

# Volunteering in Austria



**VOLUNTEERING**  
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# Content

<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>What volunteers do in Austria</b> .....	<b>5</b>
A long tradition.....	6
A strong commitment.....	6
Great efforts.....	6
What motivates Austrian volunteers.....	8
For all generations.....	10
<b>Why voluntary engagement pays off</b> .....	<b>12</b>
New perspectives.....	12
More opportunities.....	12
Staying active and fit.....	12
<b>How one can become part of the Austrian volunteers' family</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Framework conditions – quality goals</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>How the Ministry of Social Affairs supports voluntary engagement</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Responsibility for voluntary engagement policy.....	20

## Foreword

Volunteering continues to play an important role in Austria. More than 49 per cent of the Austrian population aged 15 and over are involved in some form of unpaid voluntary or honorary activities, making an indispensable contribution to social cohesion in our society and to our high quality of life. Volunteering is therefore an essential part of our country.

In recent years, further measures have been taken at various levels and in various areas to support and promote this important civic commitment, which serve to continuously improve the framework conditions for the realisation of this commitment. Back in 2012, the Federal Act for the Promotion of Voluntary Engagement (Voluntary Act) created a legal framework to support this socially important and valuable commitment. In order to further develop this legal framework, the Voluntary Act was comprehensively amended in 2023.

This new edition of the brochure aims to provide a compact overview of the value and importance, diversity and colourfulness of volunteering. The brochure has been expanded and the statistics updated to reflect the vitality of the voluntary sector. Among other things, the brochure shows the many different motives for becoming active. Volunteering can not only be an interesting way for individuals to balance their work and education, but also a good opportunity to acquire new skills, develop their own strengths, take on responsibility or remain active.

# What volunteers do in Austria



# What volunteers do in Austria

## A long tradition

Volunteer and honorary services can look back on a long and great tradition in Austria. The commitment to such activity is deeply rooted in wide sections of the population. Austria owes its high quality of life not least to the people volunteering in the areas of welfare, health, culture and sports, disaster relief as well as rescue and ambulance services.

## A strong commitment

A total of 49,4 percent of the population over the age of 15 carries out voluntary activity – a tremendously high figure. That means there are more than 3.7 million people in Austria engaged in voluntary activities. In organizations and associations there are around 1.9 million people who are active voluntarily. About 2.8 million people are active in the field of neighbourhood assistance. In comparison to 2016 there are actually 200,000 more people carrying out voluntary activities today. This means that voluntary engagement provides added value for our society – but it does not replace paid work.

## Great efforts

The amount of time invested in voluntary engagement is considerable: On average, volunteers serve 6.9 hours per week. The majority of volunteers carry out these activities regularly, and many are active – often additionally – in temporary projects.

Volunteering not only offers an opportunity to contribute one's experience and skills in a useful way, but also represents a chance to acquire new competences, to develop one's own strengths and to take on responsibility.

### Knowledge:

#### What defines volunteer activities or voluntary engagement?

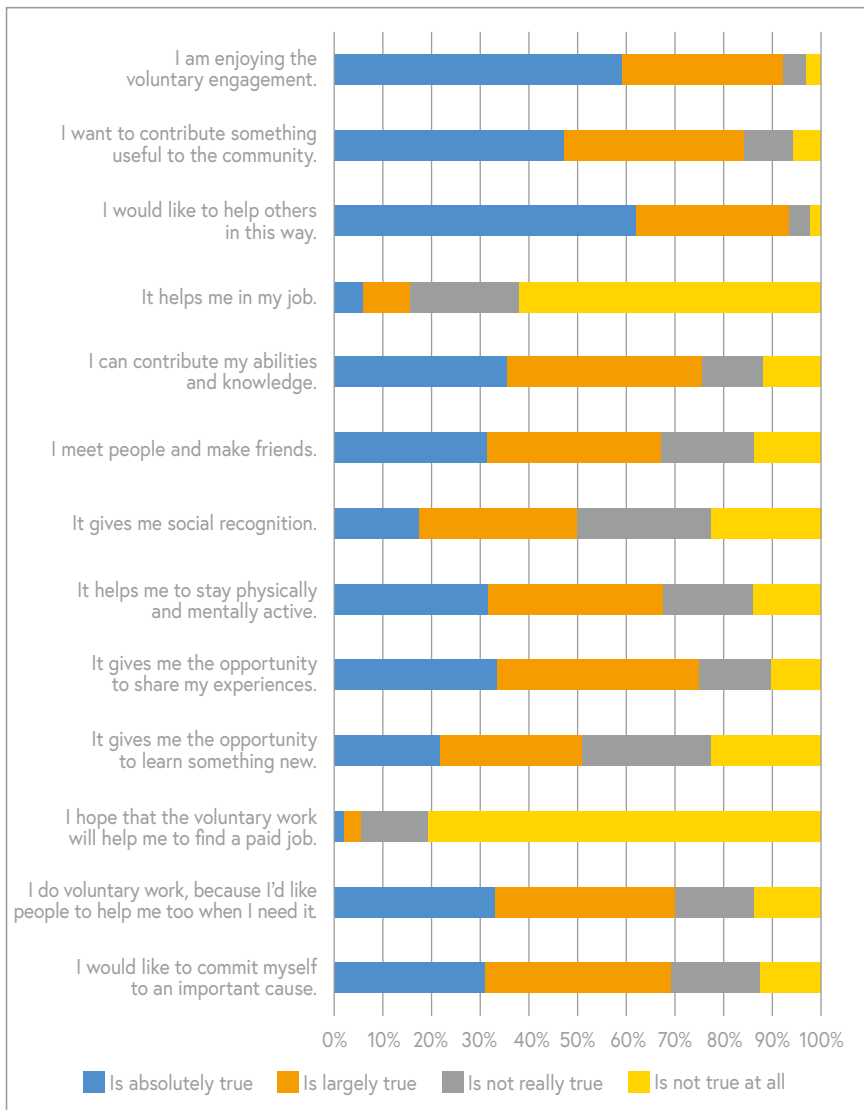
One can differentiate between two forms of voluntary activities or voluntary engagement:

- **Formal voluntary engagement and/or honorary positions**  
This refers to unpaid services rendered in organizations and associations (e.g. a voluntary fire brigade, emergency services, social welfare institutions, sports clubs, cultural clubs or societies, environmental groups etc.).
- **Informal voluntary engagement and/or neighbourhood assistance**  
This is also unpaid but takes place in private settings outside the family one's own household. It includes things like running errands, providing help with housework or gardening, personal assistance, shopping in the supermarket etc.

In recent years, there has been an increasing shift in volunteering from the formal to the informal level. For example, the proportion of informal volunteers in Austria rose from 30 to around 37 percent (2016 vs. 2022), while the number of formal volunteers slightly declined.

# What motivates Austrian volunteers

Figure 1: Reasons for voluntary engagement (in %)



Source: Statistik Austria, Survey on volunteering, 2022.



## A wide range of motives

Austrian volunteers do a lot. And they do it for a wide variety of reasons. The most important motives for voluntary engagement are: helping other people (93 percent), enjoying the commitment (92 percent) and making a useful contribution to the community (84 percent) contributing one's own abilities and knowledge (75 percent each). Only a few people, on the other hand, would like to use volunteering as an opportunity to get a job (6 percent).The variety of motives are reflected in a multi-faceted and diverse volunteer culture.

„I volunteer, because I enjoy helping others, making a contribution towards society and at the same time remaining fit and active.“ Markus W.

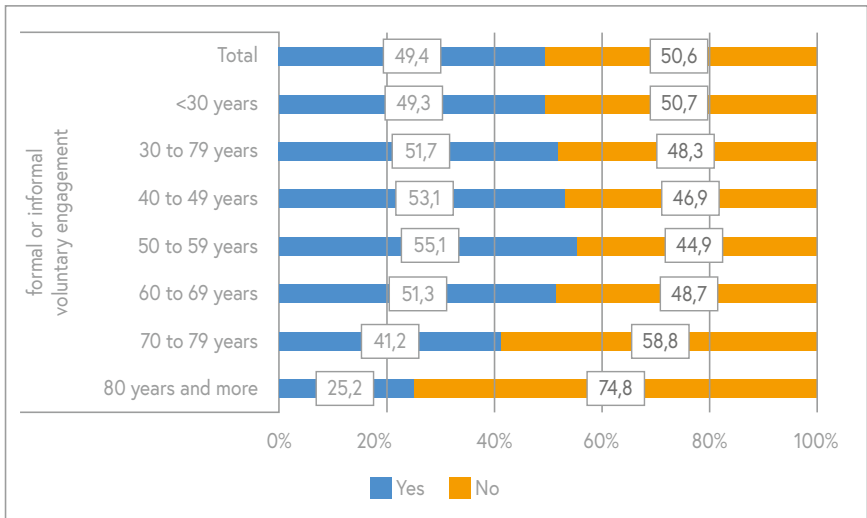


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## For all generations

Voluntary engagement is attractive for all age groups. Everyone can make a contribution. That is why participation levels are high in all age groups. Among 15-29 year olds, the proportion of volunteers is 49 percent. The most active are 50-69 year olds (55 percent). Even in the age group of those over 80, more than a quarter are committed to voluntary activities.

Figure 2: Participation rates according to age



Source: Statistik Austria, Survey on volunteering, 2022.

If the participation rate is broken down further by age and differentiated by type of volunteering (formal/informal), there are only minor distributional differences between the two forms, apart from the generally higher participation rate in informal volunteering.

Voluntary engagement is not only attractive for all age groups – it also contributes towards solidarity between the generations and thus leads to a better mutual understanding and social cohesion.

### **Knowledge:**

#### **Where are people involved most?**

The largest proportion of volunteers in the area of formal volunteering are active in sports clubs and associations (approx. 513,000 persons).

This is followed by the area of arts and culture as well as leisure (approx. 370,800), disaster relief and emergency services (approx. 366,400), as well as religion and the church (355,100). Between 269,900 and 176,700 persons carry out voluntary activities in the areas of Social and Health, Civic Activities and Community, Political Work and Advocacy as well as Environment, Nature and Animal Welfare (descending order).

Around 128,000 respectively 76,900 are involved in supporting refugees or in the Education Sector.

„My voluntary engagement enabled me to get an insight into the occupation which I could imagine carrying out in the future, while at the same time benefiting from a legal framework and social insurance. At the same time I had the feeling of having achieved something meaningful.“ Elisabeth K.

# Why voluntary engagement pays off

## New perspectives

Voluntary engagement is not only of great benefit to society, but also to those individuals who do it. It's worth becoming part of the Austrian volunteers' family. Voluntary engagement is not only an interesting change from your usual work or training, but also an exciting chance to acquire new competences, to develop one's own strengths, or to take on responsibility. That opens up new perspectives for many people.

## More opportunities

Research shows that in voluntary engagement, abilities such as rhetorical skills, organisational talent, the ability to work in a team or leadership qualities are trained. Numerous companies take voluntary engagement into account when considering job applications. For younger people, voluntary commitment therefore also improves their personal chances in the labour market and their career opportunities.

## Staying active and fit

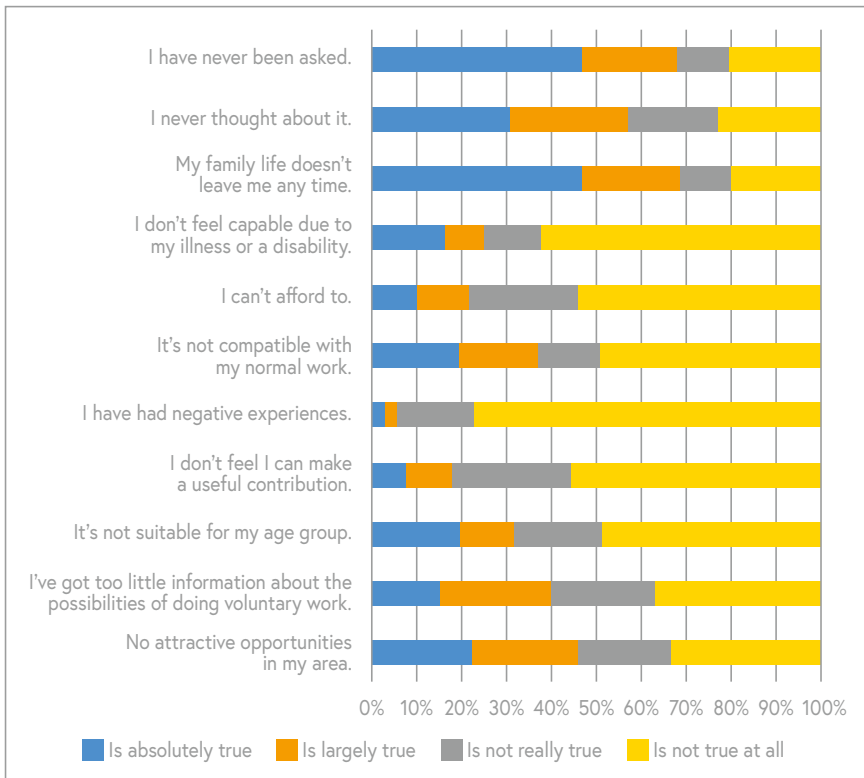
For older people, voluntary engagement is an opportunity to remain active and fit. Voluntary engagement can lead to new social contacts, promote an active social life and increase one's quality of life in general. Studies have established a close connection between voluntary commitment and health. Voluntary engagement can have a positive effect on health, well-being and one's self-esteem. People who volunteer are simply making more of their lives.

**Info:**

**What speaks against voluntary engagement?**

People who have not done any voluntary activities until now explain this primarily with their workload due to family responsibilities and the fact that they have never been asked or requested to do so (approx. 67 percent in each case). Another main reason given was that they had never thought about volunteering. Around four out of ten people also claim that they were not informed enough about the possibilities of volunteering.

Figure 3: Reasons not to volunteer



Source: Statistik Austria, Survey on volunteering, 2022.

# How one can become part of the Austrian volunteers' family

## First point of contact

For those who do not yet know how or where they can do voluntary engagement, the volunteers' portal [www.freiwilligenweb.at](http://www.freiwilligenweb.at) as well as the website of the Service- and Competence Centre of volunteering [www.freiwillig-engagiert.at](http://www.freiwillig-engagiert.at) are the first point of contact. Freiwillegenweb's list of organizations provides an overview of places where one can become involved. Experts of the Volunteers' Centres in Austria as well as the the Service- and Competence Centre provide advice and support for interested individuals and organizations.

## The right choice

It is important to find the right type of voluntary activity for yourself. Then you benefit most from your engagement. It is also important that the borders to paid work are clearly demarcated. Voluntary activities which you enjoy and which are connected with education/ training or further training are particularly interesting. This not only makes the work easier, it also provides valuable abilities which one can make use of in other fields of life.

### Knowledge:

#### How does one recognize an attractive organization for volunteering?

Numerous organizations look for people to take on certain tasks on a voluntary and unpaid basis. And people who work on a voluntary or honorary basis donate their time and efforts. Both of these parties – the person who commits themselves and the organization for which he or she does it, have to be able to rely on certain standards. Taking note of them and adhering to them pays off – for volunteers and for organizations.

Thanks to the variety and diversity of the Austrian volunteers' family, everyone can find an activity which appeals to them and which combines usefulness for oneself as well as for society as a whole.

## Framework conditions – quality goals

### Description of activities

Voluntary engagement should be enjoyable and appeal to the needs of the volunteers. A description of the activity should reveal the meaning of the engagement and the non-material benefits and personal advantages it provides. It should contain a short description of the organization, a description of the activities to be performed by volunteers, what is expected from the volunteer and his or her skills, the amount of time involved, what the organization has to offer, and the start and duration of the volunteers' engagement. An accurate description as well as clarity regarding the obligations of the volunteer (e.g. confidentiality, duty of care) protect both sides from misunderstandings and the volunteer from being overwhelmed, and can avoid confusion or possible conflicts between employees and volunteers.

### Beginning and introductory period

For a good start in voluntary activity, an introductory period to get to know each other is necessary. In this way, the volunteers have the opportunity to have a closer look at their tasks and to decide whether it corresponds to her or his wishes, expectations and abilities. For this purpose, when the activity begins it makes sense to agree upon a trial period after which both sides can decide whether they want to continue working together or not.

## **Support for volunteers**

Volunteers need a contact person who is always available so that they are not left alone in case of problems. This is why every institution enlisting the services of volunteers needs to appoint a contact person with the required competences and resources (volunteers' coordination service). Alongside this support, opportunities for interaction between the volunteers themselves should also be promoted, and if required, a qualified advice from a specialist should be offered to volunteers.

## **Responsibility and participation in decision-making**

Right from the beginning of their activities, volunteers need clarity about what they can do and their obligations. In order to be able to identify themselves with the organization where they are volunteering, they need to have sufficient information about it. A transparent organizational structure makes it clear where they can contribute their ideas and how they can have a say.

## **Reimbursement of costs**

In order that their unpaid engagement does not lead to unwelcome costs for them, it should be ensured that costs which arise in carrying out their tasks (materials, travel expenses, postage etc.) are assumed by the organization.

## **Insurance**

In order to protect both the volunteers and the organization, care should be taken to provide sufficient insurance. Concluding an accident insurance for the volunteers should be a matter of course. In addition, liability insurance taken out by the organization should cover all damage caused by volunteers during their activities.



## **Basic and advanced training**

In order to maintain and improve the quality standards of an organization (also in comparison to others), further training of staff is indispensable. This is of course also true for volunteers and constitutes an opportunity for their personal development. In addition, further training programmes for volunteers contribute towards them feeling that they are being taken seriously and can lead to a stronger sense of identification with the organization.

## **Leaving**

A special feature of voluntary engagement is that it can be ended at any time. However, an 'exit mode' should be agreed upon with them right at the beginning which enables a smooth and frictionless exit for all those involved.

## **Certificates**

Voluntary engagement can be of use and significance for future job applications etc. Volunteers should therefore be issued with a certificate indicating the time of service, the type of activity and the further training attended or skills and qualifications acquired. To this end, there is an Austrian volunteers' pass (see: [www.freiwilligenpass.at](http://www.freiwilligenpass.at)).

## **Recognition**

Voluntary engagement should be recognized and appreciated. This should be shown in various ways and in everyday dealings with each other.

Sources: IGFÖ – Association of Austrian Volunteers' Centres; ULF – Independent Provincial Volunteers' Centre

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leisure time

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public welfare

helping

responsibility

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ambulance

to join in

society

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indispensable

strengths

skills

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support

volunteers' pass

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important  
sport  
environment

Team

understanding

sports  
animals  
cohesion

compassion

to make a difference

3.7

communities music

orchestra

together

instrument

contribution

fun

people

social

meaning

deciding

population

objectives

team

be active

volunteers' centres

fire service

voluntary engagement



# How the Ministry of Social Affairs supports voluntary engagement

## Responsibility for voluntary engagement policy

Responsibility for policy on voluntary engagement at a federal level is concentrated in the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection. With a variety of activities, measures and services, it supports Austria's lively volunteers' culture. A clear strategy, an appropriate legal framework, smart cooperation, a broadly-based dialogue and operational readiness create a solid basis and a framework for voluntary engagement in Austria. It is our ambition to optimize these conditions further.

## Voluntary Act

The Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection administers the Federal Law for the Promotion of Voluntary Engagement (Freiwilligengesetz). This federal law regulates the framework conditions for formal voluntary activities, stipulates the framework conditions for formal voluntary activities serving the public interest with a view to promoting such activities and fostering participation in voluntary engagement. It also contains conditions on the carrying out of the Voluntary Social Year (FSJ), the Environmental Protection Year or the Peace and Social Service Abroad.

## „Voluntary years“

This refers to the Voluntary Social Year (FSJ), the Voluntary Environmental Protection Year, the Holocaust Memorial Service, and the Peace and Social Service Abroad – all of these are carried out in accordance with the Voluntary Act. Among other things it regulates conditions such as the recognition of organizations (as provider), fields of deployment, the obligations of organizations and places of deployment, the duration of the FSJ, the detailed rules under which it is carried out, and quality assurance. It also includes social

insurance cover for participants, the payment of pocket money, educational support and guidance, and the payment of family allowance to young people.

### **Credits for alternative civilian service (as an alternative to military service)**

The entry into force of the amendment to the Civilian Alternative Service Act on 1 October 2013 made it possible to count the following towards statutory civilian alternative service: a Voluntary Social Year, a Voluntary Environmental Protection Year, Holocaust Memorial Service or Peace and Social Service Abroad. This is based on the fact that they comply with the Voluntary Act and is conditional on the voluntary engagement lasting for a continuous ten months and being carried out with a recognized organisation (provider). All related requirements can be found on the website [www.freiwilligenweb.at](http://www.freiwilligenweb.at).

### **Austrian Voluntary Council**

The Austrian Voluntary Council is based at the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection. It has the objective of raising the perceived value of voluntary engagement as a cornerstone of the community, and to further improve the framework conditions for voluntary engagement. The Austrian Voluntary Council is an institutionalised forum for dialogue, and is particularly involved in providing advice, promoting networking, and representing the interests of voluntary engagement and furthering its development. Its members are representatives of the federal government, the federal provinces, the towns and local communities, the social partners, the political parties as well as representatives of all significant areas in which voluntary activities take place.

### **Report on voluntary engagement**

The Voluntary Act lays down that a report on the status and development of voluntary engagement in Austria has to be drawn up jointly with the Austrian Voluntary Council in a five year interval. The current Report on Voluntary

Engagement in Austria is available at [www.freiwilligenweb.at](http://www.freiwilligenweb.at). A national survey carried out provides current figures, data and facts about voluntary engagement in Austria (see [www.freiwilligenweb.at](http://www.freiwilligenweb.at)).

## **Freiwilligenweb**

[www.freiwilligenweb.at](http://www.freiwilligenweb.at) is Austria's first online address for voluntary engagement. The Freiwilligenweb functions as a central information platform for official publications in the area of the Austrian voluntary sector. It aims to provide general and clearly structured information on voluntary engagement in Austria.

## **Service- and Competence Centre for volunteering in Austria**

[www.freiwillig-engagiert.at](http://www.freiwillig-engagiert.at) complements the range of services offered by the Freiwilligenweb. The Service- and Competence Centre is, aside from the Freiwilligenweb, the first point of contact for anyone who wants to make a difference in Austria. As a service point for volunteering in Austria, the website informs and connects volunteer organizations and initiatives and promotes the exchange of knowledge. In addition, volunteers and those interested in the topic receive information on fields of activity and further training opportunities. People interested in volunteering who would like personal advice are referred by the Service Centre to regional Volunteer's Centres and advisory services. For volunteers' organizations, [www.freiwillig-engagiert.at](http://www.freiwillig-engagiert.at) represents an additional platform via which they can present themselves. If someone wishes to volunteer, there is the opportunity to make direct contact with organizations which are registered in the database. The range of offers is being continuously extended.

## **Volunteers' Centres**

Austria's volunteers' Centres connect and provide advice and guidance on the issue of voluntary engagement. They are a point of contact for people who want to engage in voluntary activities – and at the same time for organiza-

tions which want to offer voluntary activities. Together with local hubs they ensure that supply and demand in the field of voluntary engagement come together. Volunteers' Centres offer initial and further training for volunteers and volunteers' coordinators or organise it. They also support the transfer of expertise and carry out information work. The Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection promotes their networking and supports their projects.

## **Volunteering strategy**

Under the leadership of the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, a working group of the Austrian Voluntary Council developed the Volunteering Strategy 2023.

The goal of the Volunteer Strategy is to maintain and expand diverse volunteer engagement in Austria through contemporary framework conditions, to increase the reputation and recognition of voluntary engagement, and to facilitate contributions of voluntary engagement to the common good in a wide variety of areas.

## **Projects**

The Ministry promotes projects which are specifically related to voluntary engagement that are of national significance as well as pilot schemes organised by volunteers' organizations, and supports educational and quality assurance programmes.

## **Volunteers' fairs**

The Ministry supports volunteers' fairs in the federal provinces. Volunteers' fairs are a good, successful and popular platform for the promotion of voluntary activities in general and for people to inform themselves about voluntary engagement. At a fair of this kind, it is possible to find out directly about the demands, opportunities and conditions of voluntary engagement, and to express one's interest.

## **Creating incentives for voluntary engagement**

In the form of the Recognition Fund for voluntary engagement, there exists an additional opportunity for support for voluntary engagement since 1 July 2013. The fund promotes activities and initiatives which contribute towards the development or realisation of innovative measures, particularly activities or initiatives designed to guarantee the future of voluntary engagement in Austria in the long term. The maximum subsidy for such activities or initiatives amounts to € 30,000.

## **Volunteer's pass**

Voluntary engagement is about learning and education. It is about personal development and the acquisition of skills. The Austrian volunteer's pass provides the opportunity to officially record competences which have been acquired during voluntary engagement. In this way, a volunteer's pass records a personal development process. This can provide advantages in the world of work for younger volunteers and those in employment – such as when they are applying for a job or developing their careers. Now the Austrian volunteer's pass is also available in a digital form, downloadable on: [www.freiwilligenpass.at](http://www.freiwilligenpass.at).

## **Initial and further training**

Organizations based on voluntary activities need to increase their efforts to be attractive for voluntary engagement. They need to provide guidance to volunteers from the very beginning of their time with an organization to the end so that the volunteer can find his or her way within the structures and processes of the organization and become a part of it. And above all so that the volunteer can work according to his or her motivation and skills and experience a high level of satisfaction and meaningfulness. In order to fulfil these high demands, volunteers need to have contacts who are responsible for supporting them and their integration into the organization. The functions



of volunteer coordinator and volunteer manager demand a lot in terms of the specialist and person abilities of these persons.

In order to ensure that the training of the persons responsible for voluntary engagement is carried out on a standardised basis and at as high a level as possible, the Federal Ministry Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection provides a manual for the curricula of courses for persons in charge of volunteers. In this way the ministry is making a contribution towards quality assurance and improvement in the field of voluntary engagement in Austria.

## **Recognition**

The Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection is particularly interested in emphasising the excellent work carried out by volunteers and underlining its indispensability and significance for society. In various settings, such as events and the presentation of awards, this great commitment is brought out from behind the curtain so that we can appreciate it and say thank you.

In December 2023, for the first time, the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection and the Federal Chancellery jointly awarded the State Prize for Volunteering in Austria in various categories (e.g. innovation, young commitment, inclusion, etc.). Since then, this nationwide award for voluntary engagement in Austria will be presented annually by the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection and the Federal Chancellery as a sign of recognition and appreciation of voluntary commitment and civic engagement.





