

Are we training our volunteers?

By Carlene Brown

Volunteers are the heart and soul of a thriving community and contribute their time, skills, and efforts in various ways. While volunteers can help lighten the load, the notion that volunteers do not need to be trained is a common misconception. Even the best volunteers need training, direction, and supervision.

There are many types of volunteers, each serving different purposes and addressing different needs. Some of the common types of volunteers that our members have are:

Community: These volunteers work within their local community to address specific needs, such as supporting local events, organizing community clean-ups, or participating in neighborhood improvement projects such as adopt-a-park or adopt-a-street programs.

Special Event: Individuals who volunteer to assist in organizing, coordinating, and executing events which may include festivals, fundraisers and gatherings.

One Time: This may be a volunteer who comes in to help with a community garden, a food bank, or a park beautification.

Continuous: Similar to an employee, these volunteers come on a regular basis to help your organization on specified days and times. These volunteers may be lead volunteers for your senior center.

Coaches: These individuals will have unsupervised contact with minors and will need to have a national criminal background check and reference check. They will need to have training on the protocol for concussion and sudden cardiac arrest.

While there are more volunteers than described and many ways in which a member may use a volunteer, they all need to be trained in some manner prior to performing their volunteer duties.

Good communication is essential for training. One way to prepare your volunteers is by providing an orientation on their first day of service with a brief overview of your agency and how the volunteers' skills and service fit in within your agency. To ensure continued success of the volunteer program, it is important to maintain ongoing communication between volunteers and member staff. Since the continuous volunteer may have more interaction with your staff, they should be provided with training on your relevant personnel policies.

These policies should include:

1. Code of Conduct
2. Anti-harassment, Discrimination, and Retaliation
3. Roles and Responsibilities
4. Accident/Incident Procedures

If your agency has developed a volunteer handbook, its review should be a part of the orientation process. All volunteers should be required to sign the volunteer agreement confirming that they have received, reviewed, and understand the policies; other training materials; job duties and the risks associated with the volunteer service; and sign a release and waiver in favor of the member.

Members should provide instruction and training to ensure all volunteers perform tasks properly and safely along with providing the volunteers with adequate supervision and knowledge of member rules and requirements. Once volunteers have been provided with initial training, ongoing training should occur. It is important to remember that volunteers who receive a positive first impression of their experience, who are trained and supported during their service, are more likely to volunteer again.

WCIA provides liability coverage for volunteers while they are performing in the scope and course of their volunteer duties for the member. Keeping that in mind, it is important that all volunteers be reminded not to go beyond the duties to which they have been assigned. In addition, WCIA recommends that members report volunteer hours to the WA Department of Labor and Industries so that medical bills may be covered if the volunteer is injured during their volunteer service.

In addition, it is important to treat your volunteer files like your employee files in that they need to be under lock and key. It is important to keep the files per the state retention requirements and even several years thereafter as the statute of limitations in Washington state is three years and may be longer for minors.

In summary, while volunteers may not be compensated employees, providing them with training similar to employees is essential for their effectiveness, safety, and overall contribution to the member. By investing in volunteer training, organizations can maximize the impact of their volunteer programs and create a positive experience for the volunteers, the members, and the community they serve.

Guidelines on volunteers can be found in the WCIA Liability Resource Manual. The Liability Resource Manual is available on the WCIA website: <https://www.wciapool.org/174/Risk-Management>.

Your WCIA Risk Management Representative is also available for further information on risk managing your volunteer programs.