

Writing Volunteer Position Descriptions

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Volunteer positions vary within and between organizations. Descriptions of each volunteer position have been used by volunteer management professionals for many decades to recruit volunteers, to share information, communicate ideas, and to articulate expectations. Volunteer position descriptions can also be used to mitigate and manage risk and are sometimes shared with external insurance carriers. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteer position descriptions have become an important tool to help volunteers understand how closely they will connect with others while volunteering for an organization. Volunteer roles generally fall into one of three categories:

- **No Contact Volunteer Positions** – volunteer tasks are completed at home or in a location where no other people are present. Alternatively, the tasks may be completed in collaboration with others but are accomplished online, via phone, text, or email. Examples include phone reassurance programs for seniors, board positions where meetings are held online, or knitting projects for goods donated to babies in hospital.
- **Low Contact Volunteer Positions** – volunteer tasks are completed with other people present but with limited close contact, usually under 15 minutes at a time. Examples include shopping for seniors where groceries are ordered online but delivered to a client's front door, invasive species removal where groups of people are spread out over a large outdoor area, or office roles where people are stationed in individual offices.
- **Regular Contact Volunteer Positions** – volunteer tasks are completed in accordance with the communicable disease safety protocols adopted by the organization when activities require regular physical contact with other people. Examples include food bank sorting where there are multiple people in a confined space, volunteering at a farmer's market directing visitors, or mentoring in a school tutoring program.

A robust description usually includes:

- The organization's Mission, Visions, and Values;
- Contact information for the organization;
- The physical location of the volunteer position if there are multiple work sites;
- The job title and contact information of the person supervising this volunteer position;
- Volunteer suitability – this is an optional line that closely aligns the volunteer's lived experience with the program's purpose – for example: this position is open to Cis Women, Trans Individuals, Gender Queer and Gender Non-Conforming people over the age of 19;

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- Acceptance requirements – details the minimum screening criteria for accepting a volunteer in each position and what information is kept on file. For example, volunteers must provide a Criminal Record Check, references, driver’s license abstract, proof of vaccination, or other health requirements;
- Volunteer position title – every volunteer position should have a title. This helps volunteers should they need to include information about their role on a resume or job application;
- Volunteer position purpose – this is an important link that lets the volunteer know how the position is meaningful and connected to the mission of the organization;
- Detailed description that includes:
 - Major areas of responsibility – an overview of the position and the tasks and duties required of the volunteer;
 - Skills, experience or qualifications required for the position;
 - Training opportunities – information about the on-boarding, just-in-time, or recurring training provided to volunteers by the organization;
 - Time commitment or expectations for each volunteer over a week/month/year;
 - Working conditions – let the volunteer know more about their future position – for example this is a fast paced volunteer position that has no direct physical contact with others, but requires regular meetings with a team of 12-15 staff and volunteers;
 - Benefits of volunteering – explain how a volunteer might gain from this position – for example, this is a perfect position for emerging professionals looking for a work-place reference letter and networking opportunities, or volunteers are provided with one free lunch each month and bus tickets to offset travel costs;
 - Limits, restrictions, or accommodations for participation – for example, volunteers must be aged 18 or over to participate or our workplace is fully accessible to volunteers using mobility devices;
 - All health and safety requirements; and
 - Notes – include additional information that volunteers, staff, or external evaluators may need

Additional Thoughts

It is useful to add the date that the volunteer position was created or most recently updated, the department that the volunteer position is connected to, and links to training materials that are specific to the volunteer position.

If high risk activities are associated with a volunteer position, it is essential that risk mitigation and management strategies are included in the volunteer position description. Be clear and concise with volunteers – state what is and is not allowed very clearly in the position descriptions.

Volunteer Victoria always recommends that organizations add a statement to volunteer position descriptions that notes that “Volunteers who do not follow organizational policies and practices may face discipline or dismissal. Policies and practices are subject to change.”

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Presentation Matters

Volunteer position descriptions should reflect the authentic voice and values of the organization and provide new volunteers with a snapshot view into the organization. A large organization such as a health authority may write volunteer position descriptions that are standardized, formal, and structured while a small organization may write position descriptions that feel organic and community-centered.

Volunteers want to find a place where they feel welcome and a role where they can be useful. A volunteer position description is one of the first things that shows a volunteer how an organization will communicate with them. Consider including the organization logo, photos of volunteers, or quotes from volunteers in the position description when it adds value to the document.

It's Not One Size Fits All

A volunteer position description is an excellent tool to help create a volunteer position recruitment advertisement, but it should not be used interchangeably.

When advertising for a position do not overwhelm a volunteer – give them the highlights first, let them self-identify as a potential volunteer candidate, then give them the full volunteer position description early in the assessment process.

Special Note

Many organizations avoid using words that suggest or even hint at the idea that volunteer positions are a form of paid employment. Volunteer Victoria typically uses the term “position description” rather than “job description.”

Additional Resources

Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador Writing Volunteer Positions Descriptions
http://Www.Envision.Ca/Pdf/Ey/Position_Description_Guide-1.Pdf

JOANNE FRITZ, How to Write a Job Description Your Volunteers will love <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/how-to-write-job-description-volunteers-will-love-2502599>

Maria Lahiffe, Volunteer Ottawa. Write Good Job Descriptions – Job Description Template https://www.volunteerottawa.ca/cgi/page.cgi/blog.html/VO_Blog/2018-03-27_Job_Description_Template

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About Volunteer Victoria

The Greater Victoria Volunteer Society, more commonly known as Volunteer Victoria, is a volunteer centre and hub to help volunteers, volunteer managers, and volunteer-led organizations.

Our mission is to *inspire and empower volunteerism!* We:

- Help volunteers and volunteer-led organizations
- Build and share knowledge through the delivery of professional development, training, learning and networking opportunities
- Offer specialized services and resources that advance the quality of volunteer programs and build capacity
- Treat all members, volunteers, partners, staff and stakeholders with fairness, dignity, and respect
- Provide welcoming spaces that embrace diverse ideas, knowledge, cultures, and experiences

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