

# *COMMUNITY VISITORS SCHEME*

## *FRIENDS FOR OLDER PEOPLE*



*An Australian Government Initiative*

## **BECOMING A COMMUNITY VISITOR**

This document outlines the role of Community Visitors and some of the benefits and challenges involved. Phone the Coordinator if you would like more information.

### **Hunter Volunteer Centre Inc**

ABN: 66 410 172 911

PO Box 204 MEREWETHER 2291

Level 3, 432 Hunter Street

NEWCASTLE NSW 2300

PH: 4927 5544 FAX: 4927 5588

Email: [cvs@hvc.org.au](mailto:cvs@hvc.org.au)

# **CONTENTS**

<b>Overview</b>	<b>Page 3</b>
<b>Who are Community Visitors?</b>	<b>Page 3</b>
<b>Who do Community Visitors visit?</b>	<b>Page 3</b>
<b>What commitment is involved?</b>	<b>Page 4</b>
<b>How the time is spent when visiting?</b>	<b>Page 4</b>
<b>Can I take my children?</b>	<b>Page 4</b>
<b>Can I take my pet?</b>	<b>Page 5</b>
<b>Can I be a visitor if I have a disability?</b>	<b>Page 5</b>
<b>Visiting the right person for you</b>	<b>Page 5</b>
<b>What skills do visitors need?</b>	<b>Page 6</b>
<b>Ability to accept responsibility</b>	<b>Page 6</b>
<b>Visiting someone with Dementia or other problems</b>	<b>Page 7</b>
<b>The next step to becoming a Community Visitor</b>	<b>Page 8</b>
<b>Support for Community Visitors</b>	<b>Page 10</b>
<b>Other challenges</b>	<b>Page 11</b>
<b>The benefits of being a Community Visitor</b>	<b>Page 12</b>
<b>A closing word</b>	<b>Page 12</b>

## Overview

The Community Visitors Scheme is a Federal Government Initiative introduced in 1991 to enrich the quality of life of residents in aged care facilities who have limited family or social contact. Links are established between people living in an aged care facility and their local community through volunteers called community visitors. The community visitor helps to relieve the loneliness and isolation of residents living in aged care facilities across Australia.

The Community Visitors Scheme matches community visitors on a '**one to one**' basis with a resident. The community visitor then visits on a **regular** basis and through the relationship, which develops, the loneliness and isolation is reduced in the older person's life.

The Community Visitors Scheme is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. There are approximately 156 organisations that auspice the Community Visitors Scheme Australia wide and in excess of 6,500 community visitors who provide an estimated 717,000 hours of support to residents each year.

### Who are Community Visitors?

Community Visitors come from all walks of life:

- ◆ are male or female
- ◆ of all ages
- ◆ from different cultural & religious backgrounds
- ◆ with a wide range of life experiences

Community Visitors are people who have a liking for the older members of our community and an interest in what can be shared together. They have a little spare time and are prepared to make a regular, ongoing commitment.

### Who do Community Visitors visit?

***Each community visitor visits someone living in a local aged care facility whose quality of life would be improved by friendship and companionship.***

Some of the people needing a visitor may be frail, have a hearing or vision impairment, or a significant loss of mobility and perhaps require a wheelchair. Others may have a loss of skills through dementia or having a stroke. Although most residents are elderly some are only in their 50's and 60's.

Some residents of aged care facilities don't have regular contact with relatives or friends. In some cases the resident may be visited but receive little benefit from the visits. These are people with different personalities, backgrounds, values and interests.

Usually the Director of Nursing or Activity Officer at the aged care facility will decide who needs a visitor although sometimes family, friend or other professional will put the resident's name forward. The facility will contact the CVS Coordinator to arrange a visitor for the resident.

## **What time commitment is involved?**

The majority of volunteers spend approximately 1 hour with their resident each visit. Others visit for about ½ hour, either because this matches the time they have available, or because their resident is quite frail and ½ hour is enough. A small number of residents are able to go on outings, which can take more time. These outings need to be organised with the staff at the facility. It is up to you, the staff and your resident to decide how long your visits will be.

***The minimum commitment required by the Department is for fortnightly visits. We do however request Community Visitors visit weekly, as a fortnight is a long time when you are trying to develop a relationship or you do not have any companionship.***

Many volunteers like to visit more frequently. Each situation varies depending on the resident and the volunteer. Some volunteers make a regular visiting time and others have a more casual arrangement. This will depend on what is most workable for both the volunteer and the person they visit.

## **How the time is spent when visiting?**

There are a variety of things that you can do when you visit your resident:

- you might sit and have a chat
- if your resident is able, you may go for a walk or on an outing
- you might give your friend a hand massage or read a book
- you might quietly hold their hand while you listen to music together
- you might play a card or board game or another activity you enjoy doing together.

Initially, sometimes it is difficult to know just how to spend time with the person especially if they can't communicate well for some reason. Sometimes the Community Visitor gets to know the resident better than anyone else. This happens by gradually learning about your friend through frequent and enjoyable conversations. Getting to know someone who has a communication or memory difficulty can take a little time. The Community Visitors Scheme Coordinator is there to offer information, advice and support.

## **Can I take my children to the Aged Care Facility?**

The answer is a very definite **yes**. Children are extremely welcome in most aged care facilities as the benefits far outweigh any of the perceived problems. The vast majority of children are extremely well behaved when they are visiting in aged care facilities.

You will find they are the centre of attention and give a great deal of pleasure to all the residents. Your resident also then becomes the centre of attention, not only with the other residents but with the staff as well. This can be the highlight of their week.

We all know children can break down barriers. A resident who is hesitant about being touched will gladly respond to a child and return a hug or even initiate a hug.

### **Can I take my pet to visit the residents?**

Most aged care facilities will allow a visitor to bring a dog or cat into the facility as long as they have a placid nature and do not get excited easily.

You will need to speak to the Director of Nursing (DON) of the facility you are visiting in, to obtain permission to take your pet into the facility. If you do not feel comfortable asking the DON yourself, ask your coordinator to speak to the DON for you.

### **Can I be a Community Visitor if I have a disability?**

**Yes.** The Community Visitors Scheme is open to all people who would like to visit someone. The only criterion is that you are able to initiate a conversation. Residents are sometimes unable to initiate conversation and a visitor needs to be sensitive to their needs.

### **Visiting the right person for you**

The CVS Coordinator will conduct an interview with prospective visitors to help make the best match possible with a resident who has similar likes and interests. Questions will be asked about:

- preferences of suburbs where they would like to visit
- past and present interests
- background, education, work
- the type of person they would be comfortable visiting
- visiting times and days

The Coordinator may also meet residents, or gain insight through the Activity Officer, to ensure that the resident would welcome a visitor and to determine their individual needs and preferences as well.

A good match is of utmost importance. The aim is for the volunteer to visit someone whom they can feel comfortable with. In many instances a strong and caring relationship develops. In other cases the volunteer and the person they visit are simply comfortable together and enjoy passing the time of day in each other's company.

Some volunteers are happy to visit someone who doesn't remember them and are satisfied with their wish to simply try to brighten up that person's day. When thinking about becoming a Community Visitor it can be useful to try and clarify what your expectations are and to ensure you share these with the Coordinator. In this way the right kind of match for you can be made.

Occasionally a match does not work out well for some reason. If this happens, the Coordinator provides support to resolve this situation. Resolution may include introducing the Community visitor to someone else.

## **What skills do visitors need?**

There is no quick answer to this question because every person who needs a visitor is different and has different needs. It's really more a question of what 'qualities' are helpful. The most important qualities of Community visitors are their:

### *Commitment and Reliability*

It is very important that Community visitors have the time to visit weekly. By the time someone has come to live in a nursing home or hostel they have probably suffered many losses and disappointments. It's important that we don't cause more upset by being unreliable. With some residents it is preferable to have a regular visiting time, or to phone before visiting. If this is the case it is important for the visitor to be reliable regarding these arrangements as well.

### *Ability to Focus On Another's Needs.*

Community visitor's contribution to the lives of residents cannot be underestimated. Community visitors however may not always feel confident that they are making much of a difference to the life of the person they visit. Some residents have lost many of their social skills and are not able to show or clearly communicate their appreciation. Some residents may:

- Find it difficult to trust initially and need time to open up to the interest and caring that is being offered.
- Feel a bit depressed or unwell and not have much of themselves to give to their visitors.
- Not be able to remember their visitor - however, they may develop a sense of familiarity with their visitors, even though they can't express it.

Visitors are encouraged to ask for feedback either from the staff or the Coordinator on how their visiting is going.

### *Ability to accept responsibility for the growth of the relationship*

Each resident has an inevitable degree of dependency on the person who visits him or her. All things are not equal; even if the resident is a sprightly, cheery person and has a loving family that unfortunately live a long way away. Even a person like this does not have the power to independently make a new friend - that's why they need a volunteer visitor.

The degree and type of responsibility that volunteers need to accept for the growth of the relationship will vary. Sometimes: -

***It may not require much more than being reliable  
and friendly, remembering to show interest  
in their resident's family and football team.***

In other instances accepting responsibility for the growth of the relationship: -

***Could involve exploring what the person enjoys***

- Does playing music seem to be enjoyable?
- Reading poetry?
- Do they like their hand being held or not?

***Patience and a strong belief in the simple value of being a visitor is often very helpful.***

For example, some older people have been lonely for a long time and have the habit of being a bit withdrawn or self-interested. People like this need a visitor who will come back time after time and simply demonstrate that they actually think the person is worth spending some time with - even if it's difficult to think of things to say sometimes.

Accepting responsibility for the growth of the relationship can also mean seeking more information or support from the Coordinator if you feel things are not going well. The Coordinator may be able to lend you a video, come on a visit with you, or link you to a helpful staff member. The aim is for the relationship to become increasingly comfortable over time. Maintaining confidence is very important if the resident is not able to give many clues about how to get to know and understand them better.

**Visiting Someone with Dementia  
or Other Problems**

The majority of people living in aged care facilities have dementia or some other kind of cognitive impairment, perhaps due to a stroke or a brain injury of some sort. How people are affected with regard to their ability to form relationships can vary considerably. Dementia could mean that the person is repetitive, because they have forgotten (for example), that they have just asked you what the time is, or that they told you the same story the last time you visited.

***Someone could have wonderful rich memories of their childhood but not be able to remember your name.***

People who are more seriously affected may not understand much of what's going on around them, or things they say could make little sense. However, they may be able to give you a smile, love to have a chocolate, smell some flowers or enjoy a walk. People who have had a stroke may have difficulties with speaking clearly, or finding the right words to express themselves.

***There are many helpful guidelines for putting people at ease and relating in a way that expresses acceptance and friendliness, rather than attempting sophisticated conversation.***

For example, one guideline is not to contradict a confused person's sense of reality. That is, if someone talks about their mother as if she is still alive, then you just have a nice conversation about their mother rather than asking when their mother died. Similarly, if someone gets anxious or can't express what they are trying to say, you can subtly change the subject or divert their attention on to something else.

***There is no need to have 'special training' to visit someone whose cognitive abilities are not what they used to be.***

***Family members are doing it every day.***

You don't have to be a nurse or have done an aged care course to visit someone with dementia or other cognitive difficulty. When visiting someone with a cognitive difficulty you will be given all the support and information you require by the Coordinator and staff at the facility where the person lives.

The main thing is to be able to accept the person as you find them and be yourself. At the same time as you find out what you can't share with the person who has dementia. You will also be finding out what you can share.

***REMEMBER TO SMILE; IT DOES CONVEY A THOUSAND WORDS.***

***The Next Step To  
Becoming A Community Visitor***

**Step 1. *Interview Meeting with the Coordinator***

Once you have an overview of what being a Community visitor is all about the next step is to have an interview with the Coordinator, this generally takes 30mins – 1 hour.

The purpose of the interview is:

- For you to have an opportunity to ask further questions about being a Community Visitor.
- For the Coordinator to learn about your background, personality, abilities and interests so they can make a successful match.
- If you decide to proceed with becoming a Community Visitor then you will need to sign a Memorandum of Understanding agreeing to have a National Criminal History Record Check or Police Check and provide the names and numbers of two (2) people willing to be your personal referees.

*What a Community Visitor Cannot Do*

Your role as a visitor is simply to be a friend to the resident. There are some activities that, as a community visitor, you may not undertake, and these are:

- Be responsible for monitoring standards of care at the residential aged care facility;
- Become involved in the financial affairs of any resident;
- Be entitled to access to residents' care or personal records, unless he or she explicitly request this;
- Displace personal relationships established between residents and staff, or residents and existing social networks;
- Provide nursing and personal care to the resident;
- Interfere or have any involvement in the day-to-day running of the residential aged care facility;
- Replace nursing, activities or therapy staff; or
- Be involved in investigating or following up complaints.

If you do become concerned, while visiting your friend, about some aspect of their care, you should seek advice from your Coordinator.

It is important that you are aware of the need to respect the privacy of all residents of the facility. For example, you should arrange to visit your friend at a time that is mutually convenient and ensure you respect the confidentiality of any conversations you have.

## **Step 2. Orientation Day**

An Orientation Day is held in an Aged Care Facility for prospective visitors with guest speakers and staff from the facility speaking on different topics relevant to visiting a resident in an Aged Care Facility. If possible all prospective visitors are asked to attend an orientation day before they decide to become a community visitor. This is not always possible due to visitors work or time commitments and does not prohibit a prospective visitor going on to become a community visitor. Orientation days are usually held twice a year and visitors can attend more than one if they wish.

## **Step 3. Receiving an Overview from the Coordinator About the Person You Might Visit**

The next step is to be matched with a resident who needs a visitor. At this point most prospective visitors feel a bit anxious about whom they might be matched up with. The Coordinator will describe the person to you and see if they sound like the sort of person you could feel comfortable with. Apprehension abates when you are actually talking about a particular person and hearing about what they are like and why the Coordinator thinks you would be a good visitor for them.

The Coordinator might have someone in mind and even talk to you about a particular person straight after the interview. Alternatively, it may be that your particular interests and abilities, or where you live, do not enable you to be matched to any of the residents that currently require a visitor. If this is the outcome of your interview, then your details will be kept and you will be contacted in future when the Coordinator finds a suitable resident for you to visit.

The list of people needing visitors is continually updated as new people move into aged care facilities when others move out or pass away. It is hard to predict how long it can take to match a volunteer to someone, but generally this occurs within two months of the initial interview meeting.

## **Step 4. The Coordinator Introduces you to the Person You Will Visit**

After talking about the person you are going to meet, the Coordinator will arrange a time with you to go and meet the resident. The Coordinator will introduce you to the resident and also to relevant staff members. As a third person can be distracting the Coordinator only stays for a short time.

## **Support For Community Visitors**

### **Individual support**

The Coordinator phones new visitors within a few days of their first meeting to see how things are going or the visitor phones the Coordinator. From then on the Coordinator generally sees visitors at the CVS get-togethers held every month or calls every few months for a catch up. The Coordinator reads the Record of Visits Form that visitors send in every two months and records the data for the Dept. If any issues arise the Coordinator is there to provide whatever support they can.

### **Support could include such things as:**

- Finding out more information about the resident's interests and preferences or offering advice on how to gradually build the relationship.
- Giving suggestions about how to interact with the resident.
- Providing more information about the implications of certain health issues or other limitations and how these might be impacting on the relationship.
- Listening to how the volunteer is feeling (for example, visiting someone who has become depressed or had another stroke can be difficult for anyone).
- Getting some feedback from staff at the aged care facility or directly from the resident if the volunteer is unsure whether things are going well.
- Talking through the best way to end the visiting relationship with the resident if the volunteer is unable to continue for some reason.
- Supporting the volunteer if the resident deteriorates or dies.
- AND THE BEST PART OF ALL!! - Sharing wonderful stories of what's been happening when visiting.

### **Volunteer Get-togethers**

Get togethers are held every three months. Get togethers provide a great opportunity for volunteers to meet each other and share visiting stories. Guest speakers are organised to give presentations on specific issues like Dementia, Diabetes or loss and grief to name a few.

### **Newsletter**

A newsletter comes out every two months or so which contains relevant information about the Community Visitors Scheme, short articles and sometimes stories from volunteers. ***Your input of stories and articles would be gratefully appreciated, if you read something of interest please let me know so I can share it with the other visitors.***

### **Videos & Books**

We have a small library of books and videos that volunteers are welcome to borrow from.

### **Support from Staff at the Aged Care Facility**

Most facilities have a specific staff member called an Activity Officer who is involved in organising activities for residents and who also have the role of supporting volunteers.

If the volunteer visits someone who has no cognitive impairments and is able to develop their relationship independently with the volunteer, then it is usually not necessary for the volunteer to have much contact with staff. In fact not talking with staff about the resident can protect the privacy of the relationship and therefore the resident's dignity. In other cases it can be very helpful to receive support from staff, especially those who know the resident well as they can often make helpful suggestions, which can enhance the relationship.

The Coordinator helps to link the volunteer up with the appropriate staff at the facility who will be able to offer support and helpful information.

***By offering 'one on one' companionship to residents, Community Visitors reduce the isolation and loneliness of residents. By sharing their interest, time and caring, a volunteer can make a real difference to the life of an isolated older person.***

## **OTHER CHALLENGES**

There are several possible challenges to consider when thinking about becoming a Community Visitor. One, which hasn't been mentioned so far, is coping with the aged care facility environment itself.

***Even the best run facilities have their drawbacks.***

Some of the older facilities are cramped with shared bedrooms and minimal lounge or living areas. There is often not the opportunity for the resident and volunteer to spend private time in a 'one to one' situation. Other residents may also want some attention. This can be quite challenging when it is important to focus on helping the person you are visiting to feel 'special'. It can also be difficult if you're not sure how to interact with some of the other residents.

The other issue that can come up is that the person you visit may deteriorate in some way or become ill.

***In some instances the person can change significantly.***

Some volunteers need to reassess whether they want to continue visiting in situations like this. If this happens the Coordinator and the facilities staff's input and support can be very helpful. The other thing to remember of course is that the person may die. The Coordinator is also experienced in providing support if this happens.

***The benefits of being a Community Visitor***

***People like to form friendships with older people for many reasons.***

- ❖ "Older people have so much history to offer"
- ❖ "If I was in that situation I'd want someone to visit me"
- ❖ "I wanted to give something back to the community"
- ❖ "My grandparents died and I miss contact with older people"

Each Community Visitor is an individual with special characteristics and qualities to offer. The benefits for residents are individual as well.

- ❖ "John can't remember his visitor's name but he claps his hands when she walks in and gets out his photo album to show her for the umpteenth time."
- ❖ "Eileen is much calmer after her visitor has taken her for a little walk. One visit about two months ago Eileen had a clear moment and she actually said goodbye to her visitor. It's the first time she had spoken for ages."
- ❖ "I'm not bored when he visits and he always brings me bananas. I love bananas."
- ❖ "Shirley always comes to visit me on Tuesday. We have such a nice chat. She barracks for the Knights too, you know."
- ❖ "To be honest I like my visitor Mary quite well, but it's really her little daughter Samantha that I look so forward to seeing."

Community Visitors break down the isolation and loneliness of the person they visit and also provide an important link to the community (the outside world).

***The difference they make to the quality of resident's lives can be big, small and in between.***

It all depends on how you look at it. At times it can be hard to gauge what the resident is experiencing. Some volunteers describe their experience of visiting as being a real pleasure and say that they get back far more than they give. They feel that the person they visit senses that their time together is like a simple celebration of that person's being.

## **A Closing Word**

The aim of this document has been to inform interested people about a Community Visitor. Obviously there are lots of different kinds of people who need visitors and some individuals are much more challenging to visit than others.

It is important to restate that the whole scheme works well because priority is given to setting up a good, comfortable match between the residents and the visitor. Some volunteers will have more confidence or experience with people who have a disability or are ill in some way and may therefore be able to potentially visit a broader range of people. Our experience at Hunter Volunteer Centre is that, given a little time, the vast majority of people who decide to be a Community Visitor are able to meet someone who they enjoy visiting.

***We hope you have found this information booklet helpful in assisting you to make your decision about becoming a Community Visitor.***

***Or if you have any feedback to offer about the quality of this information, particularly any improvements that could be made, please contact one of the CVS Team***

***of***

***Carolyn Roddenby or Lorena Wells***

***on***

***Phone: 4927 5544***