Safety & Privacy

Youth engagement has always been vital to volunteer programs. Many volunteer leaders understand the unique experiences of youth volunteers, and have built opportunities that acknowledge and benefit from the contributions of youthful perspectives in advancing their mission. Traditionally in Ontario, youth in high school are also required to complete 40-hours of volunteer service in order to graduate.

Just like in-person volunteering, virtual volunteer programs require systems to ensure safety and privacy. During COVID-19, virtual engagement with minors (volunteers under 18) has become a common reality. As volunteer managers, plans to manage risk and promote safety must be incorporated into role development.

Adequate Supervision

Volunteer programs engaging minors should consider:

- Whether staff or adult volunteers will be supervising youth virtual volunteers, and how these supervisors have been screened.
- How virtual meetings will be organized and moderated to ensure adequate supervision.
- Whether parental consent is required before volunteers participate in virtual meetings.
- In virtual spaces it is even more vital that volunteers know how their work will be monitored. This is especially true for youth who want to know how their deliverables impact your organization.

Virtual Meeting Leading Practices

Here are some tips for developing virtual volunteer programs that include minors:

- Choose platforms that volunteers can access through a link that does not require them to create an account (for example: Zoom requires no account in comparison to Skype, which does).
- Password-protect all meetings and send connection instructions directly to the email addresses of volunteers.
- Avoid using social media platforms that require youth to use their personal social accounts.
- Set up waiting rooms for volunteers so that all meeting attendees can be verified before they are allowed to enter a virtual group space.
- Do not record meetings with minors, unless there is a specific need, and always get consent before you start recording.

Any non-profit looking to start engaging youth as online volunteers should begin by evaluating their current offline engagement with this audience:

- Level of experience working with youth in face-to-face programs
- Existing program and participant safeguards specific to minors
- Screening processes for youth and supervising staff and/or adult volunteers
- Supervision for internal and external events and activities
- Overall understanding of emotional needs and youth development

If a volunteer manager or other staff member can’t speak to these areas, the organization is not ready or equipped to engage youth in a virtual environment.

Other Youth Engaging Resources

- Volunteer Canada’s Youth Volunteer Skill Self-Assessment
- Volunteer Canada on Youth Volunteer Etiquette
- VolunteerPro on Teen Volunteering: Engaging Young People