

Craft a Volunteer Training Program That Works



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A new volunteer shows up for their first day of service at your organization with a positive attitude. That's a big plus, because several volunteers no-showed for that day's client services. The new volunteer has a professional background in your nonprofit's sector of service. Stressed but relieved, you skip the day's planned volunteer orientation and send your new volunteer straight into working with clients.

At the day's end, the volunteer, looking harried, ducks out before you can catch up on how things went. Later, staff members say the volunteer seemed overwhelmed and repeatedly left their post to ask questions of staff, leaving clients waiting for answers past their designated time slots. A brief email from the volunteer the next day says they don't feel the role is a good fit and they won't be back.

What's the missing ingredient in this picture?

Training.

A great volunteer training program meets the needs of volunteers, staff and the organization and bonds everyone together in service of the mission. It ensures volunteers are prepared and equipped to perform their roles safely and effectively, addresses common risks that may arise within their service, and informs them when and how to ask for help or report a problem. A strong training program helps increase the likelihood that promising volunteer recruits will work with your organization long enough to reach some of their goals in volunteering and make a difference for your team and community.

A training program that's too rigid will deter people who might be great fits for volunteer service and increase the risk of a weak or unqualified volunteer pool. But if training is missing or underdeveloped, risks to safety and effectiveness multiply. How do you find the right balance?

This article offers simple steps to develop a flexible and effective volunteer training program that can evolve as your organization's needs do.

Where Risks Arise in Volunteer Service

Some areas of risk related to volunteer work may come quickly to mind. Others can be harder to spot. Here are some areas where risk tends to surface in volunteer roles.

Physical safety: Volunteers may experience or cause injury or an environmental hazard. A lack of proper

training or appropriate equipment can increase this risk.

Reputational risk: A volunteer could behave in a way that damages your nonprofit's reputation, or post information online that could harm the organization.

Legal and compliance risk: A volunteer could do something that violates data privacy laws, mandated child abuse reporting requirements, or other legal or compliance requirements of your organization.

Operational risks: A volunteer could provide poor or inconsistent service, as in the example at the beginning of this article.

Great volunteer training can help make these risks less likely to become realities—and ensure your organization and its volunteers are as well prepared as possible if the risks materialize. Consistent messaging is key. So is sharing the “why” behind everything you ask volunteers to do.

What makes this communication challenging? Volunteers have varied backgrounds and levels of experience. Their service with your organization is limited, as is their time commitment to you.

To cross those barriers, a great training program offers multiple ways to learn, whether in-person, live virtual training, or asynchronous, self-paced virtual training. Having the right technology helps, but keep technological requirements simple and ensure products or systems truly serve the mission and your volunteer needs.

Core Components of Risk-Aware Volunteer Training

Nonprofit volunteer training programs are, and should be, as varied as the organizations and missions they support. Here are some core components to consider including in your risk-aware volunteer training program.

Onboarding/Orientation (required for all volunteers): This should cover the organization's mission and values, code of conduct and behavioral expectations, and give an overview of the key risks and responsibilities for all volunteers at your nonprofit. Spell out what volunteers can and can't do, and what great work in the role and on the assignment looks like. Use online tools and file sharing services to make it easy for volunteers to find information about scheduling and key documents they'll need to serve with confidence.

Role-Specific Training: Tailor this instruction based on a volunteer's duties. Depending on their role, they may need additional training on youth protection and mandated reporting of any abuse or neglect of a young person; handling confidential information and data privacy; or safety measures for working in environments that could be hazardous, like a warehouse.

Scenario-Based Learning: When possible, especially for higher-risk roles, offer opportunities to practice decision-making for things like responding to a safety incident or managing boundary issues with clients. You could ask a volunteer supervisor to roleplay a hypothetical situation with a volunteer or have them shadow a more experienced volunteer.

Compliance and Reporting: Emphasize that your organization wants to work with the volunteer, not look over their shoulder. Let volunteers know what kind of incidents need to be reported and how to report them. Make sure they know you encourage reporting of all concerns and they won't face retaliation for reporting. Communicate any protections your organization has for whistleblowers. Let the volunteer know how and where they will need to document issues that may arise in their work.

Refreshers and Ongoing Training: Update volunteer training annually or as new risks emerge. Encourage staff who work with volunteers to be available as resources to them. Whenever possible, offer volunteers constructive feedback on how to improve. Make sure your training materials are available in formats for diverse audiences across language and accessibility differences.

Evaluate and Improve

Once you have your volunteer training program in place, remember to evaluate how it's working. Gather volunteer input on the effectiveness of your training through surveys or informal check-ins. Use that input to improve your program.

Track key metrics and review them for patterns. What are your training completion rates? How about volunteer incident rates and reporting rates? (Remember that sometimes increases in incident rates reflect an increase in reporting, which is what you want!) Do the volunteer incidents reported reveal places where you may have training gaps?

How do your volunteer retention and satisfaction rates look? This information can also help identify strengths and weaknesses in your volunteer training program.

Volunteer Training: An Ongoing Journey

If your nonprofit's leaders find themselves turning into pretzels wondering where to start or how to take the next step in volunteer training—just try something! It's OK to start small and build over time. Prioritize the highest-risk areas of volunteer service first and build from there.

Once you know the core safety and ethical tenets you can't compromise on with volunteers, look for places where you can be flexible in response to their needs and concerns. Flexibility and openness to updating volunteer training are key to effective risk management. Volunteer training that evolves as the organization matures reflects a true commitment to safety and benefit for everyone involved, versus a check the box approach. If you create a risk-aware volunteer training program that can evolve with the needs of your volunteers, your team, and your community, its effects will ripple throughout your services.

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