

Best Practices for Developing a Volunteer Program

Section 4: Screening, Interviewing and Placement

Matching potential volunteers to volunteer positions will be an important part of your program's success. Making the match involves using a series of screening techniques that allow the organization and the volunteer to get to know each other and decide whether and how to best work together. Volunteer program administrators may use the screening tools human resources officers use: applications, reference checks, interviews, background checks, training, and observation. Screening potential volunteers should be as sophisticated as necessary for the type of volunteer task under consideration. Volunteers for a community clean-up and volunteers for a one-to-one mentoring program, for example, would go through very different screening processes. The goal of screening is to get the right volunteer into the right position.

Initial Contact

The initial contact is the first step in the process of determining the fit between a potential volunteer and your program. Whether that contact is by telephone, in person, or on-line, be prepared to provide some basic information about your agency and the volunteer opportunities available. Also, get a general idea of what the volunteer is interested in doing and why he wishes to serve your organization. If it appears there may be a fit, gather relevant contact information, including:

- Method of contact
- Name
- Address, including zip code
- Telephone numbers (with area code)
- Fax number and e-mail address
- Referral source (how the potential volunteer heard about the program)
- Specific activities the potential volunteer may be interested in doing as a volunteer

Applications

After the initial contact, you will want to either schedule an interview or have the prospective volunteer complete an application for the position for which the person is applying and decide after reviewing it whether to invite the person in for an interview. Volunteer applications may be very simple or extremely detailed, again, depending on the volunteer position involved. The application and the interview should elicit enough information to determine whether the prospective volunteer is appropriate for your organization and, if so, how he or she may best serve the organization.

Background Checks

Depending on the nature of your agency, the clients you serve, and the work to be done by volunteers, you might require additional screening before placing a volunteer. Be sure to check industry requirements and legal requirements. Screening tools may include:

- Personal and/or employment references
- Criminal background checks
- Fingerprinting
- Driving records checks
- Substance abuse tests
- Physical examinations

Volunteer programs induct volunteers differently according to what procedures best suit the program. Some will conduct a background check and then proceed to the interview, while others believe it is more efficient to meet the applicant before conducting a time-consuming and sometimes costly background check.

Interviews

A face-to-face interview provides an opportunity for a more detailed discussion of your agency's mission, vision, and goals, as well as the volunteer's interests, motivations, and needs. It may be appropriate for the volunteer to be interviewed by more than one person on staff or by volunteers. Whether you use a scripted list of questions based, in part, on information provided on the application, or you simply work from the application itself, the interview is your opportunity to learn about the potential volunteer's:

- Knowledge, skills, and experience pertinent to requirements of the volunteer position;
- Preferences or aversions to specific tasks or types of assignments;
- Schedule and availability;
- Willingness/ability to make the necessary time commitment; and
- Willingness/ability to meet other agency expectations.

Placement

You should make every effort to place the volunteer in a position that provides a good match between the skills and interests identified during the screening process and the duties you need performed. This effort will pay off in the quality of tasks performed and the volunteer's level of satisfaction.

Sometimes, even with appropriate support and training, the first placement may not be the best match. Be flexible enough to try other positions that might provide a better fit.

Finally, not every potential volunteer may be suited for your program--in any capacity. No matter how short-handed your agency might be, it is better to be short-handed a bit longer than to invest time and energy in a volunteer who isn't a good fit for your program.