

How to volunteer

Volunteering opportunities come in many shapes and sizes. Some volunteer a few hours regularly, others when called upon by an organization. You could volunteer in your neighborhood, online or in other countries.

This guide will help you find out what is possible and how to begin volunteering.

Things you'll need

1. A passion

Time, sometimes very little time

2. What type of cause or organization?

A good way to start is to list down the sort of cause or organization you would like to help. For example, working with children, older people, homeless people, disabled people, or refugees. Perhaps you could help clean up the environment, or get involved in sports or arts and culture, or looking after animals.

3. List what skills you have to offer

Do you have IT skills, housekeeping, driving, teaching, creative, caring, fundraising, organizing or perhaps you are good making friends. Probably the most important attributes are commitment, common sense and the ability to work in a team.

4. Work out how much time you can give

Be clear about how much time you want/are able to volunteer from the outset. Also be clear about other roles and responsibilities you have, so that from the outset expectations are set appropriately. Don't forget to think about the travel time involved.

5. Find the organization for you

Identify organizations which operate in your area or for the cause you're interested in. Check out their websites and see what volunteer roles they are looking to fill. Big charities often have a way you can inquire and apply on line. Other organizations may like you to email or write to them.

Contact your local Volunteer Centre; they may have drop-in sessions or make appointments to talk over opportunities in the area.

6. Get references

Especially if you are thinking about a big commitment of time or energy, it is important to approach a volunteer role as carefully as a paid role from both parties' point of view, so making contact or getting references from people who have or still volunteer for that organization is always a good idea.

7. Do your research

Check out how well organized the organization is in terms of running a volunteer program, how well are the role and the time-commitment defined, who can you go to for support, who will you report to, are the health and safety policies and procedures in place, what expenses they meet, how are volunteers viewed in relation to paid staff, acknowledged, etc.

Watch for how they make contact with you and talk over the volunteering opportunities with you. Do you feel you are getting the chance to ask the questions you need and sort out the arrangements and procedures?

Larger organizations will have highly well-developed volunteering programs; smaller organizations may tend to be more informal in their involvement of volunteers and have less resources for support of volunteer programs.

Both can be rewarding and worthwhile but it is important to match your abilities and aspirations with the organizations; if these are mismatched, the volunteering role is unlikely to be a satisfactory experience for either party.

8. Trial/shadowing periods

It can be beneficial to agree a short trial or shadowing period both to ensure a good match between the needs of both volunteer and the organization but also to see how you enjoy working with the other people involved. Really enjoying both the work and the people you work with is of primary importance.

Volunteers - An Important Resource

Volunteers are the most important resource community organizations have. The ability of people to work willingly together for the betterment of their community and themselves is a valuable resource.

Ideally, volunteers find the donation of their time and energy a meaningful experience for themselves as well as for the organization.

Benefits Volunteers Bring to the Organization

- Credibility – volunteers have fewer vested interests, making them a valuable public relations asset
- Objectivity – especially in the delivery of services
- Refreshed energy
- Specialized skills and knowledge
- Public opinion on important issues
- New ideas to enrich the existing program
- Flexibility to focus intently on a particular task or issue
- Fresh perspectives – "new blood" can keep an organization alive
- Ability to lessen the overall workload
- Capacity to expand services
- Immediate access to the community

Why Do People Volunteer?

- To help others and contribute to the community
- To use skills in a new setting
- To find new friends and new relationships
- To develop a sense of accomplishment and self-worth
- To learn new skills
- To meet requirements of a course or program

- To challenge themselves
- To work for a cause
- To gain recognition for their abilities
- To help improve the quality of community life

"Rights" of a volunteer

The Right:

- To be treated as a co-worker, not just free help
- To a suitable assignment with consideration for personal preference, temperament, education and skills
- To a well-planned program of training and supervision
- To a continuing education on the job and the follow-up to initial training... training for a greater responsibility
- To sound guidance and direction
- To promotion and a variety of experience through advancement to assignments with more responsibility
- To be heard, to have a part in planning, to feel free to make suggestions, and to have respect shown for an honest opinion
- To recognition in the form of promotion and rewards, and through day-to-day experience of appreciation

"Responsibilities" of a Volunteer

The Responsibility:

- To be sincere in the offer of service and believe in the value (worth) of the job to be done
- To be loyal to the organization and the staff with whom they work
- To maintain the dignity and integrity of the organization with the public

- To understand the job he or she undertakes
- To carry out duties promptly and reliably to the best of their ability
- To be willing to learn and participate in orientation and training programs, and to continue to learn on the job
- To accept the guidance and decisions of the coordinators of volunteers
- To maintain a smooth-working relationship with others and stay within the bounds of the volunteer placement description
- To contribute to supervision by self-evaluation and willingness to ask