

Keeping Volunteers Safe From Harm: Street Smarts for Unfamiliar Turf



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Volunteer safety takes many forms in a community-serving nonprofit. From a thorough orientation program to “on-the-job” training, careful supervision and incident follow-up, nonprofits have various opportunities to help their volunteers stay safe.

Start at the Beginning

Don’t assume that you know what your volunteers are worried about or afraid of. Ask them to tell you or you’ll run the risk of solving a problem that doesn’t exist. For instance, you may think they’re concerned about getting lost in unfamiliar territory when they’re worried about road rage on the highway. Or, you may think they’re anxious about being hurt in a client’s home, but they’re worried about being accused of theft or contracting a disease. Or you may be worried about their obligation to report abuse or contraband, while they’re more worried about the repercussions if they report it.

Invest the time to find out what worries and fears your volunteers have so that your risk management plan can address the real issues not those you imagine.

Polishing Street Smarts

In general, it’s wise to review basic safety precautions with your volunteers who will be traveling into unknown and potentially risky territory to deliver services or conduct other mission-critical activities. These reminders may seem old hat to some and others may never have thought to consider them. By instructing everyone at the same time, you make certain the rules of the street savvy have been reviewed, and everyone’s operating under the same guidelines. We offer the following checklists for consideration when you’re concerned about volunteers helping out in the field.

Heading Out

Before you go out on an assignment:

- Learn about the area and what precautions you should take.
- Map your route.
- Make sure your mobile phone battery or pager is charged.

- Leave a complete itinerary with the appropriate contact at your organization, including an expected time of return.
- Leave valuables at home or locked in your office or your car's trunk.
- Separate your house keys and car keys.

Pre-Trip Inspection

If you are driving to your assignment in your own vehicle or the nonprofit's vehicle:

- Make certain the vehicle is well-maintained and key safety equipment is working as intended (the headlights and brake lights work, the wiper blades clean, not smear, the horn honks, the brakes slow and stop the vehicle, and tires have treads)
- Check that the gas tank is filled at least half way.
- Keep the doors locked.
- Keep the windows rolled up whenever possible.
- Adjust your driving speed to weather conditions (slippery surface, poor visibility, bridges that freeze before roadways).
- Watch roads. In urban areas, check for potholes, dark unlit areas, broken glass and debris, dead ends and roadblocks. In rural areas, watch for narrow, winding roads with no shoulder, animals in the roadway, and unpaved roads.
- Seasonal issues: flooding streams; avalanches of snow, rocks or mud; or amorous animals (moose, deer, and elk) lured to the roadway.
- Keep your car in gear while waiting at traffic signals and stop signs. If approached or threatened, honk your horn and drive off.
- Drive in the lane closest to the center of the road to give yourself maneuvering room.
- Leave enough space between your car and the car in front to permit you to go around it quickly, if necessary.

Parking Tips

When parking your vehicle:

- Park as close to the entrance as legally possible (under a street light at night).
- Avoid parking next to vans, campers or trucks that could conceal someone from your view.
- Back into slots in an underground garage or parking lot.
- Engage the parking brake.
- Have exact change for parking meters (but don't keep change in your vehicle).
- Take the parking lot ticket with you.
- Check your surroundings before unlocking the door; if anyone strikes you as suspicious, don't get out of the car.
- Don't leave keys in the ignition.
- Don't leave a spare key hidden in or on the car.
- Don't leave packages or briefcases etc. on car seats; they're only a temptation to break in and steal.
- Lock your vehicle.

When Trouble Materializes

When you have car trouble:

- Drive to a busy, well-lighted street, if possible.
- Pull on the parking brake and turn on the vehicle's flashing lights.
- If you have a mobile phone, call for assistance (the police, a towing service, a friend or colleague).
- Wait inside your car with the windows rolled up and the doors locked until the person you called arrives.
- Never leave with an unknown person to seek help. Instead, through a closed window, ask the person to call a towing service or the police.

When You're Fearful

If you think someone is following you while driving:

- Keep driving until you find a safe area: the nearest police or fire station or an open gasoline station or grocery store where you can call the police.
- While driving to the safe area, attract attention to yourself by honking your horn in short blasts and by

turning on the flashers.

- Don't drive home, pull into a driveway or pull over to the side of the road where you could be trapped.
- Try to record the license number, color, make and type of vehicle and report it to the police.

Stay Safe

When returning to your vehicle:

- Carry your key in your hand.
- Note occupied vehicles around you.
- Check under the vehicle and in its interior to make certain no one is hiding there before you enter.
- Lock the doors as soon as you enter the vehicle.

Public Transportation Tips

If you're using public transportation or a taxi to get to your assignment:

- Determine risk levels of bus, subway, train, and walking to the destination.
- Scope out the route by car with a friend first to identify the safest route to take from the stop to your destination.
- Use busy, well-lit stops.
- Keep aware of your surroundings; no dozing or daydreaming.
- If you take a taxi there, how will you get back? Will cabs hailed on the street stop to pick up passengers in that neighborhood? If called, do they come?
- Ask the taxi driver to wait until you are inside before leaving.

Walk With Care

When walking to your assignment:

- Choose busy, well-lighted streets; avoid isolated areas, alleys, vacant lots, abandoned buildings and construction sites.
- Walk purposefully in an alert and self-assured manner (head up, back straight); know where you're headed and act as if you know; and don't dawdle or window shop.
- Don't advertise your newness to the area by referring to a map.
- Be alert to your surroundings; observe the people around you.
- Identify safe places (stores; or fire, police or service stations) where you might go (or run) if you need help, need a telephone, need to wait out a dangerous situation.
- Wear flat, comfortable shoes that you can run in should the occasion arise.
- At night, walk near the curb (away from buildings and recessed doorways) to give yourself room to run.
- Dress prudently (not provocatively) and leave flashy jewelry (even costume) at home.
- Don't fill your arms with packages; keep one arm and hand free, if possible.
- Secure your briefcase, purse or other hand-carried items against your person.
- Keep some extra money separate from wallet or purse for emergencies.

Forewarned is forearmed. If volunteers stay aware, trust their intuition, protect their personal space, and maintain a healthy degree of caution, they will be less of a target. Knowing how to make themselves less of a target will reduce the risk that your volunteers will come to harm while traveling to and from service assignments.