

Non profit Board and Volunteer Development

What is a volunteer program?

A volunteer program is a systematized way of preparing for, recruiting, training, supervising, and thanking volunteers, so that it's easy for people to volunteer for your nonprofit and you get the help you need.

It can take a little time to create a volunteer program, but once you have it up and running, it will provide consistent, ongoing help to get things done.

With a strong volunteer program your volunteers will get what THEY want from their volunteer experience which will result in happier volunteers and positive word-of-mouth in the community.

Creating your volunteer program is similar to creating HR systems for employees in that you want to recruit the best people for the job, retain them, and help them shine. When they're happy, they're more productive which means more goodness for your nonprofit.

Volunteers are not just free labor for your nonprofit. Treat them and the entire volunteer program with respect and you'll get more than just a helping hand – you'll get increased awareness as they tell their friends about your nonprofit and you'll probably get new donors as they invest their money where they invest their time.

Successful Volunteer Program

1. PLANNING

To start a successful volunteer program, think through what you want and need from volunteers and what it will take to engage volunteers in a meaningful way. To do that, you'll need a few things in place

- **Roles** – Begin by identifying what jobs volunteers can do to help. Do you need people to help work in your programs? Do you need help in the office answering phones or making updates to the website? Brainstorm a list of all the different roles that volunteers can fill to help you.

- **Position descriptions** – Think of these like job descriptions for an employee. Would you ever consider taking a job if you didn't know what you were getting yourself into? Probably not. Creating a [position description](#) will help you find the right individual for the role. Include the types of activities the volunteer will be expected to perform, time commitment, skills and experience needed, and any requirements (age, ability to lift so many pounds, driver's license, etc.). So be sure to create a written position description for every volunteer spot you want to fill.
- **Intake forms and processes** – This is the human resources component of your volunteer program. Start with an application for your volunteers to complete when they're interested in applying for a position (don't automatically say "yes" to every volunteer prospect – treat them like job applicants so you can get the right people). Create documented procedures for recruitment, onboarding, training, supervision, and collecting and tracking data like the number of volunteer hours donated this month.
 - Create a [volunteer handbook](#) and give a copy to all volunteers. Your volunteer handbook should provide all the information the volunteer needs to do the job including policies, useful organizational information (mission, history, goals, etc.), and any legal information or disclaimers.
 - Use a [volunteer database](#) to make managing your volunteer program easier and more efficient. The right database can automate processes, capture information, offer reporting, and much more. Check out these free [volunteer software options](#).
- **Management** – Someone will need to oversee your volunteer program, including posting volunteer openings and managing your volunteer processes. This person can be a volunteer coordinator that you hire, or it can even be a volunteer position! It might be YOU for the first year or two of your volunteer program and that's ok because it will give you a chance to create the program the way you want it.
- **Preparation** – Making your volunteers feel at home from the get-go is a thoughtful way to express your appreciation for them from the very start. Do you have the tools and resources in place that they need to perform their duties? Who is

their point of contact on the job site? Do they know what's expected of them? Be ready for their first day with everything they might need. It makes orientation so much easier!

- **Liability** – Please don't make the mistake of assuming your nonprofit will be exempt from liability because its purposes are charitable or because the person responsible for the harm is a volunteer. Understand this: nonprofits can be held [liable](#) for incidents involving volunteers. To help avoid these situations, partner with your insurance company to ensure you have the proper tools in place. This might include signed volunteer waivers, sufficient liability insurance, and safety and training procedures. Once you have all your plans in place for your volunteer program, it's time to find volunteers.

2. RECRUITMENT

Finding great volunteers – people who will happily show up and do the work without causing problems – can be a little tricky at first, but it *can* be done. The smartest thing you can do is to simply ASK.

While this may seem obvious, sometimes we get so wrapped up in the day-to-day that we forget to let people know we need help. So here are six places you can look for prospective volunteers.

- **Your Website** – Post available volunteer positions on your website, just like you would a paid job opportunity. If people hear you're looking for volunteers, your website will likely be the first place they look for information. Be sure they can find it easily! Have a page dedicated to "Volunteer Openings" with a short description of each job to be done and next steps for those interested.
- **Service-Based Sources** – Apps like VolunteerMatch and local volunteer resource agencies like HandsOn Network affiliates allow nonprofits to post volunteer positions on their platforms. These technologies also provide mobile and accessible options for individuals to search for and browse volunteer opportunities in their area.

- **Social Media**– Use social media to advertise your need for volunteers, especially if you have a large following and lots of connections. Because people who are following you are already your fans, finding passionate people to help out at your nonprofit may be easier than you think! Plus, asking your followers to share these posts opens you up to an entirely new set of prospective volunteers – their friends and family.
- **Newsletters** – Issue a call-to-action in your newsletter asking for volunteers and listing the volunteer positions you need to fill. Be super clear about how they need to apply – maybe drive them to your website to fill out an application. Otherwise, you might have random people showing up on your doorstep ready to volunteer without you being ready for them!
- **Local News Media** – Pitch stories to local newspapers and news channels about the impact volunteers make at your nonprofit and include that you’re looking for new volunteers. Some recognizable days of service are National Volunteer Week, Global Youth Service Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service, and September 11th National Day of Service and Remembrance. Your community may also celebrate its own volunteer days, so check those out too.
- **Word-of-Mouth**– Sometimes it’s more productive to step away from technology and get face-to-face with folks. Chat with your current volunteers and encourage them to invite their friends to volunteer. Speak to civic groups, service clubs, and faith organizations about volunteering. And don’t forget volunteer fairs and other community events! These can be great opportunities to meet new people who are searching for volunteer positions that are a perfect match for their interests.

the [principle](#) of [donating](#) time and energy for the [benefit](#) of other people in the [community](#) as a social [responsibility](#) rather than for any [financial reward](#).

the theory or practice of being a [volunteer](#) or of using volunteers, as, without pay, in social [agencies](#), [charitable](#) organizations, etc.

Volunteering is generally considered an [altruistic](#) activity where an individual or group provides services for no financial or social gain "to benefit another person, group or organization".

Volunteering is also renowned for skill development and is often intended to promote goodness or to improve human [quality of life](#). Volunteering may have positive benefits for the volunteer as well as for the person or community served.

It is also intended to make contacts for possible employment. Many volunteers are specifically trained in the areas they work, such as [medicine](#), [education](#), or [emergency rescue](#). Others serve on an as-needed basis, such as in response to a [natural disaster](#).
