



Why References?

Reference letters are a form of “background check” that employers and volunteer engagers can use to assess a candidate. **They can be a helpful tool to verify someone’s work or volunteer history and identify areas of strength from past colleagues, supervisors and workplace.**

As scrutiny of potential employees increased throughout the 20th century, references became a staple job requirement for many paid roles. **Volunteers may seek references from their supervisors, either by asking supervisors for their contact information, or requesting a formal letter.** In some cases, a letter may be requested because of a volunteer’s academic requirements, certification or licensing, applications for housing, or other non-career reasons.

The capacity and time availability of volunteer managers can make it difficult to keep up with volunteer asks for letters. **Use this resource to guide your processes.**

Tip: Get to Know your Volunteers

References are most effective when you get to know your volunteers. This can help you **identify skills, characteristics, traits and other elements** that can be helpful when writing the letter. Keep track of your volunteer’s performance, and any highlights from their involvement. Store these in the volunteer’s file to use when preparing a reference. Treat this information, and any reference letters you write and store, the same as you would any private personal information of volunteers: securely, and for only as long as is needed for the purposes of the role.

Suggestions of things to note:

- Punctuality, commitment, regular attendance/participation
- Passion for the role
- Use of skills, ease of learning/utilizing new skills



Writing References for Volunteers



There are typically **two types of letters** based on what the volunteer is looking for and how well the volunteer's supervisor knows the volunteer:

1 Confirmation of Volunteering/Volunteer Hours

- Confirms the volunteer has volunteered or is actively volunteering with the organization.
- Lists the role title, start date or tenure of role, brief description of role.
- If needed, an exact number of hours completed can be included. Details of shifts attended can also be provided upon request.
- Positive notes about volunteer, if enough is known.

This can be requested as soon as the completion of the first shift. Volunteers should have completed all training and any shadow/preparatory shifts before their first full shift in the role.

This letter may be requested as proof of hours completed to share with a case worker, verification of volunteering with employment support services, proof of volunteer role for academic purposes, or other reasons. In Ontario, high schools require a signature for hours completed by students working toward (or exceeding) their 40-hour community service requirement.

2 Reference Letter

- Confirms the volunteer has volunteered or is actively volunteering with the organization.
- Lists the role title, start date or tenure of role, brief description, and, if required, hours completed.
- Provides details about the volunteer's skills, strengths and positive characteristics.
- If information is known about the reference purpose (employment, school application), specific information can be provided relating the skills, knowledge or characteristics beneficial to this purpose.

This can be requested after the volunteer has been involved within an appropriate timeframe to ensure their supervisor can provide a proper, personal and well-rounded letter about the volunteer's performance. For example, it may be after a certain number of shifts volunteered, a percentage of the project completed, or they have been a volunteer in the role. **It's important to communicate that a reference letter requires the supervisor or volunteer manager to know the volunteer well enough in this timeframe to provide truthful details.**

A reference letter is most often requested for a volunteer seeking a job. Sometimes, a letter won't be needed, but instead your contact information can be shared for the application. In some cases, a reference letter (most often for school applications) will require a specific template to follow.



What to Expect

A reference could be for a job, a volunteer role, post-secondary school application, or a certification/credential/license. **Each need will likely have different requirements and will take varying lengths of time to prepare.** When giving your contact information, the organization or institution seeking the reference for your volunteer may send you a form or template, or set up a time to connect.

Be mindful of your time and capacity to provide references and write letters. Let volunteers know the turnaround time, as you may need one or two weeks' notice to complete the letter. Some recruiters may have a short window for references to be completed, so it's a good idea for volunteers to inform you when they provide your name as a reference. This will give you some time to prepare, including asking for and reviewing relevant information about the job or other opportunity the volunteer needs the reference for. **It's also ok to turn down last minute requests, as you may not be able to provide a meaningful reference on short notice.**

Reference Process or Policy

It can be helpful to have a process in place to make it easier for volunteers to request letters – and to enable staff to prepare them. This doesn't need to be a detailed policy, but it's a good idea to have the process written down based on the letters you provide, the structure of volunteer supervision (as in, who gets to know volunteers), and how many volunteers you have on your team. **Here are some general guidelines:**

- Let volunteers know during onboarding/orientation how letters are provided and **ask volunteers at this point if they'll be seeking a letter during or after volunteering.**
- **Create a clear system for how requests are made** – email, submission form, conversation with supervisor, etc.
- Inform volunteers **how much notice is required**, such as one week notice.
- Determine if there is an amount of time (**such as shifts/hours completed, or weeks/months with the organization**) before you'll provide a reference letter. The timeframe must be the same for every volunteer in that specific role, and volunteers should be made aware of this timeframe.
- If a volunteer has received negative or constructive feedback from their supervisor in their role, and requests a reference, **talk to the volunteer about how, if at all, this feedback may contribute to their reference.**
- When a volunteer is leaving, and during the exit interview/survey process, **let outgoing volunteers know if there is a time limit on how long they can ask for a reference.** Since institutional knowledge changes, and records are only kept for a specific period of time, it's good to set expectations in case a volunteer wants to request a reference years later.
- **Store all feedback to the volunteer in their record**, especially instances when volunteers meet and exceed expectations. These can then be used when preparing references.



Example Reference Letter

To Whom It May Concern,

I am pleased to confirm that Adja Vendiu is currently volunteering with Volunteer Toronto as a Volunteer Advisor from June 2025 to the present.

In her role as an Advisor, Adja excels at connecting with a diverse range of individuals interested in volunteering. She diligently guides them to the appropriate resources and provides insightful answers to their questions during Zoom video appointments. She is also responsible for reporting all interactions using Excel, booking applications, and email.

Adja's success in this role can be attributed to her attentiveness during training and her keen eye for detail. She quickly mastered the necessary technology, including Zoom and our booking software, allowing her to provide exceptional support to the public. Her approachable demeanor and unwavering commitment to helping others has enabled her to connect meaningfully with clients. Adja consistently engages with them, addressing their inquiries with patience and professionalism while directing them to needed resources.

Adja is a respectful and dedicated member of our Volunteer Advisor team. We are fortunate to have her as part of our volunteer team, and I have no doubt that she will continue to make a positive impact wherever she goes.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or would like further details about her contributions.

Sincerely,
Samah AbdelAziz
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