

Volunteer Management During an Emergency

A VITAL ROLE

Volunteer management is a busy and varied role at the best of times, but it is even more important during times of emergency. The requirements of your role may change a lot during these periods but the health, safety and welfare of you and your volunteers is of the utmost importance above all else.

Managing volunteers at this time will continue to be an essential part of your work in our local communities. Depending on the nature of your volunteer programme you may have to curtail activities, or you may need to ramp up the activities you provide. You may even need to provide a whole new programme that you haven't delivered before. Here are some suggestions of things you can do now:

01 **Balance or re-balance your workload.**

Things will move faster than ever before with phonecalls and emails flying in. If you are working from home make sure you plan some downtime and where possible get some physical exercise outdoors while practicing social distancing – it is important to be able to switch off. Update your phone message or email signature to tell people your revised working hours.

02 **Let your volunteers know they are supported and appreciated.**

Communication is key, even if it's just to say "we don't have much for volunteers to do right now" or "we are changing the way we do things, it'll take us a little time to adjust and we'll get back to you". Let your volunteers know what is happening.

03 **Prioritise health above all else.**

You may not have collected personal data from your volunteers in the past in relation to them being in one of the "at risk" groups for COVID-19 but you might need to ask that question now. This may seem intrusive but remember the health of us all is everyone's primary concern.

04 **Review your volunteer programme risk assessment.**

It's unlikely that you have a pandemic as a risk in it. Now is the time to include it and to reassess all elements of your work on this basis.

05 **Have a contingency plan in place.**

We all know that Volunteer Managers can be a "one man/woman" show, so make sure you have a contingency plan in place, in case you need to self-isolate or restrict your movements. Upskill a colleague to run your volunteer programme in your absence, if you have not previously done so. Think about how the programme would operate without you.

06 **Do not work/volunteer if you are ill.**

If you are sick and showing any of symptoms of Coronavirus (COVID-19) you should withdraw immediately, following the guidelines from the HSE www.hse.ie/coronavirus

07 Do not let anyone volunteer if they are ill.

If a volunteer is feeling unwell make sure that they can disengage promptly without concern or guilt. Sometimes volunteers feel guilty that they are letting the organisation down. Make sure that they know their health and well-being and that of your service users in your number one concern.

08 Get your information from reliable sources.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) can be stressful and worrying so encourage your volunteers to follow only recognised news channels, there is a lot of misleading information floating around on Social Media. www.hse.ie/coronavirus is a great resource that is updated regularly.

09 Encourage Communication

Encourage your volunteers to reach out to you if they have a question or concern about their volunteering, as one volunteer's concern could be the concern of 20 volunteers.

10 Be honest with your volunteers.

As a Volunteer Manager you may be your volunteer's "shining light" and wear many hats but you are not expected to be a scientist or doctor. Don't bluff your way in an answer to a question from a volunteer. There is no shame in saying "I don't have the answer to that question right now, but I will find out and come back to you". Volunteers will respect you for your honesty.

11 Follow HSE guidelines round social distancing.

If volunteering is to continue you need to adopt a social distancing/no handshake policy at your organisation. Volunteers are usually friendly people so encourage waving or verbally greeting people instead.



12 Implement proper hygiene

Provide facilities for volunteer hand-sanitising and hand-washing and provide clear signage to encourage this.

13 Volunteer and service user safety should be your primary concern.

If continuing interaction between volunteers and vulnerable persons, take all recommended precautions, including but not limited to PPE, gloves, eye and face masks, frequent hand-washing, and use of sanitiser.

14 You may need to adapt your volunteer policy or procedure.

Make sure you include volunteers in the decision-making process. This will ensure that their concerns are heard and addressed.

15 Explore virtual volunteering.

If your facility has closed and volunteers can no longer volunteer there explore if it is possible for them to carry out these tasks remotely. Perhaps you are recruiting new volunteers and your current volunteers could interview, screen and check references, this could be done through virtual volunteering.

16 Be prepared that some people may not be able to continue volunteering.

What if one of your volunteers tested positively for Coronavirus (Covid-19)? What if a number of volunteers had to self-isolate as a precaution, would your volunteer programme continue? Would it have an impact on services?

17 Think about which of your services is a priority.

You may need to move and upskill volunteers from one area to another to maintain capacity to deliver your priority services.

18 Mind the mental health of your volunteers.

Volunteering at a time of a pandemic can be stressful for everyone, ensure that volunteers are taking shorter shifts and longer breaks and encourage them to not push themselves.

19 Think about training.

If you have to train or upskill volunteers, think about how you are going to do this. Can you have social distancing in a training setting or do you need to offer e-learning instead? What might be some of pitfalls of this and do you need to have an enhanced buddy scheme in place for new volunteers?

MORE INFORMATION

There are a broad range of resources and tools to help you to support your volunteer programme during an emergency available on the Volunteer Ireland web site.

