

# McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

Certified Public Accountants/Business Consultants

## Nonprofit Organizations

### Can you trust your unpaid staff? Prevent volunteer misdeeds

Most nonprofit organizations are dependent on volunteers to carry out their missions.

While grateful for the hours and efforts contributed, an organization would be foolish to blindly trust volunteers or give them free rein throughout the agency. Organizations that rely on volunteers may face some special challenges and risks.

Treat and evaluate potential volunteers as you would job applicants.

Here are some ways to help ensure that your volunteers are meeting your expectations and not stepping beyond their boundaries.

#### Assign a volunteer coordinator

First, identify a paid staff person in the organization – or an experienced and trusted volunteer – who can act as a volunteer coordinator.

The volunteer coordinator will be the “go to” person who is familiar with all aspects of the organization’s volunteer activities, including needs, potential volunteer activities, recruitment and retention of volunteers, training and communication. This person also maintains a roster of volunteers.

Because of the important role of volunteers in the agency, and the potentially high level of interaction between volunteers, staff and clients, it is recommended that the volunteer coordinator report to the organization’s executive director.

#### Know the volunteer

Treat and evaluate potential volunteers as you would job applicants.

Require a written application and interview process. Of course, you want to match their talents with your needs, but you also want to determine if their interests and desires seem reasonable and plausible.

What is their background and experience? Why do they want to be involved in your organization?

Make it known to the applicant that the organization researches the backgrounds of its employees and volunteers. Ask for references and check them. Contact your local police department to request a criminal background check on the individual – the cost, if any, is usually nominal.

Honest and honorable applicants will understand this process as necessary and reasonable. Embarrassment and worse will happen if you fail to know your applicants. Be selective and use your judgment. All applicants do not have to be accepted.

#### Make roles and duties clear

It is important to let volunteers know their boundaries – what services they are to provide and what their limitations are. They should be reportable and responsible to the volunteer coordinator.

Volunteers, like paid staff, should be trained, monitored and evaluated. Educate volunteers about the organization, its mission and policies, the needs of its clients, the services provided and the means by which they are provided on an ongoing basis.

A knowledgeable volunteer is better able to serve the organization and its clients and to represent the organization appropriately.

Require that volunteers wear picture identification badges that make their names and volunteer status clear to your staff, clients, visitors and the general public. Volunteer access should be restricted and defined. If special clothing is required, such as hospital garb or t-shirts, it should be kept in a secure place, and a system of accounting for it should be in place.

Take attendance at volunteer activities. Know what, where and when volunteers are involved so that if there is an incident, you can verify whether they were present.

Insist on and maintain sign-in and sign-out procedures and logs for volunteers – for both their safety and the organization's. Have specific hours of operation and schedules that volunteers have to operate within. For the organization's protection – and their own – volunteers should not be left alone. Arrange for them to be in the presence of other volunteers or staff at all times.

Know and evaluate volunteers based on their level of participation. If they are unable to consistently meet the requirements of some activities, suggest less frequent and less demanding activities. If the relationship is not meeting the needs of both parties, have the courage to raise the issue and discuss it. Perhaps another organization can better utilize the volunteer's talents.

Clearly communicate the organization's policies regarding ethics and expected behavior. Provide a means for staff, clients and other volunteers to report inappropriate or questionable actions or behaviors of anyone, including volunteers. This can be a telephone hot line, a secure drop box, an e-mail address or Web page or trusted individuals such as members of the board of directors.

A common risk organizations experience is one in which the volunteer becomes too involved with the organization's staff or clients. Reiterate that volunteers must maintain a professional relationship with staff and clients – they should not become personally attached or involved.

If volunteers have concerns regarding the administration, policies, clients, staff or other volunteers, they should discuss them with the volunteer coordinator or use the hot line or other methods mentioned above.

At least annually, meet with volunteers to give and receive feedback. Develop a checklist of topics to be covered during this meeting, including inquiries as to whether the volunteer is aware of any improper or inappropriate conduct by the administration, staff, other volunteers or clients.

Ask if there are any concerns they want to discuss. Inquire how the organization can improve. Develop a procedure to document and ensure that all volunteers are involved in this process on a consistent basis.

---

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations' life cycle. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please send an email to [info@mksh.com](mailto:info@mksh.com) or call 410.296.6200 and the marketing director can put you in touch with the right department.

Permission to use, copy and distribute this document and related graphics is hereby granted, provided that the above paragraph and the permission notice appear on all copies.

### **McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond**

11311 McCormick Road, Suite 100  
Hunt Valley, MD 21031  
410.296.6200

[www.mksh.com](http://www.mksh.com)

70 Thomas Johnson Drive, Suite 100  
Frederick, MD 21702  
301.662.2400