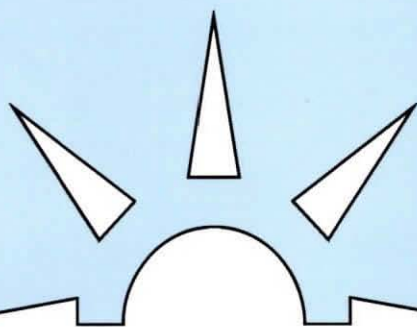


**A Quick Guide
to
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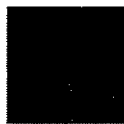
Notes From the Field



Molly M. Remer, MSW

A Quick Guide to
Successful Volunteering:
Notes From the Field

Molly M. Remer, MSW



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*Dedicated to the spirit of volunteerism—a powerful force of
social change.*

*And for my husband—unwaveringly supportive and
encouraging of my work.*

Author's Note & Disclaimer



This book is intended for use as a general guideline for a successful volunteer experience. It is not a substitute for formal training, experience, or education in the field in which you are working as a volunteer. Volunteer assignments can be complex and challenging tasks and should not be undertaken lightly or without seeking appropriate training and resources. The author has made every attempt to ensure the accuracy and appropriate nature of the material contained herein. The author and the publisher assume no responsibility for how the material is interpreted or applied by the reader.

Table of Contents



Using the Guide.....	7
Choosing.....	8
Rewards & Benefits.....	11
Cautions.....	13
Rights	14
Responsibilities.....	16
Tips & Notes.....	18
Internet Resources.....	21

Using the Guide

*"I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know:
The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who
have sought and found how to serve."*

--Albert Schweitzer



This guide is intended primarily for human service volunteers working in formal non-profit agencies with both paid and volunteer staff. Volunteers in other fields or in all-volunteer agencies will also find portions of the information useful. This guide is directed to relatively long-term or "committed volunteers." The author uses this term to refer to volunteers that spend 50 or more hours annually working for the same agency. Short-term volunteers—those who work on one specific project, often for a day or a weekend solely—will also find some of the information helpful.

The author's own observations and conclusions during her years of experience as a professional volunteer serve as the primary basis for this guide.

Choosing

"How you spend your time is the only true measurement of your priorities in life."

--Nancy Hunter Denney



The volunteer opportunities available may seem overwhelming to you—almost every non-profit agency is looking for volunteer help. The vast array may even discourage you from ever getting started. Try not to let this happen by using the following tips to simplify your decision-making process and guide you in selecting your volunteer position:

- ❖ Establish which causes/issues/service populations interest you most or that you feel committed to. Make a list of your potential interests and tour several agencies that serve the populations or causes that attract your concern. If you do not have any ideas, explore working with several different populations, settings, or causes that are the first to catch your interest when looking through websites, newspaper ads, or the phone book.
- ❖ Being a volunteer provides you with the opportunity to experiment with different settings, activities, experiences, and environments. Decide upon the new things you would like to learn or experiment with and choose a volunteer position accordingly.

- ❖ Decide on your “skills goal.” Do you wish to use existing professional skills or gain new skills by exploring an area with which you are unfamiliar?
- ❖ Clarify areas in which you are sure you do not wish to volunteer and tasks that you are unwilling to take on.
- ❖ Decide whether you wish to be a long-term, ongoing, scheduled volunteer or a short-term volunteer, possibly with a one-time event or project.
- ❖ Consider whether you would like to volunteer with a group, family members, or friends or whether you would prefer to pursue your volunteer work on your own.
- ❖ Consider that many volunteer positions require a period of training before you begin working. Decide how much time you are willing to commit to being trained for the position you desire.
- ❖ Carefully think about the group of people or the subject area you want to be involved with helping. Also consider the type of co-workers and supervisor you want to have (i.e. do you prefer mostly self-directed work, or highly structured assignments; do you enjoy working with people who are laid-back, sociable, and flexible, or who are driven and very committed).
- ❖ In addition to training, be prepared that the agency you choose may have additional requirements for becoming a volunteer—most agencies won’t just accept someone right off the street. You may need to have criminal and

child abuse background checks (this is guaranteed if you are going to be working in an agency that serves children). You will have to fill out an application and will likely be required to have a face-to-face interview in which it can be determined if the agency is a good match for you and you are a good match for it. You may also be required to have specific skills, prior training, or education in order to be considered for the position.

- ❖ The **Internet Resources** section at the close of this guide contains starter ideas for locating a volunteer position. Also consider checking with your local community's Voluntary Action Center (or League), looking in the Community section of the newspaper, or looking up specific agencies or categories of agencies in the phone book.

Rewards & Benefits

"What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and world remains and is immortal."

--Albert Pike



Volunteering is a multifaceted, immensely rewarding, and meaningful experience. The following list contains some of the rewards and benefits you may experience in your work as a volunteer:

- ❖ All of the intrinsic benefits of paid employment (sense of self-worth, interaction with others, etc.), plus extra!
- ❖ Work of your choice that you enjoy doing.
- ❖ People you enjoy working with.
- ❖ Opportunity to demonstrate your talents and receive readily given appreciation for them.
- ❖ Contribute to society and benefit others in a meaningful way.
- ❖ Use specialized skills in service of others.
- ❖ Have immense flexibility and a *huge* range of options/opportunities.
- ❖ Continual gratitude and appreciation of you by your

supervisor and peers.

- ❖ The volunteer assignment you choose may be part of your profession, thus allowing you to keep up-to-date on your skills, or it may be wildly different and thus challenge you in that way.
- ❖ “Save the world” urge is met—you may choose to work with a large, international organization, or to benefit your own local community and those around you.
- ❖ Develop a more in-depth passion and commitment about a specific population/cause.
- ❖ Make a difference in peoples’ lives.
- ❖ Opportunity to have a hand in multiple organizations/ agencies of interest to you.
- ❖ Gain, or use existing, leadership skills.
- ❖ Have a broad reaching social, cultural, or environmental impact.
- ❖ Have freedom and flexibility in schedule and duties.

Cautions

"Without volunteers, we'd be a nation without a soul."

--Rosalynn Carter



There are also a few cautions to keep in mind when embarking on your volunteer adventure. You are encouraged to think over your commitment seriously—your goals, the organization's goals, your expectations, preferences, etc.—and to consider the following:

- ❖ Avoid the temptation to give more time than you actually have—to over-commit yourself or have trouble saying "no" to extra duties or requests.
- ❖ Volunteer out of a sense of meaning and purpose that draws you to the work, not out of a sense of duty or obligation.
- ❖ Make sure to balance your volunteer work with other interests, paid work, or family commitments.
- ❖ Remember to do what you love, and love what you do!
- ❖ Work because your heart is in it, not because you wish to gain prestige or status.

Volunteer Rights

"Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received - only what you have given: a full heart, enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice and courage."

--St. Francis of Assisi



All volunteers have rights in their workplaces, beyond the commonly identified right to be free from any type of discrimination or sexual harassment. This list of volunteer rights may be used as a general guideline for the kind of treatment you should reasonably expect in a volunteer position (if you are not experiencing them, it may be time to consider changing positions). Individual agencies may also have their own volunteer "bill of rights."

Volunteers have the right to:

- ❖ Be valued.
- ❖ Be treated with respect.
- ❖ Be trusted.
- ❖ Have a defined role.
- ❖ Have a variety of duties.

- ❖ Receive appropriate training and preparation.
- ❖ Be heard.
- ❖ Say "no."
- ❖ Be recognized.
- ❖ Be kept informed.
- ❖ Receive feedback.
- ❖ Have skills utilized.
- ❖ Have contributions acknowledged.
- ❖ Receive recommendations for future unpaid or paid positions.
- ❖ Set limits on time availability and work taken on.

Volunteer Responsibilities

"I slept and dreamt that life was joy, I awoke and saw that life was service, I acted and behold, service was joy."

--Rabindranath Tagore



Volunteers also have numerous responsibilities beyond remembering never to engage in any type of discrimination or sexual harassment in their workplaces. The following list contains some generic volunteer responsibilities that are applicable in most positions. Remember that each volunteer position is different and will carry with it its own set of responsibilities.

As a volunteer you are responsible for:

- ❖ Being committed and caring.
- ❖ Taking your work seriously.
- ❖ Giving tasks your best effort.
- ❖ Being willing to try new things.
- ❖ Being a responsible part of the organization.

- ❖ Respecting the organization, its mission, co-workers (paid and unpaid), and service population.
- ❖ Putting your heart into your work.
- ❖ Following and upholding agency rules or guidelines.
- ❖ Respecting confidentiality.
- ❖ Knowing your personal limits and boundaries and knowing when to ask for help.
- ❖ Remembering your promises and fulfilling them.
- ❖ Using your time wisely.
- ❖ Taking on only as much work as you can handle and declining assignments that you do not wish to do.
- ❖ Exercising good judgment.

Tips & Notes

"Each person has a thread in the tapestry of life. Strive to connect your life thread to as many different threads as possible, thus becoming part of an almost infinite number of connections, your individual thread of existence conceivably stretching on for eternity."

--Molly Remer



- ❖ Pay Attention & Learn. This is the single most important aspect of being a successful volunteer. This will make you invaluable during inevitable times of paid staff transition (candid note: many volunteers outlast the paid employees, many years over). During these times, you may be called upon to informally train the new paid staff. This gives the newly hired people respect for you and a firm sense of your capabilities — also a renewed appreciation for your knowledge that present staff may have begun to take for granted.
- ❖ Don't expect a glamorous assignment right away — volunteers prove themselves lasting contributors by demonstrating commitment, willingness to learn, and overall competence. Agencies are used to volunteer turnover and therefore want to make sure you are going to stick around before handing you lots of responsibility and complicated tasks.
- ❖ Choose carefully.

- ❖ Don't be afraid to explore your options and to check out more than one volunteer location/position.
- ❖ Develop passion for the focus area and for the agency (beyond the more general passion that may have drawn you there in the first place).
- ❖ To get responsibility, you must act responsibly.
- ❖ Arrive willing to help with anything (within your own personal boundaries). Take on virtually any task and do it well.
- ❖ Offer any special skills you might have.
- ❖ Have specific goals in mind—too many volunteers can only say, “I want to help people.” Instead, clarify what you can offer the agency and what you expect to receive in return.
- ❖ Treat your volunteer position with the same respect, professionalism, courtesy, and sense of responsibility with which you would treat a paid position (you will then receive these back).
- ❖ Respect agency rules and guidelines. It is not a good idea to approach your volunteer position as an opportunity to fix an ailing agency or to try to reform an agency whose values conflict with your own—volunteers are encouraged to be agents of social change, but they should choose volunteer positions within agencies that share this purpose, not try to convert agencies they disapprove of or

disagree with.

- ❖ Learn all you can about the agency and how it works. Become an enthusiastic and fully informed expert about the agency's mission, values, services, and functioning and also (most importantly) about the population of people it serves.
- ❖ Be a "generalist," if possible: a worker who is knowledgeable about multiple aspects of the agency and its services and is willing and able to take on tasks in a variety of areas.
- ❖ Finally, believe in what you're doing and do what you believe in.

Internet Resources

"How wonderful that no one need wait a single moment to improve the world."

--Anne Frank



The following websites will provide you with more information about seeking, finding, and participating in a successful volunteer opportunity. Please remember that though these websites were active at the time of this guide's printing, agencies frequently change website addresses. If the addresses listed below have become out-of-date, it does not mean that the organization is out of business or does not have a website. If you encounter a problem with an address, try entering the title of the organization (i.e. NetAid) into a search engine to produce the updated website information.

Advice for Volunteers:

<http://www.serviceleader.org/advice/index.html>

Energize (for Volunteer Leaders):

<http://www.energizeinc.com/>

Go Make a Difference:

<http://www.go-mad.org/>

Idealist.org—Action Without Borders:

<http://www.idealists.org/>

InterAction:

<http://www.interaction.org/>

NetAid (United Nations Affiliated):

<http://www.netaid.org/>

Passion in Action:

<http://www.passioninaction.org/>

VolunteerMatch (find local volunteer opportunities):

<http://www.volunteermatch.org/>

Volunteers-in-Parks (National Park Service):

<http://www.nps.gov/volunteer/>

Author Biography

Molly Remer graduated with a master's degree in social work from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2000. She also earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Missouri-Rolla. The bulk of her professional experience has been in short-term crisis oriented settings. Presently, she works as a professional volunteer in an agency serving families of critically ill children. In the past, she was a full-time unpaid coordinator of volunteers at a shelter for battered women and has been a crisis-line volunteer in a shelter for battered women as well. She is also an author and artisan and lives with her husband and son in central Missouri.

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*Talking to a Battered Woman: A Guide for the Short-
Term Helper*

*Talking to Teenagers: 25 Tips for Non-Coercive
Communication*

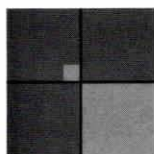
Do you want to find a fulfilling volunteer position, but are not quite sure where to start? Curious about how to make your volunteer experience rewarding to you as well as highly beneficial to the agency you serve?

This guide will help you explore what it means to be a successful volunteer. From choosing the best position for you, to tips from the field, this book presents a realistic overview of how you can help and how to define your role.

**Other helpful guides
by this author:**

*Talking to Someone Whose Child is Dying:
A Guide for the Short-Term Helper*

*Talking to a Battered Woman:
A Guide for the Short-Term Helper*



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