

Volunteer Options

Advantages of Volunteering

Volunteering is as American as apple pie and has always been an integral part of Foreign Service life. In today's world, many volunteers can take what they learn in their volunteer lives and apply it to their professional lives — or vice versa. Volunteer work enhances a resume and some corporations even eliminate candidates for executive positions who do not show community involvement on their resumes. The Federal Government accepts job-related volunteer work as qualifying experience for Civil Service positions — treating it the same as paid experience.

Volunteering is a time-tested job search and career-development technique that should not be overlooked by the mobile Foreign Service spouse. Volunteering provides a useful way to test a career field, explore new interests, get documented work experience, ease the transition from homemaking to paid employment, develop skills, make contacts, and “get your foot in the door.” A challenging, skill-building volunteer position might be better than a low-paying job. In many cases, volunteers in an organization can hear about and apply for paid job openings before they are advertised.

Volunteering for the United States Government

According to 3 FAM 2125, the U.S. Government is not permitted to accept voluntary services:

“Voluntary services shall not be accepted by the Government, except in cases of sudden emergency involving the loss of human life or the destruction of property.”

Choosing a Volunteer Position

Before taking any volunteer job, decide what you want to get out of the experience, (e.g., skill development, work experience, or pursuit of an interest). If you are trying to build work experience, look at the type of skills you want to develop (e.g., management or supervisory skills, fund-raising ability) and look for a job that will provide those opportunities. If you want to turn an interest into a career, look for volunteer jobs that will provide the necessary experience (writing a newsletter, taking photos for a magazine, etc.).

Good Idea File

Sometimes a volunteer job can be turned into a paid position. One spouse at a U.S. mission volunteered to organize the annual Fourth of July reception. Realizing that it was a time-consuming project, which required professional administrative skills, she recommended that it become a temporary paid position. The next year she was hired to repeat her performance.

It is now the norm for volunteers to clearly indicate their personal objectives before accepting volunteer assignments. For example, it is perfectly acceptable to take a volunteer job to get supervisory or public speaking experience, or to build computer skills. Doing good while gaining skills and experience is a winning combination.

If you have an ultimate career goal in mind, be as selective as possible in choosing the activities into which you put your greatest energies. Keep your goal or interest in mind, and choose work that will expand your credentials. Try to maintain some continuity in what you do from assignment to assignment. On the other hand, if you have not yet defined a career direction, use your time productively to volunteer in different areas to develop new marketable skills for the future.

In resumes and applications, do not label volunteer work experience as such. Instead, integrate both your unpaid and your paid experience. Remember that employers are interested in your skills, rather than whether you were paid. For more information about describing volunteer activities, see below, “Guidelines for Describing Volunteer Activities. See also Chapter 9, **Applications and Resumes** because volunteer positions can be described in the same way as paid positions are.

When choosing a volunteer position, the following points should be considered:

- Does the position contribute to long-range work objectives?
- Does the position utilize previous experience?
- Does the position provide new and/or additional skills?
- Does the position fit within your personal time constraints?
- How committed is the organization to the work or position?
- Is the organization willing to provide documentation of service?
- Can the organization provide reimbursement for transportation and/or child care, if necessary?

Good Idea File

Volunteering for the national or local professional association in your field of interest is a good way to make contacts. For example, volunteering to work at a conference sponsored by the association gives you access to officers, speakers (who are often leaders in the field), networking opportunities, and job leads. Also, you can attend the conference for free.

Volunteer activities with your field's association look good on your resume (especially if you are applying for a job with someone who is also active in the association). For more information about associations, see Chapter 5, **The Washington Area Private/Non-Profit Sectors**.

Volunteering with AAFSW

One very good way to combine your Foreign Service experience with a volunteer activity that will provide good work experience is to volunteer with (AAFSW) the Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide (formerly the Association of American Foreign Service Women). AAFSW especially promotes the interests of spouses and families in Washington and abroad. Serving as an officer provides executive, organizational, and supervisory experience. Volunteer-staffed activities include the Evacuee Support Network, the Housing Office, a monthly speaker's program, the Spouse Oral History project, production of a monthly newsletter, and other support networks. AAFSW also provides the occasion for those interested in getting experience lobbying Congress. For more information, contact the AAFSW at the following address:

AAFSW Headquarters
5125 MacArthur Blvd, Suite 36
Washington, DC 20016
Telephone: 202-362-6514
FAX: 202-362-6589
E-mail: aafsw@erols.com
Web site: www.aafsw.org

AAFSW has recently developed listserv, Global Careers, a networking and information sharing service. Members use e-mail to post job opportunities, ask questions, compare experiences, give advice, and share resources. The service is free and can be joined by sending a blank e-mail

to **GlobalCareers-subscribe@egroups.com**. (For more information on listservs, see Chapter 3, **Using the Internet in the Job-Search**.)

Finding Volunteer Work

The *Washington Post* and various suburban newspapers periodically list volunteer opportunities. See “The Weekly” section of the Post on the first Thursday of each month or “Anne’s Reader Exchange” in the comics section of the Saturday *Washington Post*.

All Washington area jurisdictions have Volunteer Clearinghouses that can help match you to an appropriate assignment: See Chapter 13, **Resources and Bibliography**, for complete addresses:

- Alexandria Volunteer Bureau Telephone: 703-836-2176
Web site: <http://hme.dn.net/~avb/>
- Arlington Volunteer Office Telephone: 703-228-3222
Web site: www.co.arlington.va.us/cmo/volunteer
- Greater DC Cares Telephone: 202-289-7378
Web site: www.dc-cares.org
- Fairfax County Volunteer Center Telephone: 703-246-3460
Web site: www.btg.com/volsrus
- Loudoun County Volunteer Services Telephone: 703-777-0113
Web site: www.state.va.us/loudoun/c-volop
- Montgomery County Volunteer Center Telephone: 301-217-4949
Web site: www.co.mo.md.us/services/volunteer
- Prince George’s Volunteer Center Telephone: 301-699-2800
- Prince William Voluntary Action Center Telephone: 703-369-5292
Web site: www.pwcweb.com/VAC/

Job-Related Volunteer Activities

Many volunteer activities can provide experience that would be useful in a work setting:

- Serve on a board of directors
- Organize or supervise a hotline
- Provide interpretation or translation services
- Conduct research
- Teach computer skills
- Counsel adults in transition
- Lead support or discussion groups
- Be a fund raiser
- Perform as an actor or musician
- Provide information
- Speak to groups
- Write a newsletter
- Teach a craft
- Write a grant request
- Design posters and brochures

Volunteer Opportunities in Education

Literacy Volunteers sponsors nationwide program that trains tutors to teach adults to read.

Literacy Volunteers
1325 W Street NW
Washington, DC
Telephone: 202-387-1772

School Volunteers. Most school systems have programs for volunteers to do tutoring, be guest speakers, field trip leaders, library aides, etc. For more information, contact the individual school or school system.

Government-Sponsored Programs

- ACTION, 806 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20525 administers Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA)
- National Park Service, 18th and C Streets NW, Washington, DC 20240 has opportunities for volunteers in visitor service, research in history, archeology and natural science, resource management, maintenance, and administration.
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Telephone 202-646-2703 uses volunteers to supplement U.S. Federal agencies when the President declares a national emergency.

Political and Civil Opportunities

- League of Women Voters
- Democratic Party
- Republican Party
- Local Chambers of Commerce

Cultural Opportunities

- Museums
- Art galleries
- Theater groups
- Orchestras
- Public radio and television stations

Health-Related Opportunities

- Hospitals
- Hospice organizations

- Nursing homes
- Telephone hotlines
- Mental health associations
- American Red Cross
- Volunteer fire departments

**Guidelines
for Describing
Volunteer
Activities**

To maximize volunteer experience, it is important to describe this experience accurately. Fran Bastress, in her book, *The New Relocating Spouse's Guide to Employment*, (see Chapter 13, **Resources and Bibliography**, for complete citation) suggests that you “avoid sounding like a volunteer.” This can be done by changing words to make them more generic. For example:

- Church could become nonprofit organization
- Boy scouts could become youth or members
- Children could become participants or individuals
- Bulletin board could become visual aid
- School could become facility or institution

Describing Foreign Service Volunteer Activities

The outline on the following pages was developed to be a composite of typical volunteer experiences of Foreign Service family members. The outline is necessarily general and does not describe any specific job.

The outline is divided into areas of competence or “skill areas” such as management/administration and research/writing. Under each “skill area,” various phrases are listed to define the activities that are most pertinent to the skills. You should edit and supplement these phrases according to your individual experience and, if necessary, adapt them specifically to the career area or job for which you are applying. The list of action verbs at the end of Chapter 9, **Applications and Resumes**, would be helpful.

This Volunteer Activities Outline can be used when drafting either a resume or a Federal application. For more information, see Chapter 9, **Applications and Resumes**. If you are using these guidelines to prepare a Federal application, you should explain skills in greater detail. For example, instead of writing “Organized . . .” you should detail what was involved: “Chaired meetings, initiated programs, recruited workers, interviewed. . .,” etc.

In describing volunteer work abroad, list the countries in which you have served, the years of time invested, and even the number of hours spent weekly in a particular function. Where pertinent, detail the amounts of money handled and the number of people supervised.

Highlight foreign-language competency, especially if acquired or used in volunteer activities, e.g., “Fluent in written and spoken French, which was used extensively in working with host country nationals.” Department of State spouses can have their language skills tested by the Foreign Service Institute at no charge, spouses from other Foreign Affairs agencies will be charged a fee. Call for more information or to make an appointment.

Language Testing Unit, F4235
National Foreign Affairs Training Center
4000 Arlington Blvd SA-42.
Arlington, VA 22204-1500
Telephone: 703-302-7125 or 703-302-7128

Volunteer Activities Outline

Management/Administration

Managed____United States Government official residential property(ies).
Hired and supervised household staff of_____.

Maintained household and representational accounts/records.

Supervised budget of \$____and made recommendations for budget revisions and allocation of funds.

Kept inventory of property contents.

Planned and supervised the building/rebuilding/redesign/redecoration of____Embassy residence(s), chancery(ies), garden(s). Consulted with Embassy on contracts for building/rebuilding, etc.

Initiated/coordinated/reorganized program for____needs and welfare/housing/support of U.S. citizen evacuees from [neighboring country].

Community Building/Relations/Liaison

Organized/developed/supported system for welcoming newcomers to [country of assignment].

Planned/developed/chaired orientation programs for newcomers.

Assessed/responded to needs/problems of families within the Embassy.

Provided family counseling/basic health care guidance/advice on problems handling domestic staff/information on local customs/cultural differences.

Identified/defined community/morale problems and initiated/developed programs/solutions [give details, e.g., coordinated establishment of Community Liaison Office].

Encouraged/supported better relations among members of different agencies within the official U.S. community.

Mediated/arbitrated/resolved___dispute(s) among differing factions within the___community leading to satisfactory conclusion.

Chaired/served on board/as member of executive committee of_____school/commissary/club/church/hospital.

Encouraged/developed close contacts between Embassy and families of the U.S. private/business community.

Initiated/organized/coordinated/participated in establishment of_____U.S./international community projects/programs [teen club/community action council/recreation association/summer work program for teens/book discussion groups/sports programs or tournaments/Scout troops].

Organized/provided/maintained_____recreation/community center/school at Embassy residence for U.S. Embassy employees and their families in absence of other adequate facilities.

Cross-Cultural/International Relations/Liaison/Public Relations/Nonmedia Public Relations

Organized/planned/implemented/hosted___official/___representational functions/activities monthly (for guests) for the United States Government.

Represented the United States Government at official/local government functions.

Planned/organized/coordinated schedules/supervised activities/events for VIP visitors, official groups, congressional delegations, special occasions (Fourth of July, conferences, seminars, cultural programs).

Selected artworks for the official residence from the Art in Embassy program. Initiated/coordinated/arranged exhibitions. Wrote/supervised the writing of exhibition catalogue.

Lectured/spoke/demonstrated/participated in panel discussion/programs/radio/television shows on ____ (U.S. life/customs/art/cooking, etc.).

Served as a member of official U.S. team on tours/visits of various field projects: urban renewal, family planning, schools, hospitals, factories. Briefed on implementation of project and reviewed goals.

Organized/chaired/co-chaired/sponsored/supported international/binational benefit/fundraising projects for _____. Proceeds of \$_____ used to _____. Served on board of international/binational club(s).

Used professional/specialized knowledge to initiate/advise on establishment of ___ local schools/health care facilities/English-language programs/social services/cottage industries/craft shops.

Coordinated/organized recitals/exhibitions of local craftsmanship. Advised on design. Initiated liaison among local U.S. citizen designers.

Initiated/directed/organized orientation/hospitality for local and/or U.S. student groups participating in _____. (Examples: American Field Service/Crossroads Africa/other educational programs.)

Advised student groups/international clubs. Arranged briefings/lectures/interviews. Planned social functions.

Assisted foreign diplomatic families assigned to Washington/New York adapt/adjust to life in the United States.

Developed/encouraged interpersonal contacts/relationships and communicated on cross-cultural basis with _____.

Research/Writing

Researched through publications/lectures/briefings/visits the history, politics, economics, institutions, and culture of (area of assignment).

Organized/updated reports on local living conditions/local price surveys that resulted in a change in cost-of-living allowances.

Strengthened/expanded professional/personal interests by studying/researching:

- Programs of agencies involved in development activities abroad (e.g., AID, Peace Corps, UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF [write out name of agency]).
- Programs sponsored by private voluntary organizations (PVO's) in developing countries (e.g., CARE, Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Asia Foundation, Church World Service, Catholic Relief, Red Cross, American Field Service, Young Men's/Women's Christian Association) in (name of country).

Organized/wrote booklet on living conditions/services in (country of assignment) for the U.S. expatriate community.

Interviewed/reported/wrote articles on foreign cultural programs/activities of U.S. women abroad for (name of publication).

Documenting Volunteer Work

Include all volunteer experiences in your employment portfolio. Documenting what you have learned as a volunteer is important so that you can analyze the functions you performed and the skills you acquired and build on those experiences. This documentation should reveal your areas of expertise and help you determine which new skills you need to acquire and which new directions you wish to take.

Get certification for any volunteer work so that it can be referenced if future employers want proof of skills and accomplishments. See guidelines for describing volunteer activities.

U.S. missions abroad certify volunteer service by Mission members upon request. A statement documenting volunteer service should be prepared for the signature of the Ambassador or his/her designee (the person requesting certification often prepares his/her own statement and addresses the letter to him/herself). The suggested format on the next page includes factors that should be mentioned to meet employment requirements.

Spouses of Chiefs of Mission may have their volunteer services at post certified by the Director General. Posts submit to the Family Liaison Office (FLO) a certification of volunteer services for the spouse of the Chief of Mission, which should be accompanied by verification from the administrative officer or another officer at post with personal knowledge of the activities described. FLO will forward the document to the Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Personnel for signature by the Director General or his/her designee, after which the certification will be returned to the spouse.

Format for Volunteer Certificate

(Official Embassy Stationery)

Date

Dear [name of volunteer]:

It is a pleasure for me to certify your volunteer services while resident in this country as a member of the official U.S. mission community and to add my appreciation for your special contribution.

Title

Organization Duties (including supervisory responsibilities)

Hours per week

Inclusive dates

Sincerely, _____, Ambassador

Volunteer's Bill of Rights

Every volunteer has the right to:

- Be treated as a coworker.
- A suitable assignment that considers personal preference, life experience, education, and employment background.
- Equal opportunity in applying for and being placed in a volunteer position.
- Know as much about the organization as possible: its policies, its people, its programs.
- Receive appropriate orientation and job training as well as ongoing education, information about new developments, and training for greater responsibility.
- Proper and adequate supervision and to receive a written evaluation of his/her performance on a yearly basis and when leaving the position.
- Sound guidance and direction by someone who is experienced, well-informed, and who has time to invest in giving guidance.
- A designated work place that is safe, orderly, conducive to work, and worthy of the job to be done.
- Be considered for advancement to assignments of more responsibility, for transfer from one activity to another, and for special assignments.
- Be considered for appropriate training opportunities;

- Make suggestions, to take part in discussions, and to have respect shown for an honest opinion.
- Recognition in the form of promotions and awards and through day-by-day expressions of appreciation.
- Expect his/her time will not be wasted by lack of planning, coordination, or cooperation within the organization.

Tax Deductions for Volunteers

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) allows volunteers to deduct “unreimbursed expenditures made incident to rendition of services to a qualifying organization.” Translated, it means that a volunteer may deduct out-of-pocket expenses incurred while doing work for volunteer groups approved by the IRS.

Qualifying organizations include, but are not limited to, units of government; religious organizations; a community chest, corporations, trust funds, or foundations created for charitable, religious, educational, scientific, or literary purposes; organizations for the prevention of cruelty to children or animals; and organizations that foster national or international amateur sports competition. The organization must have prior approval as a qualifying organization from the IRS. **Note:** foreign organizations are not considered qualified organizations.

Out-of-pocket expenses must be unreimbursed, directly connected with the services, solely attributable to the services, and not personal, living, or family expenses.

The following expenditures directly incurred by the volunteer are usually deductible (adequate records must be kept to substantiate claims):

- direct gifts of money to the organization;
- automobile mileage and expenses (either actual cost of gas and oil or a standard rate of 14 cents a mile);
- bus and cab transportation;
- parking and tolls;
- special uniforms (if not suitable for everyday use);
- telephone calls related to the volunteer activity;
- travel expenses necessarily incurred while away from home performing volunteer services if there is no significant element of personal pleasure.

The following expenses may not be deducted:

- value of time or services;
- child care expenses;
- expenses of another person who performed charitable services.

The current tax laws put a limit on charitable contributions that are more than 20 percent of your adjusted gross income. For further information, see IRS Publication number 526, “Charitable Contributions” or visit the IRS web site: www.irs.gov.