

How to Honor and Respect Your Volunteers



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Nonprofits across the country are showcasing their creative talents to celebrate the contributions of volunteers during the month of April, "[National Volunteer Month](#)." Here at the NRM Center we receive quite a few calls from volunteers. Unfortunately, since we're all about 'risk,' many of these callers contact us to complain about how they have been treated-or mistreated-by their nonprofit employers.

We encourage you to celebrate the service of volunteers in fun and creative ways. But before you get carried away with party plans, check out our list of must-do steps to manage the risk of volunteer discontent.

- **Don't recruit or accept new volunteers unless you truly have a need, and you have clearly defined the volunteer role.** Nothing diffuses the excitement and energy of a volunteer faster than chaos or confusion about the volunteer's role. Similarly, a volunteer's passionate flame will quickly fade upon realizing that the nonprofit requested extra bodies-but really had no use for the extra help. Before recruiting new volunteers, reflect on your nonprofit's needs and the specific roles that the volunteers will fill. Create a Volunteer Position Description for each distinct volunteer role, and make sure the description references the fact that the role is voluntary, and does not offer compensation. Also consider drafting a Volunteer Handbook-a simple roadmap that will help orient new volunteers to your mission, their roles, and general expectations for all volunteers. It's a best practice to separate your Volunteer Handbook from your Employee Handbook; this reduces any confusion about whether the volunteer role is truly voluntary, and it demonstrates that you care about your volunteer team.
- **Never recruit volunteers to do the work of paid staff.** The #1 complaint that NRM Center team members received from volunteers during 2015 was that, "I'm doing volunteer work that someone else is getting paid for!" We heard that from countless volunteers with interesting roles-from greeting visitors to hosting weekly radio broadcasts. You can offer volunteers creative, exciting roles, but unless you want to risk turning a volunteer into an employee, don't ask a volunteer to perform a job that someone else is doing for an hourly wage or annual salary. It isn't legal and it isn't fair.
- **Provide simple outlets for volunteer complaints.** We can only guess that the volunteers who bend our ears with their complaints feel they have no recourse within the organization. That's a shame, and it breeds discontent among volunteer teams, who may then be tempted to share their negative experiences with other new recruits or even on social media. Every volunteer should be encouraged to speak up-directly to the volunteer supervisor-if they have a concern about any aspect of their role. Consider including simple instructions in your Volunteer Handbook regarding the submission of volunteer complaints. Remind volunteers that complaints are welcome, and allow individuals to submit complaints through multiple avenues. For example, allow the submission of complaints to a manager who does not work with volunteers; this will enable volunteers to submit complaints regarding a direct

supervisor.

- **Teach, train, and repeat!** Assuming a new volunteer knows what to do is a common and potentially costly mistake. My teenage daughter volunteered to staff the registration desk at a conference. Although she was happy to help out, she was disappointed that no training was provided, and embarrassed that she was unable to answer the very first registrant's question: "Where is the men's room?" Show respect by briefing and training your volunteers. Provide a thorough orientation for any long-term volunteer roles, and provide on-site training before short-term volunteers get their feet wet. Consider providing more supervision for volunteers who receive less training, as they may need more assistance during their first few shifts.
- **Don't disrespect the essence of volunteering.** I'm frequently surprised to learn about strict requirements pertaining to service hours, or financial penalties for NOT volunteering! Unfortunately, the word "volunteering" has been co-opted. Requiring that students 'volunteer' in order to graduate, or that parents to volunteer in order for their children to participate in a sports team brings disrespect to the concept of volunteerism. Volunteering is doing something with no expectation of compensation or penalty. Period.

Need help getting volunteer service right at your nonprofit? Join our [Affiliate Member](#) program to enjoy exclusive access to our Webinar Vault. Available (free to members), recorded webinars on timely volunteer themes include:

- Volunteer Risk Management Myths and Truths
- Managing the Risk of Volunteer Discontent
- Employee, Independent Contractor, or Volunteer: Status Matters
- Is a Penny Saved, A Penny Earned? Managing Internship Risks

And check out the special [Volunteer Issue of Risk Management Essentials](#). Featured articles include:

- Employee or Volunteer: What's the Difference?
- Volunteers, Social Media and Risk
- Developing Risk Management Policies for Your Volunteer Program

"When honoring volunteers, it's easy to assume that a party or small gift will convey gratitude and fulfill the volunteer. We recommend more meaningful 'gifts' such as training, respect, and opportunities to truly impact or connect with a nonprofit's mission. Just as employees value certain benefits above others, the same is true for volunteers. Most of us choose the nonprofit road not to get rich or to get perks, but because we want to make a difference. Remember to show your volunteers how they are making a difference in your world. Smile often and say 'thank you' because "Volunteers are paid in six figures... S-M-I-L-E-S." (Quote by Gaila LeMaire)

Melanie Herman is executive director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions about how to manage the risks associated with volunteer service and your questions about the Center's consulting services and cloud applications. Melanie can be reached at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.