

# Australian Volunteers

for International Development

## Volunteering as a family – is it right for you?

*Australian Volunteers for International Development program*

*The details provided below are guidelines for people volunteering with Australian Volunteers International (AVI) as part of the **Australian Volunteers for International Development (Australian Volunteers)** program. This information will support you in making the decision whether volunteering is right for you and your family.*

*Some aspects of the terms and conditions of the **Australian Volunteers** program are still in draft form, and there may be minor changes before finalisation in late 2011.*

Please read these notes and discuss the issues raised with your family. Our recruitment consultants are available to clarify any points with you. We will explore all the issues with you during the recruitment process.

**AVI will not accept families in some locations, due to unacceptable levels of risk.**

### Eligibility

To be eligible to formally participate in the Australian Volunteers program, all family applicants need to be:

- Australian Citizens,
- Australian Permanent Residents or
- New Zealand Citizens, residing in Australia.

If any family member is not eligible, please refer to the notes relevant to Category 3 below.

In some countries, it will not be possible to gain a dependant visa for a non-married couple. In other places, due to the strength of belief systems, it may be disrespectful to nominate a non-married couple as program participants.

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### Next Steps

To discuss your interest further, please call the Recruitment Team at AVI.

**Email:** [recruit@australianvolunteers.com](mailto:recruit@australianvolunteers.com)

**Toll-free (only in Australia):** 1800 331 292

**AVI Office:** +61 3 9279 1788

**Website:** [www.australianvolunteers.com](http://www.australianvolunteers.com)

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## The work of families within the Australian Volunteers program

The work and interactions of families has often contributed great value to development goals and a deep level of partnership with host communities and organisations. Families are often the most resilient of Volunteer program participants, able to rely on each other for support through all the joys, successes and challenges that the experience can bring.

At other times, however, the resources of the host community, Host Organisation and AVI Support have not been able to meet underlying expectations or unforeseen challenges that some families have faced. This Fact Sheet has been prepared for potential Volunteers as a base from which to start their own research and begin to inform their commitment to the shared responsibilities of volunteering.

Families on the Australian Volunteers program generally fit into one of four categories:

1. Couples who are both volunteering with their own Australian Volunteers program assignment – co-located assignments, with accompanying dependent children
2. A Volunteer, with a partner accompanying as an Approved Accompanying Dependent (AAD) who is a formal participant in the Australian Volunteers program, and their dependent children
3. A Volunteer, who is accompanied by a partner who is not a formal participant in the Australian Volunteers Program, and their dependent children who may or may not be formal participants in the Australian Volunteers program
4. A Volunteer who would be the sole parent of their accompanying dependent children

There is no provision under the Australian Volunteers program for part-time assignments or formal job-share.

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## Options for families on the Australian Volunteers program

### 1. Co-located assignments<sup>1</sup> - both partners working as Volunteers

We ask potential candidates to identify available assignments that are a match for one or both of their individual interests and skills, regardless of where these assignments are located. Before applying, we ask the couple to call and discuss their interest in co-located assignments with the Recruitment Consultant managing one of the identified assignments. The recruitment consultant will be able to provide guidance on which location might have the highest likelihood of co-located assignments, considering the skill sets of both partners. This guidance will involve co-ordination with the AVI Country Managers, who develop Host Organisation requests into Volunteer Assignments.

We cannot guarantee that we will be able to identify co-located assignments. Arrangements for co-located assignments are not available for assignments that are less than twelve (12) months in duration.

Generally, one partner will then proceed to make an application for an advertised assignment, and the other partner will wait while any possible Host Organisation requests are reviewed and developed into an Assignment.

Sometimes, this second assignment may not be ready for application until after the start date of the first assignment. In this case, the partner without a finalised assignment will be assessed and mobilised as an Approved Accompanying Dependent (see next section) and be further assessed and nominated for the co-located assignment while in country.

Where co-located assignments are planned, both partners will undertake the full assessment for Volunteer assignments, in relation to Personal Circumstances, Personal Competencies and Professional / Technical Competencies. Both partners need to be successful in their assessments.

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<sup>1</sup> Co-located assignments means assignments that are situated close enough together to allow a couple to live together

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## 2. One partner Volunteering - the other partner participating as an Approved Accompanying Dependent (AAD)

When applying for a Volunteer assignment, applicants are asked to identify that they will be requesting for their partner to accompany them as a dependant. If an applicant is short-listed as a well-matched candidate for the assignment, their partner will be invited to commence assessment to become an AAD.

Both partners go through the same Personal Circumstances and Personal Competency assessment process before they can be offered a place in the program. The only difference in assessment is that the AAD candidate does not need to establish a match to particular Professional/Technical selection criteria. Both partners need to be successful in their applications. Both partners are required to formally agree to the Australian Volunteers program Code of Conduct.

AVI values the input of accompanying dependants, recognising their contribution to the successful achievement of assignment objectives, their support - formal and informal - of the Volunteer, and the multi-dimensional links that they can form within a community.

However, for the AAD, there are both programmatic and visa constraints on activities they are able to undertake in country. All Australian Volunteers Program Participants<sup>2</sup> agree not to engage in any paid work and/or business enterprise for personal gain in the host country. In some countries, even unpaid volunteer work cannot be undertaken by dependants of people who have been provided with the privilege of a Working Visa.

Support for an AAD is only available for assignments that are twelve (12) months or longer in duration. An AAD may start their placement through a later In-Country Orientation date than the Volunteer, and/or return from the assignment earlier than the Volunteer. However, to be eligible for AAD status and support, the AAD is required to commit to accompanying the Volunteer for at least 50% of the assignment duration. At times it may be necessary for an AAD to leave their partner during the course of the assignment. The program is able to support one break of up to 4 weeks, if discussed with and approved by the Country Manager.

In some cases, after mobilising as an AAD, a partner may find work outside of the Australian Volunteers program. They are able to withdraw from the Australian Volunteers program, with appropriate notice and consultation with AVI through the Country Manager. Care would need to be taken to ensure transparent and appropriate visa transition arrangements are made. An AAD leaving the program will need to make their own arrangements for such things as visas, medical and emergency insurance coverage, security and emergency evacuation contingencies, and return home airfares.

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### **3. One partner volunteering - the other partner not participating on the Australian Volunteers program**

In some cases, a Volunteer may wish to have a partner accompany them on their assignment without being part of the Australian Volunteers program. This is generally where the partner does not meet the citizenship eligibility for the program, or they have their own separate work arrangements.

When applying for a Volunteer assignment, applicants are asked to identify that they would be taking up the assignment with an accompanying dependent, who would not be applying to be an AAD. Accompanying partners who are not AADs are not eligible to receive any funding - neither coverage of costs nor allowances.

AVI still has a duty of care to explore issues pertaining to the partner that may impact on the Volunteer candidate's likelihood to successfully carry out their assignment. A common expectation around the Australian Volunteers program Code of Conduct would need to be reached with both partners. Issues that might impact a Volunteer's work or standing in the community might flow from a partner engaging in activities that did not abide by the host countries laws; their involvement in political, cultural or religious matters; disrespect for national or religious symbols; or involvement in proselytising.

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## Funding available for families

All Program Participants are provided with funding to cover some major costs – vaccinations, airfares within Australia for Pre-Departure Briefing, airfare to and from the assignment, medical and emergency insurance, in-country orientation, security arrangements and re-entry support.

Accompanying partners and dependents who are not AADs on the Volunteer Program are not able to receive any funding - neither coverage of costs nor allowances.

If **both partners are successful in securing co-located Volunteer assignments**, they will each receive the Living Allowance allocated for that location, the Settling in Grant of \$1,000<sup>2</sup> and Return Home Allowance<sup>\*</sup> of \$1,200. In some cases, housing may be provided by one of the employers, or each Volunteer may be provided with accommodation allowances. Accommodation allowances are set at a level to afford modest, secure, single housing within the community. In some high-cost locations, this allowance may only cover rent in a shared house arrangement. The family will also receive a Dependant Allowance (DA) for each dependent child to contribute to some of the additional costs. Please ask your recruitment consultant for the Dependant Allowance applicable in the countries in which you are interested.

In the case where there is **one Volunteer and one or more AADs**, the Volunteer will be eligible for the Living Allowance allocated for that location, the Settling in Grant of \$1,000\* and Return Home Allowance\* of \$1,200. Housing will be supported either by the employer providing accommodation, or the provision of an accommodation allowance. The Volunteer will also receive a Dependant Allowance for each accompanying dependent, to contribute to some of the additional costs. Please ask your recruitment consultant for the DA applicable in the countries in which you are interested.

The DA is rarely sufficient to cover all the living and accommodation expenses for a family, and some expenses would need to be self-funded.

*The availability of financial support for accompanying partners and dependants varies widely across the different programs that we manage at AVI.*

## Accommodation – will accommodation provided by the employer be suitable for us?

In some cases, the accommodation provided by an employer may not be suitable for the needs of your family. In this case, the family may need to fully or partly self-fund alternative accommodation. In some locations, there may be a lack of alternative accommodation suitable for the family needs. This will be discussed with candidates during the recruitment process. It is not possible to meet the needs of all families.

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<sup>2</sup> The Settling in Grant and Return Home Allowances are paid on assignments of more than six (6) months duration.

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## Challenges facing volunteering couples

All Volunteers face a wide range of interpersonal and cultural challenges in adjusting to their work and new community, to successfully carry out their assignment objectives, manage a sustainable exit from this work, and return and readjust to life back in Australia. The rewards from the effort required to overcome these difficulties often form the basis of much of what Returned Volunteers treasure about their experience.

However, in our experience, families face serious challenges that require all family members to be highly committed and well-prepared. Identifying and planning for impacts on your emotional and relationship dynamics in this new experience will assist you in deciding if volunteering is the best choice for you at this time, and for preparing for a successful assignment together.

### Some common challenges that couples face as Volunteers include:

1. Adjusting to being away together in an isolated context. Issues Volunteers have identified include: being isolated from friends or family; being constantly together in the absence of a variety of social activities, no opportunity to interact closely with significant others. Some areas for you to discuss:
  - a. How do you foster your relationship now? How will you be able to continue this practice, or build alternative practices on assignments?
  - b. How will you check with each other if your previously preferred roles and needs change? For instance, one or both partners may become more emotionally reliant on the other in the absence of friends and family.
2. Dealing with the pressures associated with one partner finding it much harder to adjust than the other and possibly even wanting to return.
3. Dealing with issues that may arise if one partner is working and enjoying success, for instance - access to networks, developing language skills, a sense of purpose - while the other partner is isolated at home. Alternatively, the Volunteer may face overwhelming challenges in the work-place, while the other is enjoying building community relationships.
4. For a non-working partner, there are often challenges in building a satisfying and self-sufficient life-style without a formal role and with limited social infrastructure.
5. Adjusting to the 'place' of Volunteers within an expatriate social strata can be very challenging – limited financial resources and the Volunteering ethos may mean that one or both partners will find it more difficult to befriend or relate to expatriate peers who often have access to greater financial and organisational resources.

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6. Adjusting senses of self identify and relationship dynamics, when local cultural norms of couples differs from the practices and implicit values of the Volunteer couple. Misperceptions about Western stereotypes can add to the pressure some couples might encounter. Volunteer couples have encountered difficulties in communities that recognise one gender over the other or have expectations regarding the behaviour of one gender. For instance, women may not be expected to work outside the home, to have a more subservient role, and not to have equal decision-making input. These tensions can impact couples on two levels – one about confronting and dealing with changes, and at a deeper level, dealing with how the changes may be affecting your partner and impacting on your relationship.
7. Volunteers might find locals attracted to them for reasons that have very little to do with their personalities. In some countries Westerners are considered attractive partners for reasons such as being perceived to be able to provide financial security or increased social status in the community. Trying to form platonic friendships across genders might be very difficult or easily misconstrued. Rumour and gossip may be very prevalent and hurtful. Within the relationship these issues can cause tensions and feelings of power, powerlessness, jealousy and insecurity.
8. For bisexual or gay/lesbian couples, there are often increased complexities in adapting to differing legal sanctions and cultural norms regarding homosexuality. Gay and lesbian couples have served successfully on our program; however, behavioural adaptation is generally required in terms of discretion and lifestyle. There may be barriers to advocating the human rights of gays and lesbians, as in some of the countries in which AVI works, there are national laws prohibiting homosexuality which can include severe penalties.

## **Some common challenges that families with children face as volunteers:**

1. **Heightened health concerns** - the needs / expectations of expatriate families can overburden local health care facilities, and the time lapse in being able to get a family member to first-world standard medical care in the event of even a small emergency can be a source of great anxiety, and in some cases, unacceptable risk. While AVI is able to provide the option of vaccination choices for adults on the programs, it is unable to provide medical clearance for children who are not considered fully immunised, due to our Child Protection policies. Mental health is as important as physical health, and all members of a volunteer family would need to actively practice self-care throughout all the cycles of stress inherent in a volunteer assignment.

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- 2. High risk of social isolation for children** - the needs / expectations of children being moved into a developing world environment, and then repatriated, often has far-reaching and unexpected consequences. While on volunteer assignment, there is no additional funding available for education support, and in many locations the only option available may be home-schooling. If international schools are available, the costs are generally very high, and may cause conflicts between the Volunteer parents' expectations of immersion in a local community, and the expatriate lifestyle the children observe their classmates living. Foreign children may not be eligible to enrol in local schools. Where local schools are an option, few children have successfully been integrated. Common issues reported are language barriers, social isolation, bullying, corporal punishment, teaching styles and mis-matched academic expectations. Re-entering the Australian culture after an extended absence causes heightened stress for most returning Volunteers and this has often difficult for children.
- 3. High needs of children for parental support while on assignment** – adjustment to new community and education environments has often meant that children have more need of parental support than was originally anticipated. This has meant that one partner of a couple may have had to forgo their own goals to be involved in development, community or career pursuits for extended periods of the assignment.
- 4. High costs of supporting children on assignment, and repatriating them back in Australia** - our Volunteers with families report that they generally have under-estimated the funds that they need to have put aside to cover the expenses of their children while volunteering. Almost all report that the costs they meet on returning to Australia are much greater than they anticipated, and can cause a great deal of added stress at a time when all members of the family have increased vulnerability with re-entry shock.
- 5. High investment in research and planning prior to an assignment** - while AVI shares the responsibility of gathering relevant information with Volunteer candidates, AVI does not have the resources to do the in-depth and specialised research into the issues relevant to families. Our country offices and serving Volunteers are not able to gather all the real-time information that a family needs to be well-prepared for an application. Thus, potential family candidates would need to invest in their own research and demonstrate their commitment to this during the application process.

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## Starting or enlarging a family while volunteering

There are many implications involved in starting or enlarging a family while on an international assignment. There are elevated medical and safety risks to expectant mothers and their children during pregnancy because the nature of volunteering is to be immersed within developing country environments, and there is a lack of timely access to medical services equivalent to those in Australia. In addition, Volunteers commit themselves to their Host Organisation for an agreed duration. As the employer of the Volunteer, the Host Organisation is not obliged to alter terms and conditions of the assignment if the Volunteer or their partner becomes pregnant and cannot work for all or part of the time committed.

Volunteer candidates and Program Participants demonstrate their ownership of the responsibility for managing the risks of volunteering by providing full and immediate disclosure of a pregnancy to AVI.

AVI will not accept families or pregnant Program Participants as applicants for assignments in some locations, due to unacceptable levels of risk. If a Program Participant becomes pregnant while serving in one of these locations, the Participant will be provided with support to finalise their assignment or AAD status and return to Australia as soon as is practicable.

Candidates and Program Participants will accept the responsibility to prepare a Health Management Plan for the pregnancy, through consultation with their health provider/s. The Health Management Plan will include a letter from the consulting doctor, advising the expected due date. The Health Management Plan will be provided to AVI's Medical Consultant for approval and clearance. AVI's Medical Consultant will be able to provide guidance to the Candidate or Program Participant of what needs to be covered in the Health Management Plan for specific locations.

Program Participants whose Health Management Plan is not approved will be provided with support to finalise their assignment or AAD status and return to Australia as soon as is practicable.

Candidates and Program Participants will disclose the implications of their approved Health Management Plan to their Recruitment Consultant and/or In-country Manager. Program Participants will accept the responsibility to diligently follow their Health Management Plan.

Program Participants with an approved Health Management Plan are provided with insurance coverage for unexpected medical complications or emergencies related to the pregnancy, occurring up to the end of the 28th week of a pregnancy. All other pre-natal care is not covered by the insurance policy. There will not be any medical or emergency insurance coverage of any pregnancy related services after the 28th week of pregnancy.

Program Participants who are pregnant and who have an approved Health Management Plan for the pregnancy will finish their assignment or finish their AAD status by no later than the 28th week of their pregnancy. Program Participants will be expected to return to Australia by no later than the 28th week of their pregnancy, utilising the funds for their exit flight, which will be provided by AVI. Program Participants will be strongly encouraged to return to Australia for the birth of their child.