directly with the most disadvantaged groups in society. When you decide to volunteer for any particular social group or cause, it's important to understand the unique challenges and tasks that come with the territory.

As a volunteer, you will become a community service provider, and those who receive your support are clients.

#### The homeless

Let's start with programs for the homeless, who are often also unemployed and live in complicated family situations. Volunteers should always treat homeless people with sensitivity and tact, as their difficult living circumstances can cause unpredictable behaviour.

For this reason, organisations often require specific volunteer traits. To work with homeless clients, you should be:

- Mature
- Sensitive and tactful
- Calm and serene
- Understanding and patient
- Familiar with relevant social services

Volunteers can support the homeless with:

- Assistance in shelters and soup kitchens.
- Visiting rounds and support in the street.
- Food delivery.
- Information and advice about shelter alternatives, such as nursing homes and mental health centres.

Australian organisations that provide services for the homeless include [Mission Australia](#), the [Red Cross](#), [Youth Off The Streets](#) and [Sacred Heart Mission in Melbourne](#).



## Immigration, refuge and asylum

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In this sector, volunteers help immigrants, refugees and displaced persons to understand and access basic rights and amenities, such as health care, housing or employment. This type of volunteering also focuses on welcoming new arrivals and helping them integrate into Australian society without having to abandon their culture of origin.

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When working with immigrants and refugees, volunteers often need to have the skills and knowledge to provide specialised services, such as health care, language translation or legal advice. This type of volunteering is therefore popular among social workers, educators, psychologists, teachers, doctors, nurses and lawyers.

In addition to these professional skills, NGOs recruit volunteers who are enthusiastic, tolerant, respectful, proactive and open.

Volunteers can offer immigrant and refugee clients a wide range of support services, including:

- Emergency assistance for new arrivals suffering from trauma.
- Legal advice to explain contractual rights and obligations, and assist with asylum and residency applications.
- Literacy or language tuition for people from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- School support for children of immigrants.
- Workforce training and orientation to aid employment search.
- Guidance in the search for emergency accommodation.
- Access to public services, such as health, education and transport.

If you would like to volunteer with an organisation that supports refugees, immigrants or people seeking asylum, some of Australia's largest service providers include [Red Cross](#), [UNHCR](#), [Settlement Services International](#) and the [Asylum Seeker Resource Centre](#).



Preševo, Serbia: Syrian refugee Ahmad and his daughter Nour\* approach a registration centre for migrants and refugees. Photo: Sam Tarling/Oxfam.  
\* Name changed to protect identity.

# Health

Volunteers are in demand in all areas of the Australian healthcare sector. Whatever your area of interest, you will find community health programs dealing with all types of patients and illnesses, including HIV, cancer, Alzheimer's, schizophrenia and chronic diseases.

When you sign up to volunteer in this sector, the organisation should provide training so that you can understand the disease better and appreciate how the patient feels. They may also teach you how to cope with the death of a client if you are likely to be dealing directly with terminally ill people. But remember: you will not be alone and you should always be supervised by a doctor or healthcare professional.

If you are willing to learn and you are a sensitive, caring person with empathy and initiative, this type of volunteering is perfect for you.

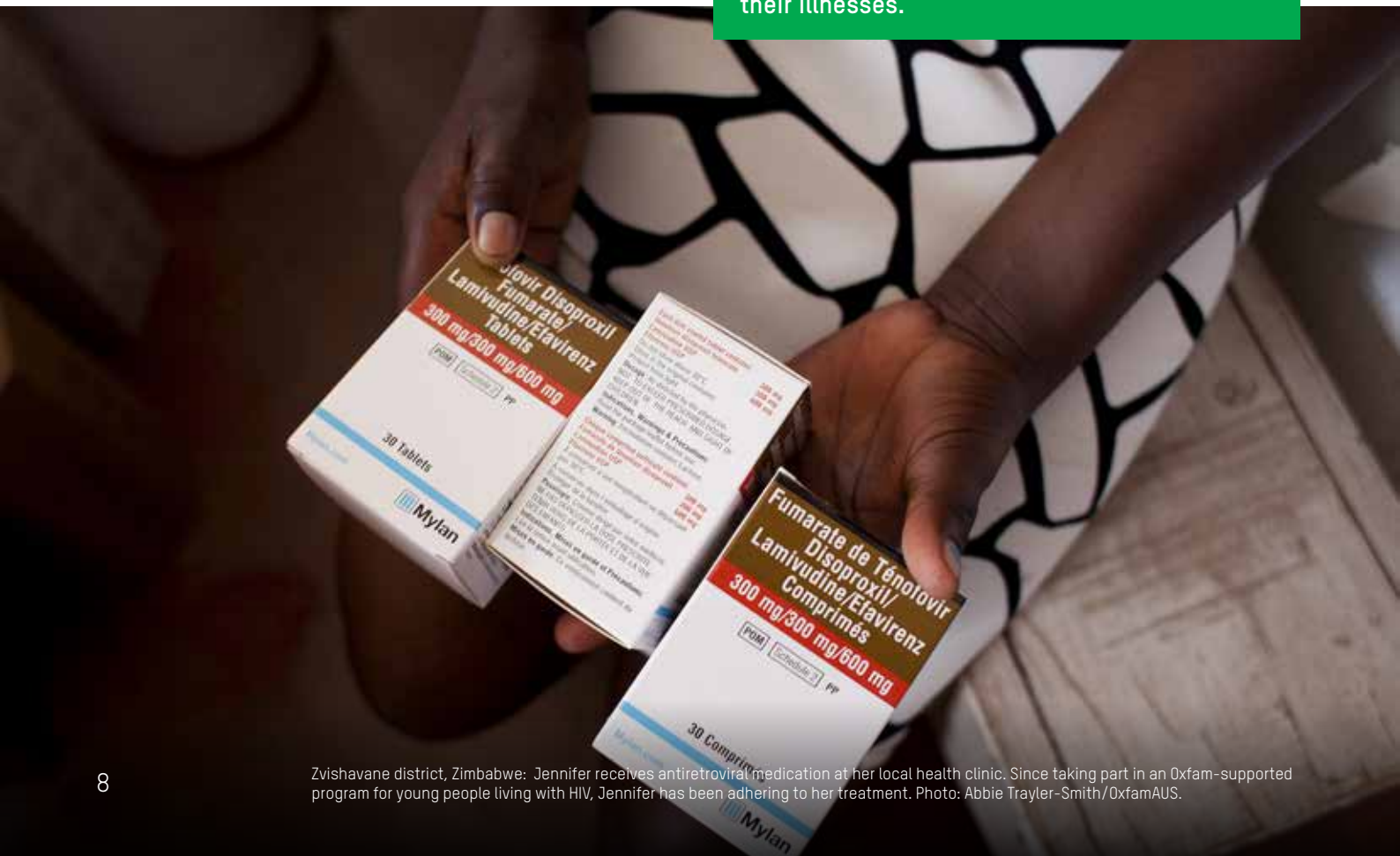
### As a healthcare volunteer, you may support people with:

- Leisure activities and training to compliment patients' rehabilitation. This may include travel, sport and visits to exhibitions and cultural events.

- Information about their disease or illness. Patients in the early stages of disease often know very little about their ailment, and are fearful of what lies ahead.
- Care for the patient's family.
- Hospital visits.
- Schooling for sick or hospitalised children.
- Reintegration into the workforce and society.
- Workshops to raise awareness and prevent disease or illness.

Many healthcare service providers rely on volunteers in Australia, including [Starlight Children's Foundation](#), [Beyond Blue](#), the [Royal Flying Doctor Service](#), [Cancer Council](#) and [the AIDS Council of NSW](#).

These people often need support from outside the family, due to the psychological burden of their illnesses.





## Addictions

Working with people who are addicted to drug and alcohol can be one of the hardest volunteer jobs in the field. People who struggle with addiction often suffer social rejection and, in some cases, rejection from their family. Social services for people who are addicted to drugs or alcohol therefore tend to focus on rehabilitation, recovery and social reintegration.

In this sector, volunteers provide support for the client, helping to rebuild their self-esteem and sense of stability. Some organisations may offer workshops to help clients reintegrate into the workplace, as well as therapy groups to prevent them from relapsing.

This kind of volunteering requires motivated and committed people. In addition, volunteers should understand the world of drug and alcohol addiction, so they may need some type of training.

If you would like to volunteer in this sector, you can contact Salvation Army, Family Drug Support, Odyssey House or Red Cross.

## Inmates

People who volunteer within the prison system usually contribute to prisoners' rehabilitation and reintegration into society. To achieve this, volunteers may conduct a wide range of therapeutic activities, including theatre, craft or music workshops, or sports competitions and training.

When you work with people who have been released from prison, the main objective is to reintegrate them into society and help them get their lives back on track. In this case, you might provide recreational activities, skill training or career counselling.

As with other types of volunteering, this work requires a good understanding of the penitentiary system. The kind of person most suited to this type of volunteering is responsible, prudent, discreet, tolerant and non-judgmental.

[Plea Project](#), [Australian Community Support Organisation](#), [Salvation Army](#), [Prison Fellowship Australia](#) and [Red Cross](#) are a few organisations with programs in this area.



## Women at risk of domestic violence

In Australia, many women experience domestic violence or other forms of gender-based discrimination. According to Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), one in four women have experienced at least one incident of violence by an intimate partner. The Australian Institute of Criminology claims that the majority of intimate partner homicide victims are female.

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**To volunteer with a program that helps domestic violence survivors, you should be an empathetic and understanding person who knows how to listen. Some specific training may be required.**

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[Safe Steps](#), [WIRE](#) and [Women's Community Shelters](#) are three examples of Australian organisations that support domestic violence survivors.



## People living with disability

Organisations and programs that cater to people who live with disability aim to improve clients' quality of life, increase personal autonomy and prevent isolation. To do this, volunteers must understand the specific disability, whether physical or intellectual, and know how to manage it.

People who volunteer in this sector should be caring, empathetic and patient. In some cases, programs in this sector require a long-term commitment from the volunteer. It can take some time for clients to warm to their assigned volunteer, and frequent change can be unsettling for the clients.

**Volunteers provide important support for these people, including:**

- Company (day-to-day or in centres)
- Recreational activities
- Accessible transport
- Technical help
- Home support

In Australia, volunteers work with a wide range of disability service providers, including [OzChild](#), [Interchange](#) and [Riding For the Disabled](#).

## Children, youth and family

Most Australian communities have developed a range of social programs focused on children and young people, to ensure that their basic needs are met. Volunteers can help deliver education programs, school support (especially for immigrants), workshops, psychological care sessions, sports coaching or recreational activities.

Working with children and young people does not usually require specific qualifications, unless you choose to volunteer in a highly specialised capacity. In any case, you should be a dynamic, positive, active, patient person who can manage impulsive temperaments.

Many organisations in Australia cater to the needs of children and adolescents, both at home and abroad, including [Big Brothers Big Sisters](#), [Barnardos](#), [the Smith Family](#), [UNICEF](#) and [Save the Children](#).



Melbourne, Australia: Punters enjoy a free lunchtime OXJAM gig by Art Vs Science at the University of Melbourne. Photo: Rodney Dekker.

## The elderly

Many elderly community members live alone and contend with numerous health problems. When the elderly cannot rely on friends or family for support, warmth and affection, they turn to volunteer organisations to avoid loneliness and isolation.

The best way for volunteers to help the elderly is to provide company and support. Helpful volunteer tasks include home visits, accompanied walks, and support with simple errands and administrative tasks.

Which character traits make you suitable for this type of volunteering? To work with the elderly, you should be cheerful, respectful, understanding and sociable.

The Red Cross is an important player in this field, but you can also volunteer with local initiatives, such as [Eldercare](#), [Wesley Mission](#) or [Meals on Wheels](#).



Box Hill, Australia: Long-time Walk Against Want volunteers Joyce and Tom Gay. Photo: Lara McKinley/OxfamAUS.



## Ecology and the environment

If you are interested in nature, ecology and the environment, you should get involved in conservation volunteering. Depending on your particular interest, you can volunteer in garden centres, reforestation programs, environmental protection organisations or wildlife conservation groups. Or you can campaign or raise awareness about issues such as climate change, the destruction of rainforests, animal species in danger of extinction, or ocean protection.

Any person can volunteer in this sector, but a long-term commitment is usually required.

[Greenpeace](#) is the best-known example in this sector, but organisations such as [WWF Australia](#), [The Wilderness Society](#) and [Earthwatch](#) also work with volunteers.



Tongatapu, Tonga: Valu Tui'nuakafe prepares organically farmed coconuts at the Kolomotu'a Virgin Coconut Oil site. Photo: Kristian Frires/Oxfam.

## 2. Operational Volunteering and Internships

This second category of volunteering does not involve client-facing work with various groups within the community. Rather, this type of volunteering (or interning) involves the internal operations and management of an organisation. In this capacity, volunteers contribute to the organisation's daily operations. So, if you are interested in the field of management, this might suit you.

**As an operational volunteer or intern, your task may include:**

- Administration and management: telephone support, accounting, computer or administrative tasks.
- Project design.
- Search for funding.
- Awareness and Communication.
- Customer service.

[Oxfam](#) offers a range of operational volunteering opportunities, spanning most areas of the organisation.

## International Volunteering

This type of volunteering is very popular among people who want a first-hand experience of an NGO's work in the field. International volunteering is a valuable experience because participants get to travel and discover different cultures, customs and ways of life.

If you have time and resources, you can commit to a long-term international volunteer placement. If you only have a few weeks or months, consider volunteering during your holiday period.

In any case, volunteers who work in foreign countries can support field workers on the ground, or be part of a work camp or solidarity trip, which usually involves working on a specific project for the organisation.

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The nature of your volunteer work will depend on which organisation you choose. You might participate in community development in impoverished countries, environmental research or activities, or work towards global peace and disarmament.

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When you volunteer abroad, the NGO will normally take care of your living expenses and accommodation, while you cover the cost of travel. Before going to the country, you will also do some training and you may need to master a foreign language, such as French or Spanish.

[Doctors Without Borders](#), [UNICEF](#) and [Oxfam](#) are a few organisations working internationally in the field. To explore your options for volunteering abroad, contact [NGO Abroad](#), [Voluntary Service Overseas](#) or [Australian Volunteers International](#).



Oecusse, Timor-Leste: Oxfam field worker visits a rural community where Oxfam is helping local families strengthen their farming livelihoods to mitigate the threat of climate change. Photo: Vlad Sokhin/Panos/OxfamAUS.



## Virtual Volunteering

Virtual volunteering involves collaborating from a distance with the NGO via the Internet or e-mail. Within many organisations, there are some tasks that don't require a physical presence in the office, such as accounting, searching for grants, and web page development.

Cyberactivism is another popular way to collaborate or volunteer virtually. For example, you can participate in a campaign to denounce an unjust social situation by collecting signatures in an online petition.

This form of volunteering is perfect if you have limited time or you cannot physically participate. It is popular among digital enthusiasts—all you need is motivation and a computer with Internet connection.

## Resources

If you want to delve deeper into the subject, you can find more information about volunteering online. You will find a range of helpful websites that offer practical information for volunteers, and identify the NGOs that need volunteers and the types of profiles that are most in demand.

This handy guide by Volunteering Australia contains some practical tips and shortcuts. For comprehensive information about volunteering in Australia, check [Go Volunteer](#), an online portal that shares up-to-date volunteer opportunities, volunteering guidelines and volunteer stories.

[Australian Volunteers International \(AVI\)](#) is one of the best-known volunteer agencies in the region. AVI manages numerous volunteer programs that provide experiences for Australian volunteers to have an ongoing positive impact, both at home and abroad.

AVI offers university programs that give students the opportunity to volunteer overseas as part of their studies. For volunteers who wish to make a difference here at home, AVI also offers short-term volunteer opportunities working with Indigenous communities across Australia.

[Amnesty International](#), [Oxfam](#), [Greenpeace](#) and [GetUp!](#) are some of the most active organisations of this type in Australia.



Melbourne, Australia: Volunteers usher participants through Checkpoint 5 on the trail of Oxfam Trailwalker Melbourne. Photo: Timothy Herbert/OxfamAUS.

If you want to make a long-term international volunteering commitment, check out [Australian Volunteers for International Development \(AVID\)](#). This initiative of the Australian Government provides opportunities for Australians to contribute to aid objectives by volunteering. AVID is best for people who are fully committed, as volunteer assignments can range from twelve to eighteen months.

Finally, consumer watchdog website [CHOICE](#) offers a useful overview of the ethical quandaries of international volunteering, or 'voluntourism' as it's sometimes called. They examine where your fees will go and offer tips on how to find a reputable volunteer program.

As you see, you can contribute to your local community or the wider international community in many ways. You just have to choose your field of action and get down to work. Australia's volunteer networks are woven together with the collaboration, participation and dedication of altruistic people like you.





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