

Understanding the difference between Formal and Informal Volunteering

What is Volunteering

Volunteering means giving your time freely to help others, without being paid.

Volunteering Australia states: 'time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain'

There are two main types: formal and informal volunteering.

What is Palliative Care Volunteering?

Palliative care volunteering involves offering volunteer support for people living with a life-limiting illnesses and their families. Volunteers may provide companionship, emotional support, help with practical tasks, or assist in creating a comforting environment in homes, hospitals, or hospices. Their presence helps reduce isolation, ease stress, and enhance the quality of life.

The **Palliative Care Volunteering SA project**, led by Palliative Care SA, supports formal volunteers and volunteer managers across SA. It helps embed palliative care into existing formal volunteering programs, builds capacity in regional and metro areas, and fosters a connected, well-prepared volunteer community.

What is the difference between Formal and Informal Volunteering?

Formal Volunteering

Formal volunteering happens when people volunteer through an organisation or program, covered by legal protection and supervision. Volunteer coordinators/supervisors are in place to support the formal volunteers, within the organisational structure. Formal volunteering tasks have clear boundaries. Often there is a strong emphasis on policies and procedures and quality management of the volunteer services being delivered. Formal volunteering roles can be client facing in a home based or community-based setting, or client facing in a in-patient, hospital, residential aged care or similar settings or non-client facing supporting administration or fundraising activities.

Key Features:

Organised by a structured program or organisation (e.g. hospital, school, charity, sporting club).

Volunteers often have set roles, training, and support, but not to replace the role of paid staff.

Usually covered by volunteer Agreement (incl. insurance) and supported by a coordinator/supervisor.

Often have a backup/pool of volunteers – if someone is unavailable, there may be another volunteer available.

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Examples relevant to formal volunteering roles in relation to palliative care:

- Companionship
- Carer Support
- Memorial Services Support
- Biography Writing | Life Story Writing

Informal Volunteering

Informal volunteering often takes place in different settings within local communities to address specific social needs. Most of the time, informal volunteers are people you already know. They could be family members, friends, or individuals from groups you belong to. Occasionally, they may come from your extended network, such as a friend of a friend. Occasionally, they may come from your extended network, such as a friend of a friend. However, you typically have some connection to them, or someone you know has introduced them to you. For example, your neighbour's teenager might offer to walk your dog, or someone from your choir group may water your plants.

Key Features:

- Not organised or structured
- No official training, agreements or insurance
- No police check or safety check involved
- Usually done for friends, neighbours, or the community

Examples Relevant to Palliative Care:

- Helping a neighbour with shopping or gardening
- Driving an elderly friend to an appointment
- Looking after someone's pet while they are in hospital
- Bringing a lasagna to a friend who is grieving

Why does the difference matter?

- Formal volunteering gives structure, training, and safety. This is important in areas like palliative care, where volunteers need to understand privacy, emotional support and health risks. Also, people may be vulnerable and it's important to ensure safety measures are in place
- Informal volunteering is flexible, personal, and often fills gaps that organisations can't always reach. Informal volunteers can be coordinated via the HELP App.

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How do I know if someone offering help is a formal or informal volunteer?

If someone offers to help you at home, it can be hard to tell if they're a formal or informal volunteer but there are a few clear signs.

- A **formal volunteer** will usually come through a recognised organisation, like a palliative care service, hospital or council. They'll often have a badge/name badge, introduction letter, or coordinator who can confirm who they are
- An **informal volunteer** is usually someone you already know perhaps a friend, neighbour, or member of your community who offers to lend a hand. They'll usually offer to help with specific tasks.

Both are valuable and needed in the community of care for people at the end phase of life

References

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- Volunteering Australia. "Definition of Volunteering." 2015, www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/definition-of-volunteering/#/.
- Healthy End of Life Program [HELP App](#) | [Healthy End of Life Program](#)