

Volunteers: Start them out on the right foot with step by step training

by Lisa Knapton

Volunteers are an invaluable resource to WCIA members, especially during times of economic hardship. They are generally well meaning people eager to assist but may have little experience when it comes to performing tasks for a municipal agency. Whether you are developing a volunteer program or operating an established one, careful consideration should be given to what type of training you should be providing to your new or existing volunteers. Different levels of training will be required based on the type of volunteers you will be using and the duties assigned to them. Your assigned risk management representative can assist with determining the level of training necessary for your volunteers and provide guidelines and sample forms specific to volunteer programs from the WCIA Liability Resource Manual. The manual is also available online on the WCIA website under the member resources tab.

Typically, those volunteers providing services for a one-time only event require significantly less training than other types of volunteers. Many members advertise volunteer events using media sources to solicit help from the community for a one day volunteer event. An example would be a park beautification project to include such duties as weeding, spreading bark and litter control. Information provided in advance to these prospective volunteers should include such things as the location of the event, arrival time, how to dress appropriately and the name of the Member contact person who will be on site during the event. At the start of the event, volunteers should be provided with a briefing on where they are to perform their tasks, any potential hazards at the site, how to safely perform the tasks, and what to do in the event of an injury or other type of emergency. When personal protective equipment (PPE) is required by WAC 296-800-160, volunteers should be trained on its proper use. One-time volunteers should sign a roster that contains release and hold harmless language, and a brief statement confirming that the volunteer was present for and understood the briefing prior to beginning their duties. Your WCIA risk management representative can assist you with drafting release and hold harmless language.

Continuous volunteers are similar to employees in that they are expected to perform duties during regularly scheduled dates and times. One of the first opportunities to prepare and support your volunteers is by providing an orientation on their first day of service. They should be provided with all the information necessary to assist them in feeling comfortable and competent in carrying out their assigned tasks. A brief overview of your agency and how the volunteers' service fits in is helpful. Because the continuous volunteer has more interaction with your staff, training should be provided on your key personnel policies. These policies should include but not be limited to safety, harassment, violence in the work place, dress code, and substance abuse. If your agency has developed a volunteer handbook, its review should be a part of the orientation process. WCIA has developed a sample volunteer handbook which can be obtained by contacting your assigned risk management representative. Volunteers should be required to sign documentation confirming that they have received, reviewed and understand the training materials. Once you have provided your volunteers with initial training, it is important to remember that training should be ongoing. Volunteers who are trained and supported during their service are more likely to volunteer again.

Board and Commission members are volunteers who submit a letter of interest and are subsequently selected and appointed by a governing body or agency CEO. Depending on their duties, they may require very specific training on federal, state, and local laws, as well as the rules and regulations of your organization and how to conduct themselves in meetings open to the public. They should also be made aware of their role being advisory in nature. Other types of volunteers who require specialized training could include firefighters, explorers, police volunteers, coaches and community service workers. WCIA's Liability Resource Manual has guidelines on several of these volunteer categories.

Whether the volunteer is serving one-time only, is a board member or continuous volunteer, all training should be documented and retained in accordance with the Local Government Common Records Retention Schedule (CORE) and Records Management Manual. WCIA covers volunteers for liability while they are operating in the scope and course of their volunteer duties for the Member. As such, it is critical that all volunteers be reminded not to go beyond the duties to which they have been assigned.

WCIA Sr. Risk Management Representatives share their knowledge with members thru multiple municipal platforms to include risk management schools, conferences and institutes. The Risk Services staff is also equipped to provide comprehensive risk management training in the areas of Volunteer Risk Management, Parks Maintenance, Public Works, Special Events and Risk Management 101 for Administration. If you are interested in hosting a regional session, please contact Member Services at memberservices@wciapool.org.