

I want to do volunteer work. How do I start? 22/07/2003 00:00

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My husband and I want to do some volunteer work in the Netherlands. Back in Australia we were actively involved in all sorts of community work. What is allowed here and how should we proceed?

The year 2001 is the UN-designated International Year of Volunteers. The Netherlands currently has 100,000 associations, 125,000 foundations and numerous other organisations, all actively involved in charity and volunteer work — from running a sports club, providing educational services, care for the elderly or disabled to setting up church-related community programmes.

Approximately 35 percent of the Dutch population is involved in some form of voluntary work. On average, a Dutch volunteer contributes 12.4 hours a week. They turn out 540 million hours of work a year, totaling a net worth of EUR 10 billion.

In general, a holder of a Dutch residence permit is allowed to do volunteer work in the Netherlands. This work has to meet certain standards such as no remuneration, no aim for profit, and it has to serve the public interest. Arbeidsbureau Nederland in Zoetermeer will check whether or not the work involved can be regarded as true volunteer work. If so, Arbeidsbureau Nederland will issue a Vrijwilligersverklaring (volunteer certificate) to the prospective employer.

That employer then has to obtain this certificate before the expatriate volunteer starts working. Without the certificate the employer is punishable by law. Prospective employers can obtain certificate application forms from the local Employment Offices. The procedure is relatively short and easy.

As a rule, Arbeidsbureau Nederland will not issue volunteer certificates for activities related to child care, restoration work or general maintenance. Employers from the regular profit sector are not eligible for certificates either, since their aim is to make money. They will have to follow the standard work permit procedure if they intend to employ an expatriate.

Dutch society needs fresh volunteers and your contribution will be more than welcome. I advise you to contact your prospective volunteer organisation about the relevant certificate.

For some inspiration you may also visit Dutch voluntary work websites, such as www.vrijwilligerswerk.pagina.nl, www.vrijwilligerswerk.nl and www.vrijwilligerscentrale.nl.

This column is for informative purposes only, is general in nature, and is not intended to be a substitute for competent legal and professional advice Dutch rules and regulations regarding foreigners, volunteer certificates, work permits, visas and residence permits are continuously subject to change.