

# **BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR VOLUNTEER HOME VISITING**

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*Good Beginnings* National Parenting Project



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The workshop was jointly facilitated by Professor Graham Vimpani, Child, Adolescent & Family Health Services, NSW and Professor Lesley Barclay, Family Health Research Unit, NSW.

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# **BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR VOLUNTEER HOME VISITING PROGRAMS**

## **Introduction**

Volunteer home visiting programs for families with dependent children are family-focused services, working with individuals and family units in an holistic way, to reduce their vulnerability, strengthening the community as a whole. Home visiting commonly refers to a supportive and/or complementary service provided in or near the family home.

The rationale for developing these Guidelines is to provide a basis for individual services to develop their own standards for home visiting services. The Guidelines are based on a set of core values reflecting social justice and equity principles. However, the Guidelines are meant to be inclusive, enabling diverse services to maintain their philosophies, structures and methods. It is assumed that these Guidelines are applicable to all organisations working with families through home visiting regardless of whether they involve volunteer or paid workers.

These Guidelines have been designed to set a framework for the manner in which volunteer home visiting support is provided, to strengthen the capacity of families and to give best care to children. It is understood that involvement of paid workers is necessary to provide more intensive and/or specialised intervention, in situations where families have complex needs, particularly those which impact on the safety and wellbeing of family members.

## **The process for developing these guidelines**

The report *Audit of Home Visiting Programs and the Development of an Evaluation Framework* (Vimpani et al, 1996), commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, identified the challenges for the development of an evaluation framework which would be relevant for the diverse programs across Australia.

This document has been produced on the basis of a national workshop convened by *Good Beginnings*. Over a period of two days, program coordinators and other professionals involved in volunteer home visiting of families with dependent children discussed standards for home visiting.

Participants at the workshop considered developing accreditation/best practice or minimum standards or Guidelines. It was decided that at this stage, good practice would be best supported through the development of Guidelines, which might lead to the formulation of accreditation standards at some other point in time.

Agencies interested in developing service standards could refer to standards documents published by *Family Support Services Association* (PO Box 45, Concord West 2138; ph (02) 97436565; fax (02) 97435841; email gssa@world.net) and *Volunteering NSW* (Level 2, 105 Pitt Street, Sydney; ph (02) 92314000; fax (02) 9221 1596; email volnsw@peg.apc.org.au).

The draft Guidelines were circulated widely, to engage maximum participation in this consultation process. Comments were invited from agencies involved in volunteer home visiting for families with dependent children in the development of the final Guidelines document.

### **Why this format for the guidelines**

This document is intended to be user-friendly, therefore this document has been kept concise, using clear and simple language. The Guidelines reflect community development principles, including assessment of community needs through consultations, the importance of inter-agency partnerships and community participation. They are set out as a checklist of indicators of good practice to ensure easy use.

### **How will the guidelines be used**

The Guidelines provide a blueprint for existing Australian volunteer home visiting programs, and can serve as a guide for agencies wishing to establish home visiting programs. The Guidelines enable services to incorporate evaluation and inquiry into their work practice and assist agencies to measure their current quality of service and to identify and review areas for further development. They can provide a basis for monitoring and evaluating processes and the impact of services on the families and the community. Agencies can apply the Guidelines within the framework of their unique programs, in the context of their unique definitions of program structures and values.

### **Relevant source material**

Family Support Services Association (FSSA) of NSW (October 1998) *Standards in Family Support*, FSSA of NSW, Concord West, NSW.

Volunteering NSW & the NSW School of Volunteer Management (July 1997) *Competency Standards for management of Volunteers*, Volunteering Australia, Sydney, NSW.

Noble J, Rogers L (1998) *Volunteer Management an essential Guide*, Volunteering SA, Adelaide.

Vimpani G, Frederico M, Barclay L, Davis C, (1996) *An Audit of Home Visitor Programs and the Development of an Evaluation Framework*, National Child Protection Council, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Evaluation reports from various volunteer home visiting programs

## **Guideline 1**

### **Volunteer Home Visiting Services offer a flexible and responsive service to meet the needs of families and the community**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ Volunteers provide services at times which are suitable to the families they support with particular focus on the best interest of children
- ◆ Volunteers listen to families to learn their concerns and provide support and referral accordingly
- ◆ Volunteers work with families in a non threatening and non judgmental manner
- ◆ Volunteer Home Visiting programs affirm the efforts of families and build on their strengths

## **Guideline 2**

### **Volunteer Home Visiting Services ensure families negotiate their own program needs and determine their own goals**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ Families set their own objectives and maintain control of what support and services are provided
- ◆ Volunteers respect the rights of families to make their own decisions
- ◆ Volunteer Home Visiting programs recognise the family as a unit made up of individuals
- ◆ Families negotiate timeframes for the services they receive
- ◆ Families have access to the policies and procedures covering their rights and responsibilities
- ◆ Families have access to their files
- ◆ Volunteer Home Visiting programs respect the confidentiality of families and obtain permission to share information about a family unless this information would compromise safety

### **Guideline 3**

**Volunteer Home Visiting Services build on the capacity of families to promote the wellbeing of their members, by enhancing their relationships and networks**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ Volunteers encourage families to increase their range of relationships and networks within the community
- ◆ Services provided by Volunteer Home Visiting Services strengthen families ability to increase their relationships with their families and children
- ◆ Volunteers are aware of child protection and family violence issues and know their responsibilities to report and refer in such situations

### **Guideline 4**

**Volunteer Home Visiting Services work to recognise and value the cultural and linguistic diversity of families in the community**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ The cultural identity of families is acknowledged and validated
- ◆ Opportunities are maximised for families to network with people from the same cultural and language group
- ◆ Volunteers come from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds which reflect the community for which they work

### **Guideline 5**

**The Volunteer Home Visiting Program has strong networks and partnerships with other professionals and organisations**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ The program has good working relationships with local services
- ◆ There are clear procedures for referral to other government and non-government support services
- ◆ The assessment and referral processes of the volunteer home visiting program are used by local services

## **Guideline 6**

**Volunteer Home Visiting Services are based on good management practices that includes clear and accessible policies and procedures**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ The core values, philosophies and goals of the service are clearly stated
- ◆ There are clear policies and procedures for volunteer management consistent with policies of Volunteering Australia
- ◆ Job descriptions have been developed for volunteers
- ◆ Volunteers are made aware of all relevant policies and procedures
- ◆ Clear policies on confidentiality are in place which explain how, and what information provided by families may be passed on
- ◆ Policies on child protection, family violence, and workers' safety are developed, in line with good practice and statutory requirements
- ◆ Volunteers are involved in the development of the service strategic plan
- ◆ The program has all appropriate insurances to protect volunteers, families and property

## **Guideline 7**

**Volunteer Home Visiting Services provide services based on planning which includes assessment of community need**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ Services are developed based on community consultation
- ◆ Services match the core values, goals and philosophies of each organisation
- ◆ Service data is used for the planning of new services
- ◆ Volunteers and families are involved in the planning of the service
- ◆ Volunteers, local service providers and families are given the opportunity to provide feedback on the services
- ◆ Services are supported by a community based advisory committee

## **Guideline 8**

**The program model is based on clearly defined roles and responsibilities for management, paid and volunteer staff**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ The program has clear aims and objectives
- ◆ The program has clearly stated values which underpin its service delivery
- ◆ The program's target group is clearly defined
- ◆ The roles, rights and responsibilities for management, staff and volunteers are clearly defined, documented and accessible to all parties

## **Guideline 9**

**Volunteer management practices are in line with guidelines as determined by Volunteering Australia**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ The program links with the state/local Volunteering body
- ◆ Volunteers work a maximum of 16 hours a week
- ◆ Volunteers are not used to replace paid staff positions
- ◆ Volunteers take on their role out of personal choice
- ◆ The organisational structure incorporates volunteers as an integral part of the service
- ◆ Job descriptions and policy and procedure manuals for volunteers are clearly written and accessible to all staff
- ◆ An appropriate budget for all expenses associated with volunteer involvement has been planned
- ◆ Policies concerning the status of volunteers, including rights and responsibilities and volunteer safety are documented
- ◆ Mechanisms are in place for recruitment, selection, training, orientation, supervision, evaluation and termination of the duties of volunteers
- ◆ The program and policies are reviewed regularly

## **Guideline 10**

### **Volunteers are trained, supported and supervised to allow them to provide a high quality service to families**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ Volunteers directly working with families are screened for their suitability, including checking for past convictions of child abuse and violence
- ◆ Training ensures that volunteers have a sound understanding of policies and procedures relating to their role
- ◆ The training promotes the value of cultural diversity, including cross-cultural communication skills and use of interpreters
- ◆ Volunteers become familiar with their duty statements as a part of training
- ◆ Volunteers receive orientation into the service
- ◆ Volunteers are matched carefully with families
- ◆ Mechanisms are in place for supervision and ongoing support of staff and volunteers
- ◆ Ongoing training and regular appraisal is provided for paid and volunteer staff
- ◆ Volunteers are acknowledged and valued in the organisation
- ◆ Adequate resources are available to volunteers to ensure they can carry out their role
- ◆ Mechanisms are in place for ending volunteer involvement with a specific task

## **Guideline 11**

### **Documentation within the program is accurate and professional and regularly updated**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ Policies and procedures are in place for record keeping
- ◆ There is appropriate storage and disposal of records
- ◆ Records are only accessible to authorised people
- ◆ Training is available to staff and volunteers on record keeping
- ◆ Authorised family members have access to their records
- ◆ Record keeping is factual, non judgemental and kept to a minimum to ensure it is non intrusive
- ◆ Up to date records are kept on the particulars of volunteers
- ◆ Volunteers have access to their own records and to the records of families with whom they work

## **Guideline 12**

**Volunteer Home Visiting Services evaluate their services through a process that involves all stakeholders**

*How do we know we are achieving this guideline?*

- ◆ Services should develop indicators to measure the program outcomes
- ◆ Service data is used to evaluate the effectiveness of services
- ◆ Paid and volunteer staff are involved in the evaluation of the service
- ◆ Families are encouraged to evaluate services they receive
- ◆ Management and/or advisory committee members are involved in the evaluation of the service - committee membership should include families and volunteers
- ◆ The evaluation process includes feedback from other families, volunteers, service providers and the community