

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Letting Fear Prevent Volunteer Involvement is Too Risky

Letting Fear Prevent Volunteer Involvement is Too Risky

By [Jayne Cravens](#)

December
2017

For the past five years, Energize President Susan J. Ellis has been successfully living with cancer. This month, she had a setback and is taking some time off from her consulting, training, writing responsibilities. We are pleased that longtime colleague, friend, and fellow expert in volunteer management, Jayne Cravens, generously offered to guest write this month's Hot Topic.

In my second year of directing the [United Nations Online Volunteering service](#), formerly a part of NetAid, senior management decided to bring in an outside consultant to analyze the potential of the program. It was late 2002, and I was particularly hungry to hear other perspectives on virtual volunteering: it was exhausting to be one of the few people talking about it, as I had since the mid-1990s. I was so looking forward to what fresh things this consultant, a supposed international expert in online communities and Information Communications Technology for Development (ICT4D), would say.

You can imagine my shock when he submitted his evaluation and concluded that virtual volunteering was “too risky” because of “safety concerns.” He felt that, because the volunteers were all remote and because those involving the online volunteers never met them on-site or, face-to-face, “bad things could happen.” His conclusion was that the Internet cultivated too much danger and the program should be abandoned.

The [UN's Online Volunteering service](#) places and supports thousands of on-site volunteers throughout the developing world, including in assignments in post-conflict countries where the security situation can be fluid and volunteers must tread oh-so-carefully, literally and figuratively. The head of UNV at the time, Sharon Capeling-Alakija, looked at the report, looked at me, and said, “Has he not seen where our *on-site volunteers* are working?”



I was thankful that Sharon put that report aside and we all ignored its recommendations. But, that experience did help me to talk about virtual volunteering more effectively, bluntly addressing possible safety concerns in presentations and workshops before any questions were asked about such. My favorite counter to “virtual volunteering is potentially dangerous” is talking about Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBS), one of the most respected programs in the U.S., which has adult volunteers engaging with children in settings unsupervised by any BBBS’s staff or the children’s families. Its safety record is outstanding, yet, based on the safety risks many people suddenly become terribly concerned about when learning about virtual volunteering, BBBS shouldn’t exist.

Susan J. Ellis says it best: “We live in a world concerned about risk and have evolved an army of designated ‘risk managers,’ too many of whom judge new roles for volunteers to be fraught with possible accidents or liabilities.”

She also likes to quote Martin Luther King, Jr. in talks about risk management in volunteer engagement: “Cowardice asks the question, ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘Is it politic?’ But conscience asks the question, ‘Is it right?’” That quote is also reflective of just how much Susan and I value volunteer engagement: it’s not just a nice thing for a nonprofit to think about, it’s a necessary thing for an organization to do. Would you really forgo involving volunteers - from involving unpaid humans in your work - because of a fear of what might happen?

I was reminded of all these concerns about the safety of clients when volunteers are brought into the picture while working with [Knowbility](#), a nonprofit based in Austin, Texas that promotes accessibility online for people with disabilities and people using assistive technologies. I’m charged with recruiting nonprofits who need a new Web site to participate in an online hackathon by Knowbility called OpenAIR. But I just can’t stop myself from also encouraging participants to improve the section of their Web site meant to recruit volunteers and celebrate their contributions. One nonprofit has no information at all on their current Web site about volunteers, and when I asked them why not, they said, “Oh, our clients are high-risk individuals. We couldn’t have volunteers around them!” And I thought of BBBS, Meals on Wheels, domestic violence shelters, and all of the other many programs that bring volunteers together with “high-risk individuals,” of all the good, even great things, those volunteers do, and the sad, even dire things that would happen if their work was stopped.

Of course, the nonprofit that balked at the idea of having volunteers around their high-risk clients happily has paid staff around these same clients. So, I have to ask: Why? How are paid staff less risky than unpaid volunteers?

I once saw a nonprofit say on an online forum, “I need to have some kind of porn blocker software on the computers at our office since volunteers have access to the computers.” Are they implying that employees, because of their paychecks, aren’t at all inclined to do anything inappropriate on work computers, yet volunteers, who are unpaid, just can’t stay away from online pornography?

Paid staff are humans. Unpaid volunteers are humans. And, when it comes to humans, what keeps people safe are well-thought out and continuously evoked risk management standards. Susan has a fantastic, short list that I have used to talk to organizations about risk management in volunteer engagement, virtual or otherwise: she suggests that, after listing the potential benefits of a particular volunteer engagement scheme, you review the possible risks:

- Is there any harm that could come of this to anyone?
- What is the likelihood of such harm occurring?
- What will be the consequence if we do not deploy volunteers in this way?
- Other than harm or an accident, what else might be negative about this?
- Are clients concerned about risk or are they willing to accept some in order to obtain a desired service?
- Are volunteers themselves concerned about the risk or willing to accept it?

In fact, these are great risk management questions for any nonprofit activity, even those that aren't going to involve volunteers. Of course, you cannot stop with just these questions: you must go through ways to address these risks. More often than not, there are ways to build in safety into volunteer engagement - or any proposed activity by a nonprofit - through work design, ongoing training, ongoing communications and supervision considerations.

Right now, sexual harassment in the workplace is a hot topic all over the news. That's a safety issue, and one that we all need to be talking about and addressing, including at initiatives that involve volunteers. But I'm not going to let fear of sexual harassment, or any other fears of what might happen, stop me from involving volunteers, from recommending the involvement of volunteers, or from exploring new ways for a nonprofit to meet its mission. Because the consequences of not thinking about ways to engage volunteers are just too frightful.

Related Topics: [Policy Development](#) | [Risk and Liability](#) | [Philosophy](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on December 1st, 2017

Betty Stallings, Calofornia, USA

Thank you for stepping in for Susan!! Since "retiring" from my professional work in volunteer engagement I have become an active volunteer with Asante Africa Foundation. The volunteers are all over North America and the world. The first gift I gave them was your book on Virtual Volunteering. They were thrilled to learn ways to become more effective as they engage increasing numbers of volunteers around the globe.

Submitted on December 4th, 2017

Alexandra Haglu..., Director, Mentoring4Future, Barcelona, Spain

Dear Jayne and Energize Inc staff,

What a great topic once again. I have known Jayne for many many years and also worked with her for four years at UNV in Germany, and it was always so refreshing and up to date topics, just like today's here. Volunteering management and Online volunteers scary? why? what makes them so fearful as Jayne mentions in the article, when the world is full of far much more danger and risk, such as the ongoing wars at local and international level, sexual harassment pointing in all directions and what about the slave trafficking going on worldwide and no government or national security talks about this!!!

I have myself been a volunteer with the UN and locally with the Red Cross and have always established Volunteer Programs in the organizations I have managed and always gotten back so much more than what asked for...Volunteers are people like you and me and so many have a huge heart and a wonderful brain they put to service to the needy community that exists all over.

Submitted on December 5th, 2017

Stuart David, Principal, YES Daddy (Worldwide Missions for Orphans) International School for Orphans, Jeju City, Jeju Island South Korea

Great piece about volunteering and FEAR. Totally agree with this brilliant article. Let us all never let FEAR win over the GOOD that volunteers have continued to do in our organisations. Inspiring article. Thanks Jayne.

Submitted on December 19th, 2017

Jayne Cravens, Portland, Oregon, USA

Thanks everyone for these comments! Betty, I'm honored that you think the Last Virtual Volunteering Guidebook is worthy as a gift for an African NGO - I enjoy your posts about them and will keep following your work. Alex - yeah, you were there for this... if we had a dollar for all the times we've rolled our eyes at comments like this... and Stuart - you said in just a few words everything I was trying to! I'm reading Susan's book *By the People* right now, and am struck over and over by the fearlessness of volunteers in our country's history to tackle most any issue. And I've seen that fearlessness in volunteers all over the world. Now, if people could be as fearless about involving volunteers!

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025