



Informal Volunteering / Self-Activation/ Community Helpers

What is the best way I can help?

When responding to a pandemic, there are many factors we need to consider to ensure our own safety and the safety of others.

The first and easiest way

- The first and easiest way to help is to reach out to family, friends and neighbours. Let them know you are there to help. Here are four simple tips to follow:
- Consider how you approach people – you may not have met some of your neighbours before or may just know them from afar. Some neighbours may not have had visitors at their doors for many weeks. Write a short note to introduce yourself. Include your name, phone number and let them know you are a call away.
- Don't offer assistance if you are sick – your priority in a pandemic is to help stop the spread of the pandemic. It is important to follow government guidelines at all times.
- Don't enter people's homes unless absolutely necessary – phone or text them to let them know you are at their door. Always practice safety and hygiene and social distancing guidelines. Be clear about your duties. It is OK to ask for clarification.
- You are responsible for your own self-care – set boundaries and avoid burnout. Take regular breaks between activities. Looking after yourself should be a priority.

Some things you may offer to help with include:

Food and essential supplies

- Ask for a shopping list and drop groceries at their front door or an agreed protected place
- When delivering items it is important to comply with any guidelines to stop the spread of the pandemic, for
- example, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic social distancing guidelines included:
 - Notifying the person that you are nearby and remind them you will be making a contact-free delivery.
 - When arriving placing the delivery outside the front door or an agreed protected place.
 - Step back at least 1.5 metres and wait to confirm that they have collected the delivery.
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- Help vulnerable people learn about online shopping if they're not already experts.

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and the Northern Territory*

Medical

Offer to pick up prescriptions and medications from the pharmacy and drop at the front door or an agreed protected place. Ensure you abide by guidelines to stop the spread of the pandemic.

Research new ways that vulnerable people can access medical treatment, for example, in the COVID-19 response telehealth was a new option for many people. Safely communicate these new options to your friends, family and neighbours.

Social connection

- A friendly daily phone call or socially distanced wave or chat go a long way to making people feel connected, happy and valued.
- Help vulnerable people understand emerging technologies to stay connected with family, friends, and neighbours. Examples include video calls and group chats.
- Ask an older, vulnerable or isolated person to read a children's book, share a story, or cook a dish via a video recording, call or group chat and share these with neighbours.

Community Helpers

You may be one of the millions of concerned people who have stepped forward and self-activated to volunteer informally in your local community supporting people in need. Community helpers have provided support in myriad ways including connecting with those in need via a phone call, a closed window, a letterbox drop, or a Facebook group to let them know that assistance is available for shopping, picking up medications, or a friendly chat.

These fine expressions of human care and kindness at a local level can make a real difference and are to be commended at uncertain times such as a pandemic. They are a coordinated or uncoordinated spontaneous well-meaning desire to help. When considering this type of informal volunteering, please be mindful of privacy, safety and the care and wellbeing of both yourself, other volunteers, and the person you are helping, and always adhere to the guiding principles of 'do no harm' and 'it's about the impacted community first'.

These self-organising groups are a positive development but there are some risks that need to be considered. Whether it is formal or informal, the organisers of any volunteering have a duty of care to volunteers and to the people they serve.

First and foremost, it is important to keep both volunteers and the community safe and avoid the spread of the virus.

If you are organising informal groups, consider the following:

- **New volunteers:** You will need to carefully think about how you will manage and support people and especially those that may not have volunteered before. Be aware that sometimes people express an interest but then are ultimately unable to help. You will need a plan.
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- **Manage expectations:** Volunteers will have good intentions and be enthusiastic about helping others. However, in a pandemic environment there are obvious limitations such as age, health, location, and varied needs. There may also be more volunteers than required initially but think medium to long term. People drop in and out.
- **Be clear:** Ensure each volunteer understands the job at hand, including any risks. A brief job description will also provide clarity when deciding who is or isn't suitable for the volunteer role.
- **Consider people's literacy levels:** The messages or information you provide to volunteers about their role or to community members about the current situation should be appropriate, accurate, consistent, easy to understand, and constantly reinforced.

Four important challenges and considerations for self-activating groups:

- **Authorisation:** For mobility of volunteers in a restricted travel or full lock-down situation. Groups may need to check in with and gain approval from authorities to be out and about helping others in need.
- **Safety and security:** Personal and other's safety and security needs to be carefully considered to ensure no harm.
- **Insurance:** Self-activating groups are not covered by volunteer insurance. There is currently no solution to this, and volunteers need to be aware of this important consideration.
- **Information:** Provision of information such as what the needs and roles are, safety and security matters, regulations, communication channels, and any logistical or technical issues, is important. This can be done via websites, social media sites, newsletters, letter drops, or tele and video links. Messages and information need to be consistent, come from trusted sources, and constantly reinforced to volunteers.