

Partnering your volunteer program with a health service

How to build and sustain formal collaborations

Guide for health and volunteering involving organisations

This guide will help you:

- Connect with local health services
- Build a strong partnership
- Create clear referral and communication pathways

UNDERSTANDING

Understanding different health care services

Palliative care services include both **specialist** and **generalist** palliative care teams.

Specialist palliative care services focus exclusively on providing palliative care. These services may be delivered in a hospital inpatient unit or hospice, through a hospital consult service, in outpatient clinics or in a person's home through community-based palliative care services.

Generalist palliative care services are provided by healthcare professionals whose primary role is not palliative care, but who incorporate a palliative approach into the care they already provide. This may include healthcare professionals working in aged care, intensive care units (ICU), general medicine, primary care, disability services, and other healthcare settings.

Together, specialist and generalist palliative care teams play an important role in supporting people with life-limiting illnesses and those important to them.

Understanding your existing volunteer roles

Identify how your existing volunteer roles can support people with a life-limiting illness and those important to them. Sometimes it can be difficult for a volunteer program to fully understand the needs of palliative care clients. Starting the conversation with a health service by sharing the volunteer roles you already offer can help identify opportunities for support and collaboration.

Examples of volunteer roles that may benefit palliative care clients and their caregivers include:

- Transport support
- Dog walking or pet care assistance
- Gardening and plant care
- Companionship and social support

WHY PARTNERSHIP MATTERS

Why organisations partner for volunteer delivery

Not all health services have the capacity or need to operate their own volunteer programs. At the same time, many existing volunteer programs could provide significant benefits to health service patients and clients; however, there are often no clear referral pathways or formal partnership arrangements in place.

Organisation type	What they bring to a palliative care volunteering partnership
Palliative care health service	Patient/client referrals, home base risk assessments
Volunteer Involving Organisations	Local trust, diverse pool of community volunteers, Volunteer recruitment and screening, volunteer systems and process induction training, scheduling/coordination volunteer expertise
Palliative Care Volunteering SA program	Training for Palliative Care Volunteers, support networks for volunteer coordinator
Local government / council	Venues for volunteer training and recognition events, community communication channels, in-kind promotion of volunteer recruitment.

WHERE TO START

Start with understanding what services are in your area

A successful partnership starts with understanding your local service landscape. Identify the health and community services operating in your area, the support they provide, and where volunteers may be able to add value. This knowledge will help you target the right organisations and have more meaningful partnership conversations.

The Palliative Care Volunteering SA Program can assist you to identify relevant services, explore partnership opportunities, and make connections with potential health service partners in your area.

WHERE TO START

Steps to starting a partnership

- 1. Assess your capacity**
Determine whether your volunteering program has the capacity to support additional clients and meet increased demand.
- 2. Identify potential partners**
Consider local health services and organisations that could benefit from volunteer support.
- 3. Arrange an introductory meeting**
Request a meeting to discuss the opportunity and explore mutual goals. The Palliative Care Volunteering SA Program can help facilitate these introductions.
- 4. Define roles and responsibilities**
Discuss what each organisation will contribute and how the partnership will operate.
- 5. Establish partnership requirements**
Identify any formal arrangements needed, such as a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), referral processes, or governance requirements.
- 6. Agree on next steps**
Develop an action plan with clear responsibilities, timelines, and communication pathways to move the partnership forward.

START INFORMALLY FIRST

Before committing to a formal arrangement, run a 3–6 month informal collaboration. Share a referral, co-host a training session, run a joint volunteer induction. Formalise once both parties know the relationship works.

Formalise the arrangement

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) — the minimum for any formal palliative care volunteering partnership. Must include:

- The purpose of the partnership and what you want to achieve together
- The roles and responsibilities of each organisation
- How referrals and volunteer requests will be made
- What information will be reported and shared
- How and when communication will occur
- How often the partnership will be reviewed
- How any issues or disagreements will be resolved
- How the partnership can be ended, including arrangements for existing clients and volunteers

RECOGNISING SUCCESS

Pointers for when things are going well

Check for these signs at every formal review. A healthy palliative care volunteering partnership shows most of them.

✓	Patient referrals and volunteers are flowing smoothly with no bottlenecks or long waits
✓	The Volunteer Coordinator feels confident to contact the health service if questions arise
✓	Staff in both organisations speak positively about the partnership in day-to-day conversation
✓	The volunteer program is growing: more volunteers and more patient interested in having a volunteer
✓	Other organisations are approaching you to ask how you built this

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Pointers for when things are not going well

These signs rarely arrive loudly. They build slowly. The earlier you name them, the easier they are to fix.

⚠	Coordinators are avoiding or delaying contact with each other between scheduled meetings
⚠	Volunteer referrals are slowing, inconsistent, or disappearing with no agreed reason
⚠	Complaints or incidents involving volunteers are not being shared promptly between partner organisations

Communication is key

Effective communication is the foundation of a successful partnership between a volunteering program and a health service. Regular, open communication helps build trust, clarify roles and expectations, and ensures both partners can identify and address challenges early while working towards shared goals.

When communication is strong and both partners share a common vision, the partnership can thrive. Together, volunteering programs and health services can create meaningful experiences for volunteers, enhance support for patients and families, and strengthen the compassionate care provided across the community.

"Palliative care is about adding life to days when days can no longer be added to life."

Dame Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern hospice movement