

Questions and Answers

Volunteer South West - EMPOWER

Primary Priority Group focus: Vulnerable Women

Project summary:

EMPOWER provided vulnerable women with a safe, supportive space to learn about volunteering and build skills at their own pace. It addressed challenges like low confidence, social isolation, and limited community connections – factors that often affect mental health. By practicing transferable skills such as communication and teamwork, participants gradually improved their confidence, wellbeing, and soft employment skills.

Using these insights, Volunteer South West supported Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) to better engage women facing barriers by reviewing current practices, identifying gaps, and developing volunteer roles that better meet women's needs.

Questions asked after presentation and responses:

1) What extent was role carving part of this program to meet individual requirements?

Creating micro-volunteering opportunities was the biggest part. These short, simple, low-commitment tasks were themselves a form of role carving, designed specifically to meet the needs of women who were not yet ready for traditional roles. Partnering with VIOs and other Service Providers made it a lot easier to create meaningful volunteering opportunities for the women.

Those who were ready to volunteer at an organisation found what they needed and were interested in within our available positions (we have a huge variety in our member base and available volunteering opportunities).

2) What draw cards did you use to entice women into your program. How did you get people to come back each week?

The drawcards varied depending on each woman's background and motivation. For women from CALD backgrounds, the key attractors were opportunities to connect with the community, practise English, and learn new skills in a safe and welcoming environment. These women were highly motivated to leave the house, meet others, and build their networks. For long-term unemployed women, volunteering was appealing as a purposeful pathway toward future employment and a way to meet Centrelink participation requirements. Women with FDV experiences or mental health challenges required more time and reassurance; for them, the drawcard was having a calm, non-judgmental space where they could participate at their own pace. To encourage ongoing attendance, we focused on building trust and maintaining gentle, consistent contact. We learned that we could only move at the speed of trust. When women didn't return immediately, we stayed connected through uplifting text messages and emails, reminding them they were welcome whenever they felt ready.

3) How have you managed to increase flexibility for volunteer roles in organisations who have rigid structures and processes?

Breaking existing roles into smaller, manageable tasks and creating micro-volunteering opportunities proved to be key strategies for reducing administrative barriers and

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making participation more accessible for vulnerable women. We supported smaller organisations by helping them design new roles based on our conversations or by rewriting existing position descriptions to make them more inclusive, transparent, and easier to understand.

In larger organisations – particularly in health and aged care – our influence was more advisory. While their regulatory requirements limit flexibility, we were still able to inspire Volunteer Managers to consider small but meaningful adjustments. Sometimes simple changes, such as using less formal language, can make a significant difference. Likewise, replacing an initial email full of paperwork with a brief personal conversation helps women feel welcomed, heard, and more confident to take the next step.

4) Who did you seek input from to develop your program? (*specialist*)

We received input from:

- Organisations working with FDV survivors like Harbour, South West Women's Health & Information Centre, Yourtoolkit
- Employment Service Providers like AKG Australia (formerly MAX Employment) or APM
- Mental Health Service Providers like Pathways SW, Richmond Wellbeing or Headspace
- Anglicare
- Bunbury Multicultural Group and Multicultural Services Centre WA
- South West Aboriginal Women's Collective

5) How did you identify the needs of the group you worked with?

We identified the needs through an extensive research and planning phase. The desktop research included in-depth conversations with organisations that work with vulnerable women, previously VMA-funded organisations who worked with this target audience and also one-on-one conversations with women who have lived experience.

6) How do you ensure duty of care for your volunteers/mentees when one on one with a not so trained or new mentor?

Most of our participants living with mental health challenges or other related issues joined our groups with their support workers to ensure safety and informed care.