

Valiant Volunteerism



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Community service is a way of life for some folks, and those folks help nonprofit missions move forward each day. My own experiences volunteering at a health clinic, a community event planning board, and an animal shelter were in some ways more rewarding than any employment role I could have. Yet volunteers often face special challenges, which volunteer managers must be aware of to prevent the decay of valiant volunteerism—whether in the form of disengagement or destruction.

To get a better grip on your risks related to volunteer management, join our [Affiliate Member program](#) to access our recorded webinar, '[Top 10 Risks Facing Volunteer Programs](#).' Here's a sneak preview of a few of the risk themes I discussed during the webinar.

Risks That Threaten Valiant Volunteerism

- **Improper Classification:** According to the [U.S. Department of Labor](#), a volunteer is an individual who donates their time and services, "...usually on a part-time basis, for public service, religious or humanitarian objectives... without contemplation of pay." Employee and volunteer roles should be distinct in order to protect your nonprofit from legal and financial risk. If a volunteer is able to prove they were improperly classified, your nonprofit could face a fine plus liability for taxes and back wages for the individual employee. Worker classification is a complex topic—in an NRMC webinar, I discuss the difference between a 'volunteer' and an 'employee,' as well as related topics such as: giving appropriate gifts to volunteers and whether you can offer stipends to paid or unpaid interns. You can read a few tips on these topics in prior Risk eNews article: [The Frankenstein Effect](#).
- **Mixed Messages:** Don't send mixed messages about the distinction between paid and unpaid roles at your nonprofit by requiring employees to volunteer. As described under "improper classification" above, a volunteer is someone who contributes their services without contemplation of pay. When you require employees to volunteer, you're devaluing every hour of paid service, by increasing the workday without paying a fair wage. Paid employees at your nonprofit may volunteer for distinctly different volunteer roles, but only if service is truly on a volunteer basis, and without penalty, should the employee decline to volunteer. It is never appropriate to ask or expect any paid staff member to work "volunteer" hours doing the same work they perform as a salaried or hourly employee.
- **Unclear Expectations:** Center team members have heard many horror stories from individuals who have volunteered for nonprofits only to realize that their roles are not what they seem. We sometimes receive calls from disgruntled people who claim that they were recruited to volunteer, but later asked to perform work similar to that of paid staff. Other volunteers become disengaged over time due to a lack of clarity about their responsibilities and their contribution to the nonprofit's mission. I think it's safe to say

that most volunteers sign up because it provides a sense of fulfillment or offers an opportunity to use or build additional skills. But if these motivators do not hold true, then a volunteer can disengage—or do damage to your nonprofit’s culture or reputation—fairly quickly. To ensure that your volunteers understand their roles and the impact of their service, use volunteer position descriptions that affirm the voluntary nature of the role, specific duties, reporting relationships, and more. To quell doubt, spell it out!

- **Draining Training:** One of the most common complaints from volunteers is that training wasn’t provided, or was inadequate. When you skip or skimp on training you miss an opportunity to help your earnest volunteers succeed. Check out the two most recent editions of the Risk eNews for onboarding and training tips. Or peruse these free resources from our website:
 - [Sample Volunteer handbook Table of Contents](#)
 - [Sample language for a volunteer orientation and handbook sign-off form](#)
 - [Volunteer orientation agenda](#)
- **Volunteer Law Ignorance:** You might have heard of the federal Volunteer Protection Act or similar state laws. While these laws protect our beloved volunteers, take time to understand what they cover, and what they don’t. Never over-state a particular law’s purpose or value to calm volunteer fears about liability. For example, the [Volunteer Protection Act \(VPA\)](#) provides a defense to legal claims alleging simple negligence made against volunteers. But the protection afforded by the VPA is narrow, and it doesn’t apply in some of the more common liability claims implicating volunteers. I’ll explain some of the ways the laws may be more narrow than you thought during the upcoming webinar. To learn more about your state’s volunteer protection law and the federal law, download our free mobile app: [Volunteer Protect!](#), which offers quick and easy access to federal and state-specific volunteer protection laws. Download the app in the [Google Play store](#) (for Android phones) or in the Apple store (for iPhones).

I’ve heard many nonprofit leaders state that volunteers are the lifeblood of their nonprofit’s mission. If it’s true, then take action now to address the most critical risks that face your volunteers (and you as a volunteer manager). It’s your duty to provide the best possible volunteering experience for the sake of your team and your mission.

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