

Care and Feeding of Good Volunteers

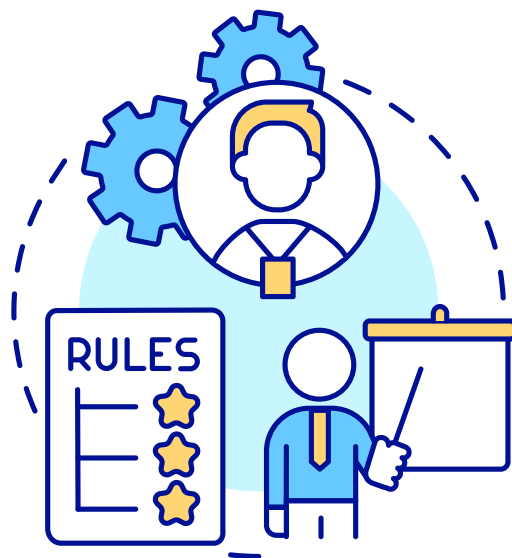
Volunteers are the life blood of every nonprofit. But managing volunteers can be a bit like herding cats. Your volunteers are busy people, and have many options of where they want to spend their time. It's important to have a good plan in place for their careful care and feeding. You need to keep them feeling fulfilled, wanted, and needed so they stick around.

Develop a Job Description

This step is incredibly important. Managing volunteers is a time consuming process and you want to make sure you know what you need and who you need to do it. Successful volunteer programs treat this more like recruiting for a paid staff position instead of finding warm body and trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

Review what the organization's needs are and make a list of the skills needed to complete the tasks. This ensures you not only get the job done by someone who has the right skills, but also to increases the chances that the volunteer(s) will be satisfied in their role (role fit is crucial to job satisfaction).

It also helps in communicating expectations. Number of hours and days of the week that help is needed, work location, tasks required, who the supervisor/point of contact is, etc.



Where to Find Volunteers

Your next terrific volunteer could be anywhere. Be prepared to talk about your nonprofit, its mission, vision, and values in a clear, concise way. Practice describing your programs, the positive impact they have... and how valuable your volunteers are to your nonprofit's success.

Use your social network, and your newsletter. One of the best ways to recruit volunteers is to simply ask your friends and family if they or someone they know might want to volunteer. Then, ask your current volunteers and other staff members to do the same.

In addition to that, consider asking:

- Your clients, their families, and relatives
- Alumni of your program/s
- People in your organization's neighborhood
- Individuals who have been affected by the problem you want to solve
- Schools and universities
- Local businesses
- Clubs and community groups.



Train Them Right...Right from the Get-Go

Whether your nonprofit is large or small, it helps to have all new volunteers go through an orientation or onboarding process. This could be as simple as having someone demonstrate the task involved, or shadow an experienced volunteer throughout the day. Someone who can also answer questions about what, why, when, where, and how that may pop up.

One of the biggest mistakes nonprofits make is to bring in an eager volunteer and then allow them to linger around because they aren't sure what they should do, who is responsible for telling them, or even who is in charge.

Even the most passionate volunteer will grow weary and lose interest if they feel confused and frustrated about what's expected of them.

Or it could be more formal orientation with printed workbooks, testing, and instruction by qualified staff members or professionals in a focused field.

Whether simple or more involved, orientation should also include a review of any and all organizational policies applicable to them.

5 Basic Policies for Volunteers

Here are five basic policies that every nonprofit should have in place for recruiting, training, and managing volunteers. Ensure that every new and returning volunteer is made aware of them. Consider creating a *Volunteer Handbook* that includes these policies along with other useful information.

You may already have versions of these policies for staff. Do some research and consult with an HR professional to see what changes or edits are wise to make for policies related specifically to volunteers.

#1 Screening Policy

While larger and well-established nonprofits likely have a screening policy in place, new and smaller nonprofits may not have considered a need for one, especially if there is a base of local volunteers to regularly rely upon. However, screening applicants before allowing them to volunteer benefits the nonprofit in several ways.



You can learn about an individual's strengths and weaknesses, as well as leadership ability (or not!), plus evaluate their general suitability to help your nonprofit. Do they share your mission and vision? Does their background indicate they may be a good, bad or inappropriate fit?

Background checks are a must--especially if your volunteers are interacting with your program participants. You want to take measures to ensure that an individual (staff or volunteer) does not pose any threat to your organization or the people it serves.

#2 Privacy & Confidentiality Policy

Depending on the type of work your nonprofit does, your volunteers may or may not have access to private information about others within the organization or people and entities that you help. Develop clear policies on how your organization will handle personal information about volunteers, and what information about your participants that volunteers are able to access. Some considerations include:

- How long you will retain information after a volunteer leaves your organization
- Who in your organization has access to personal details about volunteers, staff and program participants.
- Where the data will be stored, and how will you restrict access to it
- If and under what circumstances would any volunteer's information be disclosed to someone.



#3 Workplace Violence & Harassment Policy

Are you aware of the *Volunteer Protection Act of 1997*? It provides immunity for volunteers who inadvertently cause harm. However, it does not apply if the harm is due to “willful or criminal misconduct, gross negligence, reckless misconduct, or a conscious, flagrant indifference to the rights or safety of the individual harmed by the volunteer.”

Your Board may already have such a policy for staff members. It should also consider how the policy would extend to volunteers. Brainstorm some scenarios that might happen. Consider having staff and key volunteer leaders role-play a challenging situation. It's always better to have given thought to such things in advance than face dealing with them unprepared in the moment.

You can download a free copy of the *Volunteer Protection Act of 1997* from:
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-105publ19/pdf/PLAW-105publ19.pdf>

#4 Feedback and Evaluation Policy

Consider your own experience as a volunteer in other nonprofits as well as others you have served with. What did you enjoy most about how you were treated? What frustrated you? What specific elements did you think could be improved from your perspective as a volunteer?

Those questions and others are good to ask your volunteers to answer. You can ask for feedback informally, but also consider developing a feedback evaluation form, particularly after a major event or program experience.

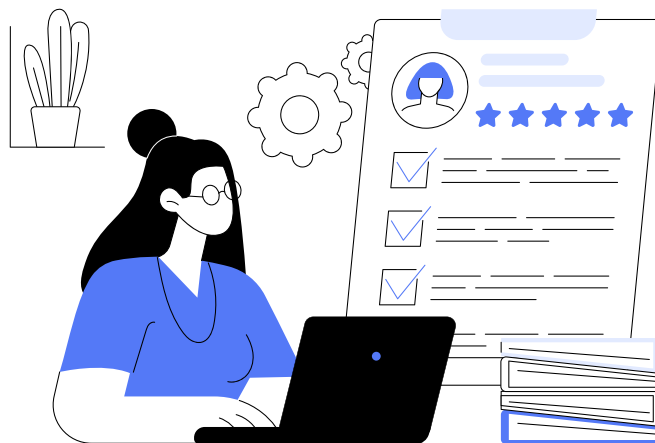
Make sure volunteers understand how to air grievances in a productive way.

#5 Dismissal Policy

Letting someone go for any reason is seldom an easy task.

The truth is that not every individual will be a good fit for your team of volunteers. Some may start out fine and be well-appreciated helpers only to become disgruntled, argumentative, combative, or too negative over time in ways that can sabotage the camaraderie of the team as a whole and the organization's reputation. Still others could be found engaging in illegal acts like theft, intoxication, or other crimes and questionable behavior.

Having a formal Dismissal Policy in place can provide much needed guidance and a procedural structure for staff and leaders to follow, especially when it's become clear that an individual needs to be dismissed from their role.



When Someone Wants to Un-Volunteer

It's hard to say goodbye to a faithful volunteer who has decided to step back, especially one who has been a blessing to work with and was relied upon by the team.

Let them know how much you have valued and appreciated their help. Recall some of the best times and good things accomplished during their tenure. Wish them well.

Consider a gift or a card. And extend an open invitation to come back to those you'd love to have return in the future.

Don't forget to document your orientation and training process, along with any disciplinary and dismissal events that occur.



Attracting, training, and keeping good volunteers is an ongoing process for every nonprofit.

Attract eager, long term volunteers with your mission, your vision, your goals, and your passion. Make them feel welcomed and appreciated. They may provide much of the hands-on work for your nonprofit, but never make them feel isolated, less than, micro-managed, unwanted, or unneeded.

Also, while volunteers don't need to be privy to everything that goes on within your organization, don't hide important details from them. Keep them informed, prepared, and feeling as much a valued part of the organization as the staff, board, and those you serve.