

# VOLUNTEER SERVICES

Volunteers perform an important and necessary service for hospice programs and other community based organizations. However, they can also represent a substantial exposure. Any injury to a patient or damage to property stemming from the actions of the volunteer could result in a claim against the organization. Because of this risk exposure, it is important that organizations that utilize volunteers, establish comprehensive policies and procedures for volunteer selection, orientation/training, supervision/monitoring and ongoing evaluation.

## RECRUITING AND SELECTION OF VOLUNTEERS

While many organizations depend on volunteers to support their mission and the provision of services, this does not mean they must accept everyone who expresses interest in volunteering. There should be a screening process in place. Require completion of a formal application that has an accompanying cover letter describing the qualifications, time commitments and any special requirements of the position. This may serve to deter casual applicants who are not prepared to meet your requirements for service and training.



Conduct a face-to-face interview in which you provide a brief overview of the organization and its expectations of volunteers. Require and verify personal references and include documentation of notes from the interview and the reference checks in the volunteer's file.

There should be written job descriptions and defined performance criteria for all positions in which volunteers may function. When the qualifications for a position are well defined, it is easier to reject an applicant for failing to meet the minimum qualifications. For example, an organization can advise an applicant that his or her skills and/or experience do not match those required for the position. There is no legal obligation to accept every candidate or to state a reason for rejection.

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## **Orientation/Training**

Orientation of volunteers in a community-based program should be almost as comprehensive as that provided to new employees. Some issues to address in a volunteer orientation program may include:

- The role of the volunteer
- Roles of the various team members with whom the volunteer will interact
- Communication skills
- Patient and family rights and responsibilities
- Infection Control practices
- Professional boundaries and patient/family boundaries
- Safety Issues
- Confidentiality
- Reporting requirements related to patient changes, pain or other symptoms

It is also important to include volunteers in ongoing educational and training programs. Sometimes, it is difficult to provide continuing education sessions that fit the schedule of every volunteer. It is important to identify which sessions are mandatory for everyone. Consider providing online training opportunities that can be more easily accessed. Additionally, consider using a volunteer newsletter or email group to provide training reminders as well as policy and procedure updates.

## **Supervision/Monitoring**

It is important that both the volunteer and the employed staff understand their responsibilities in this area. There may be an employed volunteer coordinator or a Director of Volunteers, but most often, other team members are directly supervising and monitoring the volunteer's activities and interactions on a day-to-day basis. Written policy should indicate the title of the person to whom the volunteers report, as well as procedures for mentoring and dealing with problems.

## **Ongoing Evaluation**

It is important to conduct annual evaluations of volunteers. Some organizations may feel the task is too difficult because of the number of volunteers and their varied work schedules; but these very same conditions make annual evaluation even more important. A poor performing volunteer can create as much risk exposure for an organization as an employee. Evaluations should include input from team members who directly observe the volunteer during care assignments. Patient/family satisfaction surveys are often a good source of information on volunteer performance also.

## Special Risks

**Teen Volunteers** – Volunteering provides young people with opportunities to explore career fields and engage in community service. Minors should not be permitted to volunteer unless they have written parental consent. Many organizations include a parent or guardian in the interview process as it is important that they understand the position requirements prior to giving their consent.

**Professional Volunteers** – Some organizations have professionals who volunteer their services. This might include barbers/beauticians, nurses, massage therapists, etc. When utilizing a volunteer in a professional capacity, it is important that you maintain documentation similar to what you would maintain for an employee. This would include verification of any required certification or license and evidence of current malpractice insurance coverage.

**Auto Liability** – Volunteers in community-based programs may spend a lot of time driving their own vehicles in the course of their role as a volunteer. As part of the initial screening process, it is important to verify that the volunteer has a current and valid drivers' license along with adequate auto insurance coverage. Additionally, check motor vehicle records (MVR) when the application is submitted and every year thereafter. Volunteers who may be transporting others in their vehicle should have verified auto liability coverage of at least state minimums.

**Abuse Prevention** – Unfortunately, many individuals who are looking for an opportunity to take advantage of a vulnerable adult or child enter the organization through a volunteer position. Thorough screening procedures, including criminal background checks, are imperative when volunteers are placed in direct contact with at-risk clients.

## SUMMARY

Risk management and liability reduction are important considerations when working with volunteers. A risk management assessment is necessary because it helps protect everyone involved (the organization, volunteers, clients, etc.) Hospice, home care and senior living organizations need to carefully evaluate their volunteer programs to assure that they are adequately managing the risk.