BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE VOLUNTEERING

Disability inclusive volunteering is not without its challenges, however. This section covers barriers that organisations face in providing inclusive volunteering opportunities for people with disability, and suggested initiatives to overcome them.

These strategies have been identified in research undertaken for the Victoria ALIVE project and from project activities. They are suggestions for individual volunteer-involving organisations to consider and implement if appropriate.

- ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE & ATTITUDES
- ORGANISATIONAL LEADERSHIP & ACTION
- ORGANISATIONAL RESOURCING & CAPACITY
- ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITY
- ORGANISATIONAL SYSTEMS & PROCESSES
- INTER-ORGANISATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Greater Dandenong Disability Inclusive Volunteering

Organisational Culture and Attitudes (Theme 1)

"A lot of amazing skills and knowledge are going un-utilised because of the structural and attitudinal barriers. This so easily can be changed." – **Jake Lewis, Project Governance Group.**

An inclusive culture is a key determinant in overcoming barriers for volunteers. Some organisations are large and well-resourced while others are small, with limited resources. However, organisations with a strong culture of inclusion and a desire to embrace diversity are more likely to be adept at reducing barriers, regardless of resourcing.

Many not-for-profit and community sector organisations have an inclusive mission and consider themselves inherently inclusive places. "It's in our DNA"- **Victoria ALIVE focus group participant.**

Particularly inclusive examples of volunteer-involvement were often founded on a strong, trusting relationship between volunteer manager and volunteer, with both learning from each other over time. Conversely, organisations without a strong culture of inclusion and self-reflection are likely to create barriers, even unknowingly, which cumulatively reduce the participation of people with disability in the volunteer workforce in Victoria.

"One of the main challenges that (volunteers with disability) face is the erroneous belief that it will be too difficult to incorporate disabled people (sic) into the work of our organisations" **Esther Gill 13**.

BARRIERS
Stigma and direct discrimination
One of the mostly commonly identified barriers is the perception that people with disability are not capable of meaningfully contributing to an organisation because of their disability
The soft bigotry of low expectations; staff perceptions that people with disability are incapable of fulfilling roles
People with disability often thought of only as the 'client' or 'patient', and generally as recipients of support rather than as people who add value to an organisation and support others
Unconscious bias and not valuing the expertise and experience of people with disability
Direct discrimination; excluding people because of their disability; limiting the opportunities available to them; treating people differently because of their disability
"Some people want to know and some people just don't want to know" – workshop participant, Voice at the Table

13 Gill, E., (2011) Real people with real issues: Working with disabled volunteers, Heritage Open Days, UK

A lack of familiarity and experience with forms of disability

A lack of sustained, ongoing interaction with diverse communities of all abilities which can lead to anxiety around engaging people with disability. People are afraid of offending or mismanaging interactions with people with disability

A lack of experience with a specific disability, even when an organisation has experience with a specific type of impairment

A lack of understanding of diversity, which contributes to an organisation not being able to offer a space that is culturally safe or accessible

An inability or resistance to recognise 'invisible disabilities'

"Some people deny that I have ID [an intellectual disability]" – workshop participant, Voice at the Table

Organisational commitment

A culture of inclusion requires a whole-of-organisation commitment to inclusion and accessibility. Cultural barriers at a broader organisational level include:

Unrealistic organisational expectations (for example time taken to train someone) and inflexibility (for example shift durations and availability)

Prioritising other operational requirements over inclusion and accessibility

Risk averse thinking and attitudes

A lack of people with disability in the employed workforce and leadership positions

BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE

Stigma and direct discrimination

Active recruitment of people with disability to volunteering, paid and leadership roles

A willingness to be adaptable, flexible and make adjustments as required e.g. adjusting duties or positions descriptions, allow time for shorter hours, time to undertake tasks more slowly etc

Addressing risk averse thinking and shifting to a human rights-based approach

Unconscious bias and not valuing the expertise and experience of people with disability

Adopting an abilities-focused approach; focusing on people's abilities rather than disability

A lack of familiarity and experience with forms of disability

Encouraging a 'growth mindset' for staff; learning through doing

Developing a culturally safe environment by ensuring staff are educated on cultural and diversity awareness; addressing misconceptions and issues as the arise

Organisational commitment

Establishing a Disability Advisory Group or regular consultation with people with disability

Demonstrating organisation-wide that volunteers' work is important and valued. This can be done by:

o   recognising and promoting the achievements of volunteers with disability. Volunteer recognition is one of the eight National Standards for Volunteer Involvement. See - https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/national-standards-and-supporting-material/
o   Actively raising awareness of how inclusion can value add to an organisation.
o   Including a commitment to inclusion and diversity in the mission, vision and values of the organisation.

Being committed to a change process, over the short, medium long-term, without tokenism or reactivism

Overt signs and visual clues that the organisation is inclusive and culturally safe e.g. displaying a logo, affirmative statements and photos of diverse communities

A whole-of-organisation commitment is required, not only from staff but also to ensure volunteers are not discriminated against by other volunteers

Organisational Leadership and Action (Theme 2)

"We've got quite a few people within the organisation with a form of disability and that helps culture. Our CEO has a disability so it truly goes from the top to the bottom" - **Nick Gabb, Western Metro forum, attendee.**

Culture and leadership was found to be a critical determinant of successful inclusion regardless of organisational size or funding constraints. It is likely that a commitment to inclusion at a governance level enables organisations to be adaptable and address other barriers that arise. Strong leadership and inclusive cultures are often inter-related. Leadership which drives organisational inclusivity is not only 'top down' but should also build capacity and embed inclusivity from the bottom up and from side-to-side (including staff and volunteers).

"Leadership is really important – we've had strategic planning with ALL our volunteers, and for me as a leader it's about investing in our volunteers and showing them how important they are." – **Laura, Western Metro, panellist.**

BARRIERS

A lack of leadership on disability inclusion is a barrier to organisations being inclusive and accessible and can result in:

Organisations not prioritising diversity, inclusion and volunteerism

Barriers to people applying for roles or accessing the organisation

Staff not feeling empowered to make the changes required to be inclusive

Barriers to inclusion not being addressed or being ignored

Negative attitudes and the perpetuation of misconceptions

BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE

Organisations with strong leadership on disability inclusion at a governance level empower staff to act and change their practice to be more inclusive. Strategies can include:

An explicit focus on volunteers with disability in the strategic direction of the organisation (e.g. linking to the mission statement, strategic plan, organisational values)

Developing a Disability Action Plan for the organisation

Setting diversity and inclusion targets for the paid and volunteer workforce, including leadership positions

Ensuring volunteering and inclusive practice is adequately resourced in the organisations' budget, including staff training

Seeking governance and advice from people with lived experience of disability

Ensuring volunteering and inclusion is part of quality audit processes of the organisations (e.g. meeting volunteering standards, having people with disability participate in audit process)

Disability Action Planning

Many organisations do not have a Disability Action Plan (DAP) and therefore are not actively considering and implementing a range of strategies to engage a diverse volunteer workforce. Where organisations do have a DAP, they often do not reference their volunteer workforce nor directly implement effective intervention strategies relating to volunteers.

Disability action planning was identified in the Victoria ALIVE research as one of the most effective means of making improvements in an organisation and is recommended as the first step for an organisation wanting to make a more concerted effort towards inclusion.

Given that many organisations have not undertaken this process, there is a need for guidance and encouragement for organisation to initiate the process. While a DAP does not need to be lengthy, an effective DAP should be a living document, requiring regular revisions and actions (for example the DAP approval and reporting could be included in standing orders for Board and Committee meetings).

Governance and advice from people with lived experience with disability

Diverse governance including people with lived experience with disability has flow on effects for the organisation. A survey of volunteer-involving organisations conducted for Victoria ALIVE found that respondents with above average participation rates (of reported number of volunteers with a disability) were twice as likely to have at least one board member with a disability than those with below average participation rates. A clear majority of respondents with more than one board member with disability had above average participation rates.

Another effective practice is to have regular consultation with volunteers around what is and is not working well and incorporating lived experience in discussion and decision making.

There was a tendency for organisations who are particularly inclusive to have a disability champion that fosters participation of volunteers with disability. Champions typically had a special motivation and drive to make positive change, for example having a family member with disability or an earlier role in their career focusing on disability support.

Inclusion and diversity targets

Affirmative measures like targets and quotes for diverse communities are more often used in employment settings than the volunteering context.

Responses to a Victoria ALIVE survey of organisations indicated that levels of volunteers with disability in organisations is below the levels reported for the levels of people with disability employed in government and business. This may in part be due to limitations in collection methods for measuring the numbers of people with disability volunteering (including disclosing disability, protecting privacy, establishing systems to capture data for monitoring and reporting). Nevertheless, our research found that organisations which actively targeted volunteers with disability had above average participation rates of volunteers with disability.

Organisational Resourcing and Capacity (Theme 3)

"Working with people with disabilities – it also gives you access to an excellent new pool of potential workers, and a chance to see how you might creatively problem solve around hiring people with disabilities into your organisation." – **Anthony Aitken, President of Volunteering Geelong.**

Inclusion (like the use of volunteers) does not come free, requiring an appropriate and adequate investment of time, effort, space and resources. Particularly for smaller, community-based organisations, these factors are often constrained by funding limitations.

BARRIERS
Stigma and direct discrimination
A lack of time and resources to implement strategies and initiatives
The time and expense of training for staff and volunteers to work with people with disabilities
High workloads and turnover of staff
Possible costs involved in meeting the specific access requirements of individuals
Costs in improving access to inclusive information and signage
The expense of legislative compliance
The time and cost of other investments required to make the work environment fully accessible including assistive technologies, hearing loops, large print, accessible website, and software.
A reliance on grants for funding. Grants are often time-limited and one-off, application processes are time consuming exercises, and grants frequently do not provide the continued assistance and funding required to make sustainable changes.
Physical access
Many organisations operate out of older buildings which do not conform to universal building regulations
Organisations which commonly utilise a volunteer workforce, such as not-for-profit and community organisations, are often constrained financially and therefore do not have the capacity to lease newer buildings or undertake building upgrades

Resourcing for volunteer management

A successful volunteer program also requires an investment of time and resources. "We need to provide individualised support, not one size fits all, because it doesn't." - Christine, Western Metro forum

A lack of understanding of the value of volunteering by other staff and limited opportunities for training or education

A lack of dedicated staff to support volunteers or staff feeling too stretched to properly support volunteers

A lack of resources to support and maintain systems for volunteering

Limited volunteering opportunities available, particularly for people with disability

BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE

Funding and resources

Stable and consistent funding opportunities that enable the development of inclusive volunteer programs and initiatives within organisations

Funding and improved access to inclusion and disability awareness training for staff

Physical access

Funding support to make adaptions to the physical environment and access assistive technologies for volunteers (funding is currently only available for those in paid roles)

Increased awareness of the availability of assistive technologies and accessible equipment

Resources for volunteer management

Funding for volunteer coordination is required, such as a dedicated role to ensure the organisation is accessible and inclusive for volunteers with disability. This is particularly the case for small organisations, that are predominantly volunteer-run

Increased support resources, including dedicated volunteer support services for including volunteers with disability

Mentors and buddies

Not all people with a disability require formal support workers. Some people require no additional support while others may only require a short period of guidance to settle in or someone to go to just in case. Providing a mentor or buddy from within the organisation or volunteer program can be a great way to address this

More information: www.victoriaalive.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Using-mentors-buddies-or-other-support-1.pdf

Organisational Capability (Theme 4)

"We want to make sure if there's a person living with a disability who is willing and able to participate in a volunteer capacity, then we're going to work very closely with them to ensure that they can achieve that." – **Elias Lebbos, CEO Travellers Aid.**

An organisation's capability is often reflected through its competencies, attributes, attitudes and behaviours. These factors contribute to the capability of an organisation to be inclusive of volunteers with disability. While there are many aspects of capability that influence inclusion, the skills, knowledge and strengths of staff are often a key factor. "We are not disability experts", said one volunteer manager in a focus group. Training in aspects of disability is therefore seen by many organisations to be an essential part of healthy inclusion and diversity.

"I think it's really important to remember you don't have to know everything about every disability to be inclusive." – **Melissa Hale, Coordinator DARU.**

BARRIERS

Skills, competency & the need for training

Many organisations lack confidence and key information around disability. The disability cohorts that organisations are involved with vary from organisation to organisation. Therefore training needs to be tailored to the organisation and be disability specific. For example training specifically on how to support people with vision impairment is different from the knowledge and skills needed to support volunteers on the autism spectrum

Lack of training and lack of time to undertake training: in small organisations there is often a lack of personnel to backfill while others train

Lack of confidence: fear by organisation of doing or saying something wrong; fear of not being able to handle incidents – especially in regard to people with mental illness

The need for guidance to re-imagine and design roles for volunteers and/or match volunteers with meaningful tasks appropriate for their abilities

Lack of knowledge and experience in how to educate volunteers without disability or staff in inclusion, and how to deal with negative attitudes

The need for whole of organisation training

Respectful communication

A lack of confidence to deliver required messages or information, while still being respectful

The need for time to build relationships with volunteers and understand their perspective

Staff not being aware of their attitudes, assumptions and biases that can inform their responses

A lack of knowledge on how to respond respectfully to disclosures

A lack of awareness on appropriate language around disability

Specialist volunteer role & reflective practice

Organisations consistently reflected on the need for specialist roles to support volunteers. This role was considered essential for all volunteers, particularly in promoting the inclusion of volunteers with disability. The purpose of this role was seen as co-ordinating volunteer activities, providing support and mentoring, and addressing issues as they arise

Similarly, reflective practice was seen as critical to ensuring the organisation was inclusive and accessible, and providing a culturally safe environment. Reflective practice was needed to promote self-awareness and early identification of issues

BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE

Skills, competency & the need for training

Disability awareness training for staff and volunteers including information about particular impairments (especially mental health issues).

Training that is organisation-wide and ongoing but also "as needed" and sometimes specific to particular impairments. The delivery of specific or multiple training sessions may be problematic for people already short of time.

Respondents to the Victoria ALIVE research suggested that if organisations were allowed a discretionary training budget which they must spend and for which they were accountable, this would allow them to organise their own training according to their needs.

Respectful communication

Learning communications skills and strategies on how to be respectful towards people with disability, including active listening and a relational approach to reduce bias

Learning about appropriate language to use around disability

Asking the individual if questions arise about the their skills or requirements, rather than making assumptions

Ensuring volunteers are called by their name, have a name badge, are welcomed and acknowledged.

Taking time to build relationships and maintaining regular times for communication and feedback.

Specialist volunteer roles & reflective practice

Accessing or allocating funding for specialist volunteer support roles

Embedding reflective practice in the organisation, through allocation of time for supervision or regular meetings with staff and volunteers

Promoting reflection on unconscious bias and assumptions to promote increased cultural safety

Disability awareness training

"Managers lack the confidence to take on people with disabilities" – **Judith Buckingham, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria.**

Through Victoria ALIVE research, volunteer managers were asked for their views on how to build disability awareness capacity and their preferences for future opportunities.

Training stood out as the most powerful tool used by organisations to increase their capacity to be inclusive. In cases where training was used most effectively, the training was ongoing, organisation wide, face to face, specific to a particular disability or disabilities and involved people with disability.

Face to face training has the advantages of:

- a live presenter who is able to field specific questions which a webinar or manual does not address.
- it does not leave it up to an individual to find time they do not have and thus put it on a the 'back burner'.
- training can be tailored to a specific organisation, addressing their existing strengths and needs.
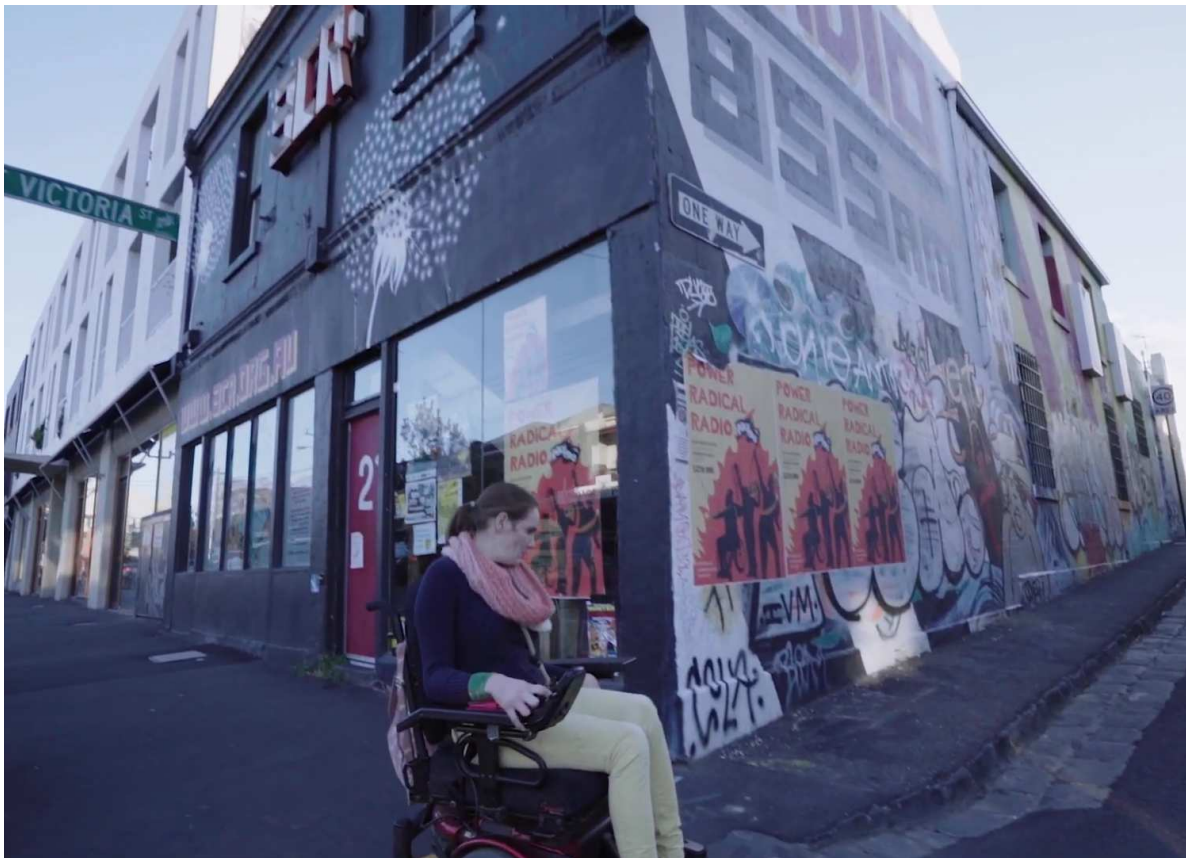

Image 4: Stella volunteers as a Radio Presenter at 3CR radio station

Organisational Systems and Processes (Theme 5)

Barriers related to organisational systems was one of the dominant themes identified in the community forums, particularly the systems and processes in place for working with, supporting and managing volunteers. These issues were seen to impact organisations and volunteers alike, with the capacity to negatively impact the volunteer experience.

Making small changes to systems and practices not only benefits the organisation and supports the development of a robust and diverse volunteer program, but also can promote positive volunteering experiences for people with disability, providing a wide range of benefits.

BARRIERS

Effective systems for volunteer management

The current systems and processes in place for volunteer management are often not well designed for including working with volunteers with disability. These 'back of house' dynamics create hidden restraints for staff and volunteer managers

Processes that are not responsive to the diversity of people with disabilities

Policies and procedures that do not reflect inclusivity

The anticipated, additional need of supporting administration and back end organisational support (resource management, role design, networking, policy development and so on)

The need for supportive resources to guide practice

The need for processes to appropriately plan, implement and evaluate systems, incorporating the perspective of people with disability

Issues through the volunteering life cycle

Inaccessible information, advertising and application processes

A reliance on technology for advertising which can be a barrier for people with technology access or skills

Limited knowledge on how to promote opportunities to reach different members of the community

Position descriptions need to be checked for accessibility and unnecessary barriers eliminated (such as requiring a drivers licence or fitness for heavy lifting when the role does not in fact require it)

The lack of adaptability within an organisation regarding the requirements of the volunteer role (for example, flexibility in hours or shifts) and the inability to redesign a volunteer role

Challenges with matching people to the right roles based on their abilities, particularly if their disability has not been disclosed

Inadequate induction processes and support when first starting a role

Training that is not adaptable to different learning needs

A lack of confidence in providing feedback, managing performance and exiting volunteers in specific circumstances

The volunteering experience

While all of the barriers listed above have the potential to reduce access to volunteering and negatively impact the volunteer experience, there were also other issues identified from a volunteer perspective that could pose a barrier to a meaningful volunteering experience

Organisations not understanding and responding to the volunteer's personal motivations behind volunteering and their professional goals

A lack of awareness of specific needs or requirements

A lack of meaningful roles, flexibility in roles, or opportunities for skills development

A lack of pathways to employment (when desired)

Volunteers not feeling valued or 'having a voice'

BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE

Effective systems for volunteer management

Having processes for reviewing and re-designing existing volunteer management systems to ensure they are inclusive and accessible

Develop procedures for evaluation and measuring the outcomes of systems, that include the perspective of people with disability

Developing systems and strategies that are adaptable and flexible to support the individual needs of volunteers with disability

Ensuring there are accessible policies and procedures in place before engaging a volunteer

Issues through the volunteering life cycle

Advertising roles in an accessible format and in a broad variety of forums, including those accessed by people with disability

Designing clear and appropriate position descriptions, volunteer roles and agreements

Taking time during the recruitment process to understand the motivations, skills and passions of volunteer as well as any support needs

Ensuring that the volunteer roles are meaningful and utilise the volunteer's skills

Having some volunteer roles that are designed specifically for people with disability

Promotion of the organisation as accessible on all organisational collateral and advertising materials such as course programs, Facebook, newspaper ads and so on

The volunteering experience

Develop mentor/buddy programs to provide support and enable the volunteer's professional growth

Identify opportunities for skills building and create meaningful pathways for volunteers, where possible

Establish clear mechanisms for feedback to promote volunteers with disability having a voice and being actively involved in informing programs and services

Offer flexible learning approaches suited to the individual

Informal and formal reward and recognition

"It's really important wherever you are on your inclusive journey to ask yourselves 'how are we including people with disability in the design of this?' and 'how are we valuing their expertise' and 'how are we keeping them front and centre in the design of our volunteer programs?" – Leah Van Poppel, CEO of Women with Disabilities Victoria

Inter-organisational Partnerships (Theme 6)

"If your organisation is wanting to engage more with people with disability, reach out to some like-minded organisations in the disability sector who might be able to work with you on projects. That's a really good way of bringing in lots of people, but really one of the best ways is to talk to your own community" - **Helen Gwilliam, 3CR, Victoria ALIVE Video Series.**

A novel finding from the Victoria ALIVE research was a tendency for particularly inclusive organisations to have partnerships with other organisations. Having relationships with disability organisations is important in developing an organisation culture and for the successful inclusion of volunteers with disability. Partnerships between community organisations and disability organisations are often reciprocal relationships providing opportunities for learning and pathways for skills development, volunteering and employment. Disability organisations can also be a valuable partner in providing information and support for volunteers with disability when required.

BARRIERS

While there are many benefits to developing partnerships with disability organisations, a significant number of organisations do not have such relationships and may face barriers in doing so

A lack of time and resource to develop partnerships

Lower coverage of disability services, which is particularly challenging for rural communities and likely lowers the opportunities for partnerships and the rate of organisations that have volunteers with disability

Specialisation in a particular area or type of disability may promote the perception that an organisation is inclusive of all disabilities

BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE

Strategies for developing inter organisation partnerships include:

Promoting volunteer roles and opportunities directly to local disability organisations (including disability service providers, peak bodies and special schools)

Actively engaging disability organisations in the process of referring volunteers and recruiting people with disability already engaged with the organisation

Approaching people to participate in the organisation in an advisory capacity or to contribute to service development

Approaching disability organisations for information or training opportunities

Inviting disability organisations to open days or information sessions

Approaching organisations to partner on projects, initiatives or grant applications

Develop communities of practice to share ideas and learn from each other