

Orientation for new volunteers

Proper orientation for volunteers enables them to perform their role as required and ensures they understand their responsibilities and their rights within the organisation. It is a crucial part of risk management for volunteer programs.

A stitch in time

Properly planned volunteer orientation will save your program or group time and resources. It defines the expectations of the volunteer relationship – on both sides – and equips the volunteer to do their job. It is the organisation's responsibility to make sure volunteers have the necessary knowledge to perform their role and to navigate organisational policies and culture. If a volunteer acts against policy or regulation, the organisation may well be responsible because of a failure to properly induct, train or supervise. Potential performance issues and sources of conflict can be significantly reduced with a thorough orientation.

1. Make a plan

Orientation can be formal: for example, a classroom training session for a group of volunteers. It can also be an informal one-on-one session with relevant staff members. Whichever format you choose, make sure you have adequate time to cover both specific orientation to the role and a more general introduction to the concepts, policies and procedures that affect everyone in the organisation. You also need a clear plan for what you want volunteers to learn through orientation. You should then check that they have taken on the information required by reviewing the session and asking them to sign relevant policies.

2. Role orientation

Give an overview of the organisation's services that relate to the volunteer role. Make it clear what role volunteers play, what role staff and management play and the relationship between these roles. Give clear information about any training or orientation activities the volunteer will be involved in and why. Describe relevant procedures for that volunteer – this is particularly important for roles that have specific legislative or regulatory requirements, such as committee or board members. Finally, introduce relevant staff, the physical environment, equipment and facilities.

3. Make them aware

Ensure that your volunteers are made aware of their rights and responsibilities related to the role and to the organisation. This can reduce conflict within teams and provide a more supportive environment for the volunteer. Provide volunteers with any relevant policies, such as reimbursement of out of pocket expenses, and explain it to them so they will understand and agree to a code of conduct and/or rights and responsibilities.

Even small contributions add up to big impacts

Take the opportunity to promote the cause, mission and impact of your organisation. Some volunteer roles may not be the most glamorous jobs in the world but a volunteer knowing their contribution ultimately makes a difference can be a big motivator.

Policy must-haves

Your induction program will need to include an overview of organisational policies and regulatory requirements for matters common to most volunteer-involving organisations:

- Sexual harassment
- Privacy and records management
- Health and safety
- Discrimination.

Look for the Volunteering Victoria Fast Facts sheets on these topics, or see *Fast Facts – Essential Volunteering Policies and Procedures* for an overview. If you are inducting board members to an incorporated organisation you will also need to go over the requirements of the regulation that covers you: generally, the Associations Incorporation Act or the Corporations Act.

General induction package

An orientation kit can make new volunteers feel welcome, as well as providing them with information and documents they need to perform their role. The kit should provide a clear description of the rights and responsibilities of the volunteer.

It could contain:

- a letter of welcome
- an overview of the organisation's history, philosophy, mission, clients, structure and funding base.
- a copy of the volunteer's position description
- a statement of the volunteer's rights and responsibilities
- a training schedule
- a copy of the organisation's volunteer policy (or details on where it's kept, if it's too large to include)
- reference to relevant procedures and policies and where to obtain them
- relevant forms (e.g. for reimbursement of expenses, attendance records, etc)
- a map of the work site
- an organisational chart and/or a list of staff positions, names and contact details
- the latest annual report of the organisation
- emergency procedures
- a copy of the insurance schedule and instructions for reporting critical incidents, injuries or accidents
- details of operating hours, public holidays, etc
- information on upcoming important events, such as National Volunteer Week and International Volunteers Day.

Clearly detail regulatory or legislative requirements, such as privacy or health and safety. Failure to ensure volunteers receive and understand such information could expose the organisation or the volunteer to liability. You should outline grievance procedures, with information on how the volunteer may raise concerns.

When inducting the volunteer it helps to describe staff culture and service culture (particularly if there are differences across the organisation in the support offered to clients, consumers, event attendees and so on).

More information

Volunteering Victoria's Volunteer Management Toolkit provides templates and guidance to help you develop your volunteer orientation and induction: volunteeringvictoria.org.au/volunteer-management-toolkit/

National Standards for Volunteer Involvement: www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/National-Standards-Document-FINAL_Web.pdf

Volunteering Victoria is the state peak body for volunteering. We provide support to volunteers and not for profit organisations, and represent the interests of volunteering in Victoria.

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