

COVID-19 Rapid Antigen Tests, Personal Protective Equipment, and Volunteers: Position Statement

Volunteering Australia calls on the Australian Government to work with the State and Territory Governments to ensure free rapid antigen tests and personal protective equipment (such as face masks) are available to volunteer involving organisations which provide essential services.

Volunteers have contributed immensely to the delivery of essential services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The demand for services delivered by volunteers, which include emergency and food relief, crisis support, domestic/family/gender-based violence hotlines, aged care, disability care, and mental health support, remains high as Australia navigates ongoing outbreaks of the Omicron variant of COVID-19.

At the same time, the capacity of organisations to deliver services is under significant strain, with 80 per cent of community services organisations experiencing an increase in demand as of late 2021.¹ A recent survey found that a majority (59 per cent) of for-purpose organisations that engage volunteers were experiencing a demand for volunteer-led services specifically.² Ensuring that volunteers are safe while volunteering will be essential to supporting ongoing service delivery.

However, volunteer involving organisations have not received adequate support to minimise the risks to volunteers of continued engagement, including in the provision of rapid antigen tests. As governments consider measures to ensure the viability of essential services during the current outbreak of COVID-19, the needs of volunteer involving organisations must be considered.

Many volunteers have been hesitant to return to their roles due to the risks of COVID-19. If rapid antigen tests are not available to organisations, then appropriate and timely testing and isolation procedures will not be possible. This increases the risk and uncertainty associated with volunteering during the current outbreak, limiting volunteer involvement. The provision of rapid antigen tests and personal protective equipment to volunteers involved in the delivery of essential services would help to slow the spread of the virus among service providers and recipients and ensure that the involvement of volunteers in these organisations is safe and sustainable. It would also alleviate financial burden on organisations which already face significant strain.

- The Australian Government, in partnership with State and Territory Governments, should ensure that free rapid antigen tests and personal protective equipment are provided to all organisations involved in the provision of essential services, for both paid staff and volunteers.
- The provision of rapid antigen tests to volunteer involving organisations which provide essential services should be urgently arranged while supply chain issues are addressed.
- Rapid antigen tests should be made available on an ongoing basis to volunteer involving organisations, including small organisations, which provide essential services.

¹ https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Demand-snapshot_ACSS-2021_v3.pdf, 15

² https://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/final_report_pulse_of_the_for-purpose_sector_wave_2.pdf