

Volunteer Handbooks: A Simple Guide

By Tobi Johnson and Associates

Volunteer Handbooks are a key foundational risk management strategy. They can help protect your volunteers, clients, and agency from unintended harm by providing guidelines for acceptable conduct. They're also a great resource for volunteers when they have questions about a policy or process they may have forgotten or missed during orientation.

Volunteer Handbooks Help You Manage Talent

Volunteer Handbooks are also an important part of the talent management of your volunteer corps. A Volunteer Handbook is not the same as a Training Manual, covering key technical aspects of the job they will do. Instead, Handbooks help volunteers acclimate to your organization by providing social clues about "how things are done around here." A high-quality Handbook can also inspire volunteers to see what's possible as a result of their service.

Volunteer Handbooks can also help deepen levels of engagement. When volunteers join, many haven't yet fully committed to your program and are still checking you out. A well-written, informative, and approachable Handbook answers three critical personal questions your new recruits are asking themselves — Does this organization have the capacity to make a difference in the world? Can I make a difference here? Will I fit in?

Volunteer Handbooks Don't Have to be Boring

Nor do they have to be expensive. You don't have to spend a lot of money printing a beefy, multi-paged document out. Instead, post it on your website so volunteers can easily find it when they need it. You can sprinkle volunteer and client testimonials about the power of your program throughout. Think about including photos of diverse volunteers in action (provided you have permission). Or, take photos of clients with hand-held signs that note why they personally appreciate your volunteer team. To reinforce critical concepts, you can also create an accompanying video of volunteers sharing key points.

Your Volunteer Handbook doesn't have to be bureaucratic either. Write it as if you were sitting across the kitchen table from a friend, and simply explain how things work. Better yet, have a team of "volunteer guides" create your handbook in their own words — assign each person a section and include their photo and a short quote about why they volunteer at the beginning of that section. Or, write it as a comic book or graphic novel, with illustrations and lots of color.

What Should be Included in a Volunteer Handbook?

Organizational Overview – Organization Mission, Org Chart, Staff Roles

Professionalism and Ethics – Representing the Organization, Conflict of Interest Policy, Accepting Compensation, Gifts, Impartiality, Appropriate Use of Organization Resources

The Role of Volunteers – Welcoming Volunteers From all Walks of Life, Value & Impact of Volunteers on the Lives of Those They Serve, Paid Staff vs. Volunteer Tasks

Workplace Safety – Working Conditions for Volunteers, Safety Rules & Checklist, How to Handle Emergency Situations, Reporting of Accidents & Injuries, Contagious Diseases, Client Home Visit Protocol (if allowed), Suspected Abuse or Illegal Activity, Sexual Harassment & Domestic Violence, Alcohol & Drugs

Service Standards – Anti-Discrimination Policy, Serving Low-Literacy & Limited-English Speaking People, Professional Boundaries & Risk Management, Liability Protections, Federal Volunteer Protection Act, State-specific Good Samaritan Law(s), Volunteer-Client Relationships, Client Confidentiality, Client Records, Serving People in Crisis

Supervision & Support – Self Care, Special Accommodations, Volunteer-Paid Staff Relationships, Confidentiality of Volunteer & Staff Personal Information

Training Program – Orientation and Training Course List, Peer Mentoring (If applicable), Schedule, Requirements, Certification Testing (if a highly-skilled, high risk job)

Supervision & Support – Volunteer Coordinator, Other Staff, Time Sheets, Leave of Absence, Travel Reimbursement, Other Perks, Grievance and Complaint Procedure, Technology, Inclement Weather Policy

Volunteer Separation and Dismissal – Resignation, Exit Interview, The Right to Progressive Discipline, Reasons for Immediate Dismissal

Required Reporting – Forms, the Importance of Data Integrity, Data Submission Deadlines, Use of Agency-Approved Materials

If you're short on time right now, pick a few of the most important areas — ones that represent a high risk for your organization or areas where volunteers frequently have questions. Also, don't forget what a great resource volunteers can be in helping pull our Handbook together and give it life.

Finally, be sure to have your Handbook reviewed by your Human resource or legal staff. Just because volunteers aren't paid, doesn't mean there aren't laws or regulations you must follow. Make sure you're aligned with your agency's expectations and the law.

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