No Surprises in Volunteer Management



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Volunteers are at the heart of most nonprofits, but your nonprofit's heart may beat a dangerous rhythm without volunteer risk management. Every nonprofit with volunteers is at risk of experiencing these surprises:

- The risk of a volunteer abusing a client
- The risk of a volunteer's actions harming the nonprofit's reputation
- The risk of losing a key volunteer who leads and motivates others
- The risk of volunteers considering themselves employees
- The risk of volunteers misusing private client information or financial assets
- The risk of harm coming to a volunteer.

How can you avoid surprises and setbacks when managing your volunteer team? Peek at these volunteer screening tips from No Surprises: Harmonizing Risk and Reward in Volunteer Management, to learn more.

TIP #1: Create a written description for each volunteer position. Formal position descriptions convey expectations between the nonprofit and the volunteer. These expectations may include: assigned duties, qualifications, time commitment, which staff member to report to, and dress code, among other things. Formal, written descriptions encourage appropriate applicants to apply for the volunteer position.

TIP #2: Be selective when recruiting volunteers. Many of us believe that "the more, the merrier.' This mentality leads us to engage more volunteers than we can handle, or to indiscriminately select volunteers. Thoughtful selection reduces the chance of engaging a volunteer who presents a risk, or who is not compatible with the needs of the nonprofit. Selective recruitment also allows you to engage only the number of volunteers you can supervise, given your resources.

TIP #3: Interview volunteers based on position requirements. Devote your time and resources to interviewing candidates for volunteer positions. Ask specific interview questions that relate to the responsibilities of each position. For example, you may ask an applicant for a driver position questions about his or her driving record. If another applicant seeks to mentor children, you might ask that person why helping children is satisfying work.

TIP #4: Screen friends the same way you screen strangers. If the board chair's sister wants to volunteer, she may not be asked to provide references because you already trust the board chair. Whether volunteers are friends or strangers, you should screen them using the same methods. What you see isn't always what you get, so be sure to screen familiar applicants!

TIP #5: Complete additional screening for high-risk positions. Require added screening when selecting volunteers for high-risk positions, such as positions providing one-on-one support for vulnerable clients. Advanced screening may help determine which volunteer applicants are not suited for high-risk work. Standard volunteer screening may include applications and orientation, whereas advanced screening for high-risk positions may include: applications, interviews, reference checks, criminal history background checks, home visits, orientation, and extra training.

No Surprises also offers advice on other volunteer risk management topics:

- Volunteer recruitment strategies
- Volunteer supervision, discipline, and termination
- Volunteer protection laws
- Insurance for volunteer programs
- The difference between employee and volunteer
- Volunteer challenges and fulfillment
- Public relations issues in volunteer programs.