

Offering Regular Volunteer Hours

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT SKILLS SERIES

Why Volunteers?

You probably know that volunteers can save organizations time and money. Each hour of volunteer labor is worth a dollar amount and allows paid staff to focus on other tasks. However, volunteers are much more than cost savings and there are many reasons why volunteers might be sought. Here are just a few things to consider when thinking about volunteers:

VOLUNTEERS AUGMENT ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Volunteers contribute to the atmosphere and experience of your nonprofit. As a result, volunteers represent the community formed around your organization, putting its values into practice.

VOLUNTEERS PROVIDE EXTERNAL FEEDBACK

Volunteer input on programs and processes can help provide non-staff perspectives that can improve organizational and programmatic operations.

VOLUNTEERS PROVIDE FREE ADVERTISING

Volunteers can help spread the word about your mission and offer networking opportunities that might otherwise slip by.

VOLUNTEER WORK IS WORK

Volunteer hours should be tracked, as their value can be leveraged in grant proposals. Each hour of volunteer labor is an hour of organizational operation and has an equivalent monetary value.

What Are Regular Volunteer Hours?

Regularly held volunteer hours (as opposed to one-off or irregularly occurring volunteer events) are an opportunity for organizations to streamline some of their operations and open doors to the community to be involved on a consistent basis. Regular hours offer a set time (for example, 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. every Wednesday) when community members know that doors will be open at your location and they will be welcome to come help with operations and learn more about the work your organization does.

Often volunteers can be assigned to tasks relating to upkeep (such as cleaning, packing food boxes, sorting or hanging clothes) or the facilitation of staffed programming. While tasks can vary, the important thing is that these hours occur consistently so volunteers can work it into their schedule. Organizations can attract and retain regular volunteers through volunteer hours. Here, “regular volunteers” means frequently returning community members that do not represent specialists with a specific skillset, such as electricians, that might be offering pro bono service as part of their position.

How Do You Administer Volunteer Hours?

As every organization is different, individual organization needs may vary. However, there are practices that can make volunteer hours run smoother, and make sure you and your volunteers get the most out of the experience. These include:

AT LEAST ONE STAFF MEMBER SHOULD ALWAYS BE PRESENT

While some volunteers may be familiar enough with operations to help staff run volunteer hours, it is important that staff is present for check-in, assigning tasks, decision making, handling conflict or emergencies, etc. They will be the guiding voice and keep volunteers on track.

REQUIRE ORIENTATION AND TRAINING BEFORE NEW VOLUNTEERS PARTICIPATE

Requiring training in advance of volunteer participation helps tasks proceed as expected and makes staff oversight less difficult. An orientation should include a broad introduction to the organization and its projects as well as the organization's expectations of its volunteers. Orientations are especially important if volunteers are expected to interact with clients or program attendees external from the organization in order to be sure the organization is represented well externally and clients receive excellent services.

REQUIRE LIABILITY WAIVERS IN ADVANCE OF PARTICIPATION

Especially if your organization works with youth, requires the use of tools, or requires working around heavy equipment, it's important the volunteer is aware in advance and that your organization is protected from liability. MCR can support organizations with creating liability waivers through its Office Hours program (www.mi-community.org/officehours).

HAVE VOLUNTEERS REGISTER IN ADVANCE, SIGN-IN, AND RECORD THEIR HOURS

Volunteer registration, offering a sign-in for each session, and keeping track of hours can help you track who is present and who is volunteering regularly. Additionally, this information can help you understand how much time (and money, in a per hour sense) your operations require, which is information that can be included in grant proposals. While you can use paper sign-in sheets to do this, a digital CRM (customer relationship management) tool can make it easier.

KEEP VOLUNTEERS ON TRACK WITH PROJECT OUTLINES AND EXPECTATIONS

Volunteers can get off track, especially if there are many aspects to the work they are assigned. A staff person should make sure to outline each project or task clearly and reaffirm the expectations throughout the time volunteers are present. This check-in also lets volunteers know that their work is accomplishing a goal.

REGULAR VOLUNTEER HOURS SHOULD BE LIMITED TO 3 HOURS AT A TIME

By keeping regular hours short, it will be easier to manage the enthusiasm and energy levels of volunteers. It also will be easier on staff, especially if the volunteer hours fall at the end of a workday.

What Should Volunteers Do?

Volunteers can fill a myriad of roles. Since the objectives of regular volunteer hours are often related to upkeep or standard programming, the work is usually similar. Here are some things to consider:

Trained volunteers can augment staff.

If volunteers have been properly trained or possess a specific skillset, some programming can be facilitated, in part, with volunteers. Examples of this include volunteers tutoring at an afterschool program, serving meals at food giveaways, or managing teams for event setup. In many of these situations, however, it will be important to have appropriate liability infrastructure in place to protect all parties involved.

Assign concise, specific, and repeatable tasks.

Tasks like packing food into boxes, organizing clothing and hanging it, sorting bike parts, or planting trees are all examples of tasks that can be easily started, stopped, and scaled. These kinds of tasks are also easy to oversee. However, keep in mind that repetitive activity can become tedious – liven things up with music, or have volunteers rotate, if time allows.