Should You Bring Volunteers Back In-Person?

Protecting the health and safety of volunteers, staff, and clients must remain a priority through every phase of your organization's COVID-19 response. As you look to engage new volunteers or re-engage existing volunteers to provide in-person services during the pandemic, enhanced screening is necessary to stop further community spread. If the volunteers fall within a high risk demographic, such as those who are 70 years or older, additional procedures such as pre-shift screening are even more imperative.

Volunteer Toronto recommends non-profits comply with Toronto Public Health guidelines for all volunteers, staff, and clients. This, along with the recent adoption of physical distancing protocols, are necessary during screening and on-site volunteer shifts.

Reducing Risk Ongoing

Some organizations are asking volunteers to sign a waiver. This document should be crafted in collaboration with senior management, perhaps your board, and legal counsel. Each organization’s waiver will be unique which is why a template is not available. Beyond waivers, you can also request a Police Check or a Vulnerable Sector Screening. These protocols indicate whether a potential volunteer has a criminal record or outstanding warrant that is directly related to their volunteer role.

Pre-Shift Volunteer Screening

You may also want to consider additional screening before volunteers begin their shifts. This can be as simple as an email, or an online survey asking volunteers if they are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms. For in-person services, it can be a more in-depth such as having volunteers undertake temperature checks before engaging with clients. Remember to also schedule one-on-one check-ins to ensure volunteers feel supported.

Other Screening Resources

- Volunteer Toronto’s 30-minute webinar on Screening and Risk During COVID-19
- Volunteer Toronto’s 30-minute webinar on Orientation and Training During COVID-19
- Volunteer Canada’s Checklist for Volunteers – Volunteering during COVID-19
- Access Volunteer Ireland’s Stress & Volunteering one-pager and CBC’s list of services in support of your volunteer’s mental health during COVID-19.

What is your organization’s responsibility? Before re-engaging volunteers in person, non-profits must:

- Adopt new health and safety practices in alignment with Toronto Public Health
- Connect with existing volunteers to gather input on a new volunteer process
- Have new screening procedures in place
- Clearly communicate risks and program changes to volunteers, staff, and clients
- When relevant, provide enhanced training

What is the volunteer’s responsibility? Each volunteer must accept associated risks regarding their decision to volunteer. Organizations should be prepared to answer the below questions from volunteers:

- What safety measures are in place to protect volunteers?
- If I have questions/concerns, who is my Supervisor? And if they aren’t available?
- How will I receive training for this role?

Sources: Volunteer Toronto Screening Resources
City of Toronto

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