



Community Guardianship Program

Is support provided for volunteers?

OPA coordinates the Community Guardianship Program, which is responsible for appointing Community Guardians, recruiting volunteers, and providing support and advice.

The Community Guardianship Program Coordinator and staff provides comprehensive training and ongoing support to all volunteers.

Who can volunteer?

Anyone who is over the age of eighteen and interested in helping people with a disability can apply to be volunteer as a community guardian.

Community Guardians are people who:

- come from a range of backgrounds
- believe in the potential of people with disabilities
- have good communication skills
- have critical thinking and problem solving abilities.

If you are:

- willing to speak up and advocate for people with disabilities
- prepared to make decisions for those who can't make decisions for themselves
- capable of acting in the best interests of others

then contact the Community Guardianship Program Coordinator on 1300 309 337 and ask for more information.

Notes:

What is the Office of the Public Advocate?

The Office of the Public Advocate (OPA) is an independent body established by the Victorian State Government, working to protect and promote the interests, rights and dignity of people with a disability.

OPA provides a number of services including:

- advocacy and guardianship
- an advice service for enquiries relating to powers of attorney, guardianship, and consent to medical and dental treatment
- community education sessions
- systemic advocacy

OPA also supports three volunteer programs:

- the Community Guardianship Program
- the Independent Third Person Program
- the Community Visitors Program.

Volunteers in each of these programs are trained and supported by OPA.

Community Visitors monitor the quality of disability services in order to safeguard the rights of vulnerable people; Independent Third Persons provide support for people with a cognitive disability or mental illness who have contact with the police; and Community Guardians are volunteers appointed as guardians for Victorians with a cognitive disability who cannot make decisions for themselves.

Office of the Public Advocate

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Who are Community Guardians?

Community guardianship is a truly unique volunteer role. Community Guardians act as guardian for people with a cognitive disability or mental illness, helping to ensure that their interests and rights are protected.

Community Guardians are appointed by the Office of the Public Advocate (OPA) to represent people with cognitive disabilities or mental illness when they are unable to make lifestyle decisions for themselves.

The essential role of a Community Guardian is to help a person with a decision-making disability make reasonable decisions about particular aspects of their lifestyle and wellbeing.

When a Community Guardian is appointed, the person they make decisions for is referred to as the 'represented person'.

A Community Guardian may make decisions for a represented person about where they live, who has access to them, what medical treatment they require, or what support they need.

Community Guardians have official authority. The Public Advocate delegates their powers under the *Guardianship and Administration Act 1986*, to make decisions for the represented person.



“When a person with a disability can't make decisions for themselves, Community Guardians play a vital role in ensuring their rights are protected. The commitment and dedication they demonstrate is truly inspiring, taking responsibility for making a range of lifestyle-related decisions.”

Colleen Pearce, Public Advocate



Who needs a community guardian?

Many adults in Victoria have limited capacity to make decisions for themselves due to cognitive disability or mental illness.

When a person is unable to make decisions for themselves, a guardian is appointed for them by the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT). The guardian is given the responsibility of making those decisions for them. The exact types of decisions the guardian can make are specified in the guardianship order, which VCAT puts into place at the time of appointment.

Wherever possible, VCAT appoints a relative or close friend as guardian. However, this is not always possible, and in certain cases, VCAT may appoint the Public Advocate as guardian.

The Public Advocate may then delegate the power of guardianship to a volunteer community guardian.

What can a community guardian do?

A Community Guardian has to 'stand in the shoes' of the represented person, and act in their best interests when making decisions for them.

A guardian must try to act in a way that:

- promotes the best interests of the person
- least restricts the person's freedom
- takes into account the wishes of the person and, where possible, puts them into effect.

A Community Guardian will often visit the represented person, and in many cases, may work with a number of people who are involved with, or working to support, the represented person. This can include family members, social workers, carers, and other professionals involved with the person. Talking to them often helps the Community Guardian gain a better understanding of what the represented person may want, and what is in their best interests.

Acting in the represented person's best interests may involve:

- advocating for them
- protecting them from abuse, neglect or exploitation
- encouraging them to participate in the community where possible
- encouraging and helping them to care for themselves.