

valuing volunteering

Basic principles

In general, individuals can volunteer for as long and as frequently as they wish without affecting any of their social welfare payments. However, for those who are in receipt of payments from the Department of Social and Family Affairs due to being unemployed or disabled, certain restrictions do apply.

Volunteering when unemployed

Volunteering Ireland believes that people who are unemployed should have the right to volunteer and be encouraged, but never forced, to undertake voluntary work. It benefits all:

- *Society in general:* All manner of 'causes' benefit from the time, energy and individual skills and qualities that unemployed people contribute when they are volunteering. Volunteering helps to create a more civil and socially inclusive society.
- *Unemployed people themselves:* Volunteering can act as a confidence booster for out-of-work people. While helping others, they can use and improve their current skills and develop new ones. They get a chance to do something useful at the same time as keeping in touch with the day-to-day demands of work and meeting new people (who may in turn be able to help them find paid work).
- *Potential employers:* By volunteering, unemployed people are showing potential employers that they can commit to work, are used to the work routine and have recently used, and possibly improved, their skills.

The Voluntary Work Option

Registered unemployed people can do certain forms of voluntary work without losing their Unemployment Assistance or Unemployment Benefit (and any other entitlements) while remaining on the live register. Examples of the type of voluntary work which may be done include helping elderly, sick or disabled people or assisting in a church group, youth club or other community organisation. The following two criteria must be met:

- The individual must still meet the conditions for getting their unemployment payment, that is, s/he must be genuinely seeking work and be available to take up work as soon as the opportunity arises.
- The voluntary organisation must have official approval from the individual's local employment exchange before taking on the volunteer. To do this, the organisation must complete a simple application form (VWI) which can be obtained from the local office of the Department of Social and Family Affairs or Volunteering Ireland.

Volunteering by people who have a disability

Volunteering Ireland strongly believes that people with a disability should have the opportunity to volunteer, if they wish to do so. Undertaking voluntary work is of benefit to the volunteers themselves as well as others in society (including potential employers). Generally, voluntary work is much more flexible and geared to the needs of the individual than paid employment can ever be. For example, if someone cannot commit to work for long hours or on a regular basis as a result of their disability, this can usually be taken into consideration by the organisation that they are volunteering with, highlighting the unique nature of voluntary action.

Volunteering and disability-related social welfare payments

There are a number of different disability-related social welfare payments which may be claimed. Entitlement to these and associated benefits is normally affected if any employment is taken up by the person claiming a disability payment. However, if voluntary activity adheres to the following conditions, payments should not be affected:

- For people on **Disability Benefit** and **Injury Benefit**, it is possible to do light voluntary work for which no money is (or would normally be) paid, or volunteering under a charitable scheme. The Disability Benefit/Injury Benefit sections of the Department must be contacted beforehand.
- People on **Unemployability Supplement** or **Invalidity Pension** who wish to volunteer must apply to the Unemployability Supplement or Invalidity Pension sections of the Department with medical evidence (a letter from their doctor) that the work is rehabilitative and beneficial to them, as well as a letter from the voluntary organisation.
- For people on **Disability Allowance**, a letter from the voluntary organisation is required by the Disability Allowance section of the Department stating that the work is being done on a voluntary basis and no payment is being made for it.
- A person in receipt of **Blind Person's Pension** who takes up volunteering is only affected when there is a change in means (that is, if they are being paid). Contact the Blind Person's Pension section of the Department if unsure.

IMPORTANT: *before starting voluntary work or training of any kind, it is essential to get permission from the Department of Social and Family Affairs and ensure that all required documents are submitted.*

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