

Volunteers are not free

By Carlene Brown

Volunteers are essential for organizations. Best of all, many volunteers have a passion for what they are doing and want to help. While volunteers can lighten the load, the notion that volunteers are free is a common misconception.

Volunteers must feel they have the required knowledge and skills and are adequately prepared for their assignments. Even the best volunteers need training, direction and supervision. Most of the time, paid staff provide supervision. If you manage volunteers, you know it can be a time-consuming endeavor. But, most of the time the benefits far outweigh the costs and risks and utilizing a volunteer likely means the project will get done faster.

Volunteers may help your entity once or twice a week on a continuous basis. It is important to plan for the volunteer's time well in advance just like you would a new employee. One way to prepare your volunteers is by providing an orientation on their first day of service. A brief overview of your agency and how the volunteers' service fits in is helpful. Good communication is essential. 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 unlawful harassment, violence in the workplace and substance abuse. 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 documentation confirming that they have received, reviewed and understand the policies, other training materials, job description or duties, and the risks associated with the volunteer service. They should 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. Members should provide volunteers with adequate supervision and knowledge of member rules and requirements. Once you have provided your volunteers with initial training, on-going training should occur. It is important to remember that volunteers who receive a positive first impression and 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 Department of Labor and Industries so that medical bills may be covered if the volunteer is injured during their volunteer service.

Guidelines on volunteers can be found in our Liability Resources Manual. The Liability Resource Manual is available through the Member Resources page on the WCIA website: <http://www.wciapool.org/member-resources>.

National background checks should be performed in accordance with [RCW 43.43.830](#)–839 for all volunteers who have regularly scheduled unsupervised access to children under sixteen years of age, developmentally disabled persons or vulnerable adults. Volunteer applicants should be provided a copy of their background check if one is performed. Refer to WCIA's Liability Resource Manual guideline, PAR.20 Background Checks for Park and Recreation Programs, for further information.

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