



Are your volunteers putting your nonprofit at risk?

Not-for-profits that direct and benefit from the actions of their volunteers can be held accountable if those individuals are harmed or harm others on the job. Lawsuits involving volunteers often arise from allegations of negligence or intentional misconduct, even when volunteers act outside the scope of their prescribed duties. Your organization needs to take steps to limit risk associated with unpaid workers.

Volunteers as employees

Your volunteer recruitment process should be almost as formal and structured as your paid employee hiring process. Develop job descriptions for open positions that outline the nature of the work, any required skills or experience and possible risks the job presents to the volunteer or your nonprofit.

Once you have volunteer candidates, screen them according to the risks that might be involved based on your nonprofit's mission, programs and likely volunteer activities. Some positions will pose few risks. For those, ask candidates to fill out an application and submit to an interview, and then check their work and character references.

Positions that carry greater risks — such as work involving children, the elderly and other vulnerable populations, or direct access to cash donations — should involve more rigorous screening. This might include criminal history and credit report checks and verification of driver's licenses, certifications or degrees.

Training and performance plans

Once volunteers are on board, provide training, supervision and, if necessary, discipline. Hold an orientation session to explain your nonprofit's mission and policies. After volunteers have begun working for you, continue active supervision to verify that they understand expectations.

To encourage professionalism and responsibility in your volunteers, consider devising performance plans that include goals — and rewards for achieving them. Such plans can also provide you with a framework to evaluate and dismiss volunteers who may be putting your nonprofit at risk by, for example, failing to follow safety procedures.

Role of insurance

No risk reduction plan is complete without insurance coverage. In addition to general liability, consider supplemental policies that address specific types of exposure such as medical malpractice or sexual misconduct.

It's also a good idea to have legal advisors periodically review policies and procedures pertaining to volunteers. Attorneys and financial advisors can help you determine whether your organization is doing all it can to reduce risks.