Rewarding Risks: The Prodigious Power of Volunteers



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It's National Volunteer Week, an opportunity to celebrate the contributions of volunteers and the indelible impact that volunteer service makes on communities across our country. In the promotional materials for National Volunteer Week, the Points of Light Foundation reminds us that: "Whether online, at the office, or the local food bank; whether with a vote, a voice, or a wallet—doing good comes in many forms, and we recognize and celebrate them all."

Volunteer programs offer wonderful case studies for risk management. Nonprofits across the country have identified, pondered and taken proactive steps to address myriad risks that arise from volunteer service: from safety risks, to liability exposures and more. By reflecting on the risks that arise from volunteer service, a nonprofit team can ensure that the participation of volunteers is appropriate, meaningful, and mission-advancing. Over our history of service, we've observed many terrific examples of volunteer risk management, including:

- **Youth protection –** A growing number of nonprofit teams have made bold moves to increase the safety of children in their care. I recently volunteered for an event involving children where safety was clearly the principal focus; each volunteer was required to complete multiple training programs before their first interaction with participants, and additional time was devoted to sharing the elements of the safety program with parents. What an inspiration!
- **Driver safety –** During the past several years we've published a number of articles on driver safety and we recently delivered an Affiliate Member webinar on distracted driving. The feedback on these resources has been positive. And we've been delighted to see that many prominent carriers insuring nonprofits are offering free driver training resources to their policyholders.
- **Volunteer training –** Mature volunteer programs have efficient systems for helping volunteers learn what they need to know, even the things they may not think they need to know like policies related to photography, social media, out-of-program contact, and what to do in an emergency. We applaud those who take the time to create custom volunteer training materials that address the real risks encountered in volunteer service.
- **Volunteer screening –** As tempting as it may be to accept any help that knocks on your door, risk champions know that matching the right candidate to an open volunteer role is the ultimate goal in volunteer screening. A secondary goal is excluding any applicants who pose a danger to your organization and your clientele. Thorough screening tailored to the position and its risks is always a worthwhile investment. To learn more, check out our Staff Screening Notebook.

- **Volunteer communications** – Keeping volunteers up-to-date and informed is key to sustaining their enthusiasm and engagement. Volunteers want to be 'in the know' about their schedules, assignments, and also how their work contributes to your mission. Many nonprofits tell us that they are using multiple communication methods to keep their volunteers informed, from text alerts, to email updates and postings on volunteer web portals. Learn more about trends and risks related to volunteer communication at our Risk Connect workshop on May 14th: Riders of the Storm: Volunteer Risk Management in the Information Age**.**

Managing Volunteer Recognition Risk

As you celebrate your gallant givers this week and throughout the year, remember to pay attention to the risks associated with certain recognition practices. For example:

- **Keep volunteer headcounts**. The IRS requests nonprofit filers to report the number of volunteers on page one of the Form 990. The Service also recommends that organizations record (on Schedule O) *how* the headcount was tracked. Details about recording methods aren't required and reasonable estimates are permitted.
- **Avoid recognizing volunteers with cash.** It may seem obvious, but some nonprofits forget that volunteers stop being volunteers when you start paying them for their service! The IRS considers gift certificates to be taxable income in almost every case, no matter how small the value. For more information take a look at Stephen Fishman's summary in his article "What Tax-Free Benefits Can Nonprofits Give Volunteers?" published by Nolo.com.
- **Create and follow your expense reimbursement policy.** An important element in a well-run volunteer program is clarity with regard to non-taxable reimbursements. Is your policy on reimbursements clear? If not, adopt a reimbursement policy that explains what expenses are reimbursable and what steps a volunteer must take to request reimbursement. As a reminder, the permissible mileage reimbursement rate is currently 14 cents per mile for charitable organizations.
- **Say thanks in many ways.** To retain volunteers and sustain high levels of engagement, resolve to use multiple strategies for saying thanks. In the guidebook "Take Root: Volunteer Management," the Hands On Network offers 9 reminders about volunteer recognition: (1) give it frequently, (2) give it via a variety of methods, (3) give it honestly, (4) give it to the person, not the work, (5) give it appropriately to the achievement, (6) give it consistently, (7) give it on a timely basis, (8) give it in an individualized fashion, and (9) give it for what you want more of.
- **Use position descriptions to clarify responsibilities.** As you recognize your volunteers you may want to take the opportunity to re-emphasize responsibilities and roles. Every volunteer wants to do a good job; a clear position description sets the stage for stellar performance.
- **Don't skimp on training, or assume volunteers know how to do the job.** Part of recognition is appreciating how volunteers learn and grow in their positions. Consider offering additional training as an investment in your great volunteers to enable them to shine even brighter.

Recognizing Our Volunteers

We would be remiss if we didn't mention a few of our own wonderful volunteers who support NRMC's mission to "inspire effective risk management and Risk Champions across the nonprofit sector." We're grateful for our dedicated Board of Directors for their unwavering support and leadership. We're also indebted to the stellar faculty who present at our annual Risk Summit. Thank you to all of our volunteers who bring their valuable insights and service mindsets to support our mission of inspiring effective risk management in the nonprofit sector.