

Developing Risk Management Policies for Your Volunteer Program

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Volunteer Risk Management

There is no single way or ideal approach to managing the risks that arise from volunteer service. In ***No Surprises: Harmonizing Risk and Reward in Volunteer Management***, the Nonprofit Risk Management Center explores various facets of risk associated with volunteer programs and organizations. This popular book, now offered as a 5th edition, outlines practical ways to manage a wide array of volunteer risks. Before you set off to draft new policies or polish existing guidelines, consider the following tips for ensuring that your volunteer risk management program rests on a solid foundation.

- **Understand the important volunteer roles in your agency** — What will your volunteers do? Are the expectations of volunteers reasonable? Is the distinction between employees and unpaid volunteers clear? Is the structure of your volunteer program (including reporting relationships) effective and suited to current needs and circumstances?
- **Memorialize volunteer roles and responsibilities** — Taking the time to document volunteer requirements, roles and responsibilities in volunteer position descriptions or Volunteer Agreements is key to effective risk management. Written position descriptions increase the opportunity to establish shared expectations between service volunteers and their paid or volunteer supervisors.
- **Devote time to training and orientation** — Expecting dedicated volunteers to “learn as they go” is inconsistent with thoughtful risk management. Your nonprofit has the benefit of past volunteer experiences, familiarity with the programs and services you offer and insight on legal requirements, quality standards and other issues that your volunteers will need to appreciate in order to succeed. A common complaint among departing, disgruntled volunteers is that the nonprofit did not provide adequate training. The risk of an unhappy volunteer can’t be avoided altogether, but you can eliminate a frequent cause of discontent by providing engaging and helpful training and support throughout a volunteer’s tenure.
- **Got questions?? Ask your volunteers!** — Don’t allow the views and perspectives of your long-time volunteers go to waste. Take the time to solicit feedback on your volunteer recruitment, screening and training activities. Remember to include a “net promoter” question such as: “Would you recommend volunteer service at this nonprofit to a friend?” as well as a question about how you can improve, such as: “What steps could we take to improve the volunteer experience we provide?”

With a strong foundation for volunteer risk management in place, you’re ready to start developing or re-working your volunteer risk management policies. Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind as you develop policies:

- **Great policies evolve over time.** Use easy to correct word processing software to draft policies rather than a chisel and stone tablet. Things change! As your nonprofit matures, as volunteer roles evolve, and as the marketplace for volunteers changes with the times, your policies will require updating.
- **Effective policies are easy to understand and apply.** A complicated, convoluted or jargon-filled volunteer policy will be of little value. Use language that every volunteer is likely to understand. Pilot test your new policies in a volunteer Q&A session. After explaining the rationale for the policy and its key components, invite questions. Consider incorporating Qs and As into the final version of the policy.
- **Remember to explain rationale as well as requirements.** A common mistake in volunteer policy development is to omit the explanation of “why” the policy is needed and focus solely on “what” volunteers should or shouldn’t do. When the rationale, purpose or benefits to the nonprofit and its

volunteers are unclear, your volunteers may see little reason to comply. Gaining “buy-in” for safety policies begins with making certain that the “why” is clear.

In addition to **No Surprises**, NRMC offers a web application—[**My Risk Management Policies**](#)—to help leaders develop custom volunteer policies and forms in a matter of minutes.