

Risk management begins with the first point of contact and ends with the exit interview.

The ultimate goal of any program is to serve its learners. Learners, staff and volunteers need a dynamic, safe, and supportive environment in which to carry out their responsibilities. To reach this goal effectively, a program must have solid risk management practices to minimize factors that would deter learners' progress and program participants' satisfaction.

Risk management is often perceived as a complex and overwhelming series of steps to safeguard programs from unknown liabilities. In fact, risk management practices can be simple and straightforward. The ultimate goal of risk management is to protect a program's staff, learners and volunteers from events that cannot be prevented. Employing sound and comprehensive risk management strategies allows program managers to worry less and concentrate more on serving learners.

Important components to include in a volunteer program are the following:

- Risk Management Policies and Procedures
- Volunteer Application
- Volunteer Interview
- Volunteer Rights and Responsibilities
- Volunteer Agreement of Conduct
- Workplace Harassment Policy
- Reference or Background Checks
- Underage Volunteer Form
- Community Service (court-assigned) Volunteer Form
- Emergency Procedures
- Feedback and Evaluation of Program
- Feedback and Evaluation of Volunteer's Experience
- Exit Interview

In implementing sound risk management strategy, here are some perspectives to consider:

1. Treat your volunteers as if they were staff members.

Volunteers should be awarded the same respect and have the same performance expectations as a staff member. Designated feedback times and processes, a clear understanding of harassment and organizational policy, and outlined expectations are necessary parts of a volunteer's orientation. What they don't know *can* hurt them, it can even hurt your program and participants.

2. Make sure to have a consistent screening process for each volunteer applicant.

Use the same interview, application, and other screening processes for all volunteers who apply for the same or similar positions.

- 3. Don't make the mistake of thinking program time is too valuable to employ screening techniques.**
To ensure a safe and quality-focused program, it is essential to implement screening techniques. A common mistake among busy program coordinators is to sacrifice this essential component of risk management. Initial effort on this front can save you incredible hassles later, not to mention protect your program and participants against lawsuits, physical harm or other risks.
- 4. Set aside some time in your week for follow-up on risk management practices for new and current volunteers.**
A suggestion for busy coordinators is to designate time during their work week to deal with volunteer management needs and schedule a monthly orientation or training. For example, you could set aside 12-4 p.m. on Thursdays or every Monday morning and Wednesday evening (this will accommodate the different schedules of prospective volunteers) as "office hours." By setting aside this time, volunteers know when they can access your supervision, expect an orientation, training, or in-service, or simply touch base with you about questions or concerns they may have about their experience.
- 5. Only gather information that is relevant to the volunteer task.**
Don't waste your time collecting more information than you need. Determine what your program risks are and make sure your risk management process captures the information you need to size up a volunteers' competency, responsibility, and integrity.
- 6. Consider asking the same question in a variety of ways to make sure you get the information you need.**
Asking the same question in a variety of ways - through a reference check, an employer, and in the volunteer interview - can often assist a coordinator with determining whether a volunteer possesses the right skill set for a position.
- 7. Include others in the process.**
Whether considering a volunteer for service or inviting feedback on their performance, involve staff and lead volunteers in providing constructive feedback on a volunteer's performance or suitability for a position.
- 8. Be sensitive to culture and manage your own assumptions.**
In your recruitment process, be aware that the best person for the position might be nothing like you. You might not realize it now, but sometimes the people that seem to you unlikely to excel at first, end up showing special talents later.