

# A Volunteer's Bill of Rights and Responsibilities

## A volunteer's rights

### 1. The right to feel safe

One of the benefits of volunteering is that we can decide to intentionally leave our comfort zones in order to experience new and challenging situations, environments, or roles. However, there is a big difference between feeling off-center or uncomfortable and feeling at risk or unsafe. As a volunteer, you have the right to be apprised of any potential risks as well as have precautionary measures and safety procedures in place to ensure your physical and emotional well-being.

### 2. The right to information about your volunteer role or project

Whether it's questions about the application process (why do I need to have a background check? when will I find out if I've been accepted?) or the volunteer role or project itself (who will I be working with? how will my efforts make a difference?), you have the right to know the who, what, when, why, and how of your volunteer position.

### 3. The right to feel valued

Volunteering—whether for two hours or two years—is a significant commitment that you choose to make. In return, you have the right to feel that your time and contribution—however long you've volunteered and whatever your task—is valued. Similarly, you have the right to feel that an organization or volunteer effort is using your skills and talents well (keeping in mind that they may not always have the capacity to take on some or all of your ideas or proposed projects) and that the work you do—and this can be anything from filing papers in an office to coaching a youth sports team—has meaning and makes a difference.

### 4. The right to negotiate your volunteer role

Find yourself in a volunteer position that just isn't working for you? You have the right to talk to your volunteer manager or supervisor to discuss ways you might be able to shift your role or take on another project or position. And if you still can't find a good fit...

### 5. The right to leave

...you have the right to leave. This isn't a decision that should be made hastily but, if after talking to and working with your volunteer manager or supervisor, you still feel unhappy, unappreciated, or unsatisfied with your volunteer experience, you do have the right to do something, or go somewhere, else. (A side note: should you leave, it's best to avoid bad-mouthing the organization in the community. Not only might your negative experience have been unique to your circumstances, but publicly bashing them can both hurt the organization's reputation and ability to work towards their mission as well as perhaps unintentionally burn some bridges of your own as you seek to volunteer—or even work—somewhere else.)

## A volunteer's responsibilities

### 1. The responsibility to communicate your needs

Feel like your work isn't meaningful? Not what you thought you'd signed up for? Or just bored and ready for something else? Talk to your volunteer manager or supervisor, providing specifics about your dissatisfaction and at least a few suggestions of ways to make it better. If you don't let them know that you're not getting from the experience what you'd hoped, they can't work with you to improve things. Similarly, don't hesitate to let them know if you feel you need additional tools, training, or support; if they can't provide it directly, they should at least be able to point you in the right direction.

### 2. The responsibility to follow through on your obligations

There's a pervasive myth that volunteers are unreliable. While of course this isn't true across the board, there are plenty of flaky volunteers who reinforce such negative perceptions. Help improve the reputation

of volunteers worldwide by doing what you say you'll do, whether it's honoring the volunteer role and schedule you'd agreed to, providing ample notice if you're unable to perform your tasks or responsibilities, saying no or stepping away from volunteering when necessary, or simply serving as a good representative of the organization in the community.

### **3. The responsibility to not promise what you can't deliver**

While related to #2, this one is worth singling out as it's fairly easy to unintentionally promise too much when one is excited about making a difference. This is especially important to avoid if you are working with a vulnerable population like children. An example: say you've promised to take a young person whom you're mentoring to a concert. You then forget or get busy and are unable to go. By not following through with your promise, not only can you potentially hurt the reputation of the organization and undermine its work but, more importantly, you could unintentionally do harm by giving the young person a reason not to trust you—or possibly even others.

### **4. The responsibility to honor the organization's investment in you**

Another pervasive myth about volunteering is that volunteers are free. In fact, organizations invest quite a bit in their volunteers via staff time, tools, training, and so on. This is why it's important to research your volunteer position first to determine if it's a good fit for you, and, once you're in the role, to always first try negotiating your volunteer role if you're unsatisfied, rather than just suddenly leaving.

### **5. The responsibility to take care of yourself**

Last but most certainly not least, you have the responsibility to make sure that you aren't overextending yourself, burning out, or causing yourself physical, mental, or emotional harm by taking on roles that aren't a good fit or that you aren't prepared for. While some stress and burnout may be inevitable depending on the project—for example, anyone volunteering in a hospice is likely to have some difficult moments—you can significantly limit it by seeking out support (talk to your volunteer manager and fellow volunteers), taking a break (either as you're volunteering or stepping away from volunteering altogether for a while), injecting some fun into your service portfolio (even if it's just a one day gig on the side), and having realistic expectations about what can be accomplished and when.