

# A guide to community work in Australia



## What is community work?

Community work is a career focused on creating positive social change and strengthening communities. It is both a values-based discipline and a field of practice that brings together knowledge, ethics, and methods to support communities to build capacity, inclusion, and wellbeing. It involves working with people to build skills, improve opportunities, and influence the systems that shape their lives - making it a purposeful and rewarding profession that contributes to a fairer society.

Community workers are the many qualified people who work with individuals, families, and the broader community to ensure social and economic inclusion and access to needed services, support and opportunities.

## Is this the career for you?

If you are considering community work as a career this guide provides a starting point to understand the work, the workers, and the communities they serve. It highlights the values and principles that shape the profession, the types of roles available, and the settings where community workers practise. It also outlines pathways into the profession.

### Core values and principles of community work

- **Equity and inclusion** - ensuring fair access to opportunities and resources
- **Respect for human rights** - upholding dignity, safety, and choice
- **Social justice** - addressing inequality and promoting fairness
- **Cultural safety** - recognising and valuing diversity
- **Strengths-based practice** - focusing on capabilities and resilience



# Where do practitioners work?

Community work jobs are primarily found within the community services sector. Most community workers are employed either by government agencies or not for organisations. However, some community workers are employed in the private sector or run their own businesses. Community work is diverse and professionals work in a variety of settings including:

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**Disability services** - supporting people with disability and their families, including through the NDIS, advocacy, and inclusion initiatives.

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**Aged care** - working with older people to promote wellbeing, independence, and social connection, both in residential and community settings.

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**Family and children's services** - providing support to parents, carers, and children to strengthen family relationships and wellbeing.

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**Child protection** - ensuring the safety and rights of children at risk of harm, and supporting families to address challenges.

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**Youth work** - engaging young people in education, employment, housing, health, and recreation, with a focus on participation and empowerment.

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**Alcohol and other drugs (AOD)** - providing counselling, harm reduction, and recovery support for people affected by substance use.

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**Mental health and peer work** - offering support through counselling, advocacy, and peer-led services that recognise the value of lived experience.

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**Family violence and gender-based violence** - working with victim-survivors, children, and perpetrators to ensure safety, accountability, and recovery.

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**Community development and social inclusion** - building capacity in communities, supporting local leadership, and fostering social participation.

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**Housing and homelessness support** - assisting individuals and families to secure stable housing and address related social and financial challenges.

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**Refugee and migrant settlement** - helping people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to access services, education, and community life.

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**Climate resilience and disaster recovery** - supporting communities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from natural disasters and climate change impacts.

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**Digital inclusion and online service delivery** - addressing barriers to digital access and literacy and delivering support in hybrid or online environments.

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## Did you know that in Australia...

*‘Disadvantage can extend from one generation to the next and that children living in poverty are much less likely to do well at school’.*

In 2023-24, Australian governments spent more than \$220 billion on welfare and social security programs, making it the largest area of public expenditure after health and education.

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In 2023-24, around 179,000 Australian children aged under 18 came into contact with the child protection system.

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On Census night in 2021, about 122,494 people were homeless.

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In 2023-24, specialist homelessness agencies helped around 280,000 clients.

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More than 3.3 million Australians are estimated to live below the poverty line.

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Around 761,000 or 1 in 6 children are estimated to be living in poverty.

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The community services industry employs over 1.7 million people, representing around 12% of the national workforce. This includes community workers, social workers, carers, and managers across diverse fields.

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Employment in the community services sector is projected to grow by more than 15% in the next five years.



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# A values driven career

Most community workers have a strong sense of social justice and fairness. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global framework for addressing poverty, inequality, climate change, and sustainable development by 2030. Community work in Australia is closely aligned with these goals, as it is grounded in equity, social justice, and collective wellbeing.

Community workers contribute to progress on the SDGs every day through their roles in health, housing, education, inclusion, and advocacy. Some of the most relevant SDGs for the sector include:

<p><b>1</b> NO POVERTY</p> 	<p><b>SDG 1:</b> No poverty - addressing disadvantage through housing support, financial counselling, and community development.</p>	<p><b>3</b> GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING</p> 	<p><b>SDG 3:</b> Good health and wellbeing - promoting physical and mental health, supporting recovery, and strengthening community connections.</p>
<p><b>5</b> GENDER EQUALITY</p> 	<p><b>SDG 5:</b> Gender equality - working to eliminate family violence and gender-based violence, and empowering women and girls.</p>	<p><b>10</b> REDUCE INEQUALITIES</p> 	<p><b>SDG 10:</b> Reduced inequalities - supporting people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people with disability, and LGBTQIA+ communities.</p>
<p><b>11</b> SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES</p> 	<p><b>SDG 11:</b> Sustainable cities and communities - building resilient, inclusive communities, supporting digital inclusion, and preparing for climate-induced migration and disasters.</p>	<p><b>13</b> CLIMATE ACTION</p> 	<p><b>SDG 13:</b> Climate action - supporting communities to adapt to climate change, respond to natural disasters, and strengthen resilience.</p>
<p><b>16</b> PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS</p> 	<p><b>SDG 16:</b> Peace, justice and strong institutions - promoting human rights, justice reinvestment, and community-led governance.</p>	<p><b>17</b> PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS</p> 	<p><b>SDG 17:</b> Partnerships for the goals - building strong collaborations between governments, service providers, community-controlled organisations, volunteers, and people with lived experience to achieve shared outcomes.</p>

# Your career starts here

## Work experience

You can use the work experience organised through school to test whether community work interests you as a career. The community services sector is large and diverse so think carefully about your options but also don't give up if your first experience in the sector isn't the right fit.

## Volunteering

Before you enrol in a course you could get involved in some real-life community work by becoming a volunteer. Check out [www.govolunteer.com.au](http://www.govolunteer.com.au) to see the options available.

Over 3 million Australians volunteer each year and many are young people. If you volunteer, not only will you gain some insight into what a future career might look like, you'll also be doing something useful and meaningful.

## Qualification

To be a community work professional you will need a qualification. The minimum qualification is a diploma but increasingly community workers have a degree in human services. Both options will lead to good job prospects but to make the best choice consider where you want to go in your career. The pyramid diagram on the next page will help you make some important decisions.

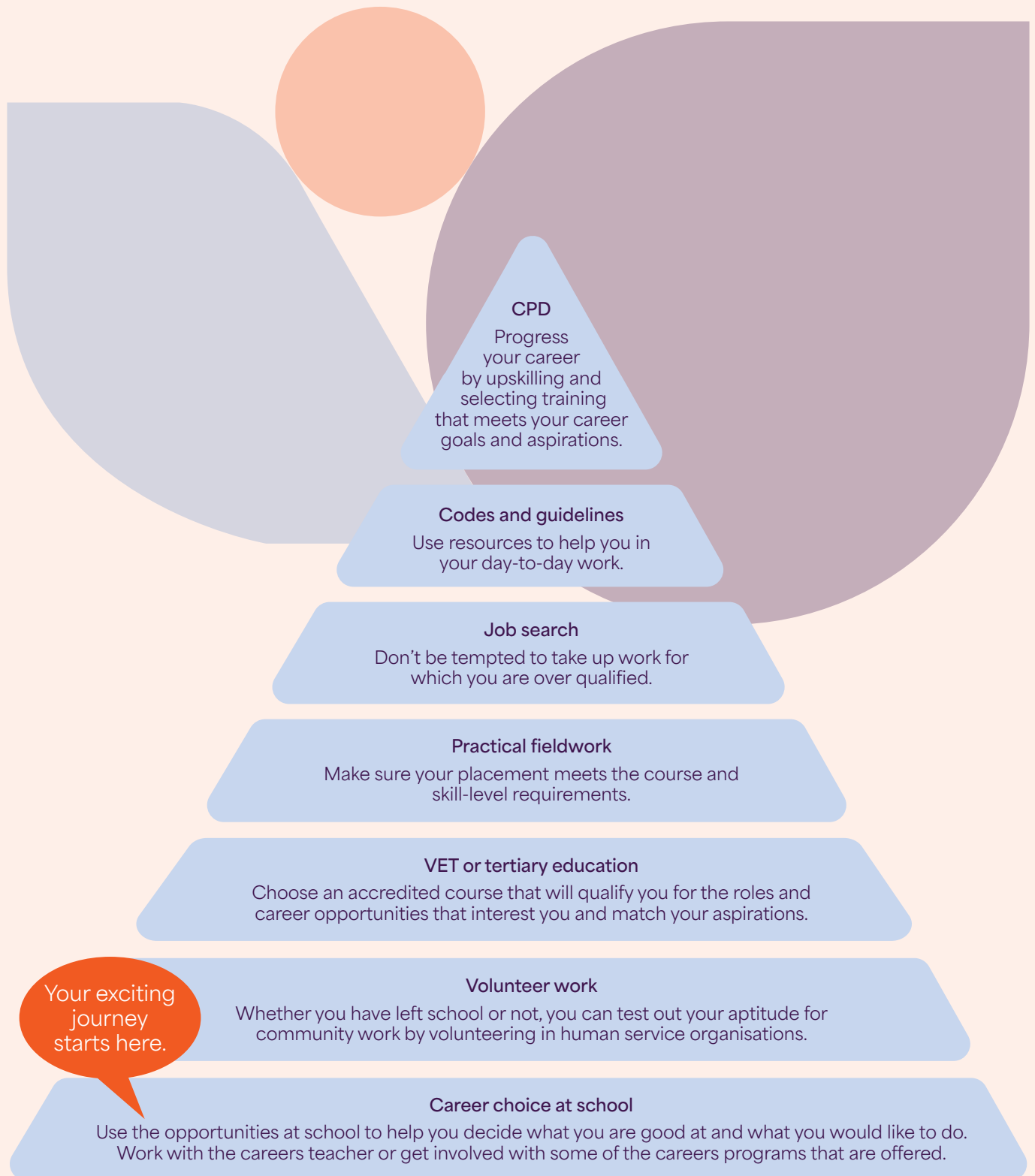
To make things easier, the peak body for the community work profession, Community Work Australia, has approved a large number of courses that can lead to a career in community and human services. You can find the list at the [Community Work Australia website](#).

Remember lots of courses have the same name but some are better than others. Look for Community Work Australia accreditation and make sure that at the very least you enrol in a course that includes face-to-face classes and 400 hours of practical fieldwork.



# Community Work Australia

Leads the development, identity, registration and recognition of the community work profession in Australia. For more information about a career in community work and advice on how to choose a course, visit [communitywork.org.au](http://communitywork.org.au).



## Compare the roles

ABOUT THE ROLE		COMMUNITY WORKER	SOCIAL WORKER	SUPPORT WORKER	VOLUNTEER
QUALIFICATION	Degree	Three year degree in community/ human services or a specialised field	Four year Bachelor of Social Work, two year Master of Social Work	NO	NO
	Diploma	Diploma in Community Services or in a specialised field	NO	NO	NO
	Mandatory practical fieldwork	YES/minimum 400 hours	YES/1000 hours	NO	NO
	Certificate	NO	NO	YES	Available
	On the job training	NO	NO	YES	YES
TYPICAL ROLES	Case management	YES	YES	NO	NO
	Assessment	YES	YES	NO	NO
	Counselling	YES	YES	NO	YES
	Team management	YES	YES	NO	YES
	Project management	YES	YES	NO	YES
	Referrals	YES	YES	NO	YES
	Advocacy	YES	YES	NO	YES
	Senior management	YES	YES	NO	NO
	Crisis support and intervention	YES	YES	NO	NO
	Personal care and support	NO	NO	YES	NO
PRACTICE FIELDS	Disability services	YES	YES	YES	YES
	Aged care	YES	YES	YES	YES
	Family and children's services	YES	YES	NO	NO
	Child protection	YES	YES	NO	NO
	Youth	YES	YES	YES	YES
	Alcohol and other drugs	YES	YES	YES	YES
	Community development	YES	YES	NO	NO
	Mental health	YES	YES	YES	YES
	Family violence	YES	YES	NO	NO
EMPLOYERS	Government	YES	YES	YES	YES
	For profit	YES	YES	YES	NO
	Not for profit	YES	YES	YES	YES
	Private practice	YES	YES	YES	NO
	Clinical services	NO	YES	NO	NO
AVERAGE PAY		\$75,000 - \$85,000+	\$78,000 - \$95,000+	\$58,000 - \$62,000+	Unpaid
PEAK BODY		Community Work Australia	Australian Association of Social Workers	Not applicable	Volunteering Australia