Orienting Volunteers

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.
-Margaret Mead

The orientation process serves several purposes.

1. It contributes to the volunteer's first impression of the organization once they are accepted.
2. It is the first opportunity for the volunteer to develop a connection and feel a part of the agency.
3. The orientation also serves to introduce the volunteers to the organization and its clientele. It gives new volunteers the opportunity to meet other new and current volunteers, as well as the paid staff with whom they will be interacting.

Conducting the Orientation

The orientation may be conducted in a formal group meeting or an informal individual discussion. The volunteer administrator (VA) must be well prepared for the orientation. An orientation that is unorganized does not present a positive impression about the agency. The VA should have a positive attitude when delivering the orientation. Positive energy conveys that the VA is excited about their job, and excited about the new volunteers joining the agency. Following are some key elements the VA should communicate during the orientation:

1. Begin with a description and history of the organization. How and why was the agency established? What events led to its establishment and who were the key players? What is the mission and vision of the organization, as well as funding support?

2. Conduct a get acquainted activity so that the paid staff and volunteers can get to know each other. Such activities build the relationships between paid and volunteer staff that make for a productive and rewarding association.

3. Describe the overall programs, projects, and clientele of the organization. What services/products does the organization provide and who are the...
primary and secondary recipients of those services? What have these programs accomplished for the community?

4. Outline what the volunteer will do for the organization and how that role contributes to the agency's mission and vision. Even mundane tasks performed by volunteers help the organization move forward.

5. Provide an organizational chart of the organization. Who are the important people in the organization? Include board members, funding committees, organizational directors, managers, volunteer supervisors, paid staff, and other volunteers.

6. Knowledge of general policies and procedures. Policies provide overall guidance and direction to staff and volunteers to ensure the smooth running of the organization and protection of clients, volunteers, staff and board members. Includes, but is not limited to, the following:

   - Code of conduct - written statement of values, beliefs, and guidelines to create a level playing field. Includes dress code, addressing clients, board members, and staff.

   - Accountability - volunteers need to know to whom they are accountable, who is responsible for supporting them, and to whom they can express concerns. This includes procedures on timesheets, record sheets of volunteer-provided programs/services, and client feedback on programs/services.

   - Representation to media or community - who can speak to the media on behalf of the organization? Are volunteers authorized to act as representatives of the organization within the limits of their job descriptions? Advise volunteers to seek prior consultation from their supervisor before speaking on behalf of the organization to the media.

   - Absenteeism, leave of absence, substitution - define the commitment the volunteer is making. Be clear on punctuality, work schedules, who to contact if they are unable to show up for duty, and how to make alternative arrangements.

   - Car use - are volunteers required to transport clients in their own vehicles? Is a vehicle provided by the organization? What are the conditions or limitations for transporting children? Require volunteers...
to submit proof of driver's license, evidence of insurance, and knowledge of traffic laws.

Confidentiality - volunteers and staff must respect and maintain the confidentiality of information about clients, other volunteers, and staff that may be gained through their role as a volunteer. Describe what constitutes confidential information. Include information about computer software and files, the organization's business documents and printouts, and all volunteer, employee membership, donor and supporter records.

Conflict of interest - define conflict of interest situations and ensure that volunteers understand the term and implications. The volunteer must formally disclose the interest, refrain from attempting to persuade or influence other persons participating in the decision, and shall not cast any vote on the matter.

Training requirements - all volunteers should receive sufficient training to carry out the responsibilities of their position. Training should provide the volunteer with specific knowledge, skills, and support to perform their role effectively. Be clear about the expectations for volunteers.

Staff/volunteer relations - staff must be role models on implementing and following through with volunteer policies. Staff authority is undermined if volunteers don't see a staff commitment.

7. Description of the social climate of the organization. Describe the beliefs and values of the organization, including but not limited to: philosophy of involvement, inclusion of people with disabilities, multiculturalism/anti-racism, sexual harassment, alcohol/drugs, service at the discretion of the organization, right of refusal, ownership of rights of materials produced/published, and confidentiality of service.

8. Give an orientation to the facilities and layout of the organization. Help volunteers locate the restrooms, classrooms, break room, entrances and exits, emergency fire extinguishers, first aid kits, outside areas, offices, resource library, public areas, and parking.