

A Guide to Volunteering: Practical Tips to Get You Started

WELCOME

First, thank you for volunteering your time, energy, and talents! Dozens of organizations in our area count on volunteers to provide services and assistance so that help is available when members of our community are in need. Simply put, without people like you, so many important things would be left undone in our community. Thanks!

As you begin to explore your options, you will find that each organization and program offering volunteer opportunities is different. How well your skills are utilized will depend, on some extent, on your supervisor's management experience and the organization's commitment to volunteerism.

The United Way of the Tanana Valley Volunteer Action Center (VAC) is here to help you locate just the right volunteer position, and promote volunteerism in the community.

HOW WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM BEING A VOLUNTEER?

Through volunteering you can:

- Gain valuable work experience
- Make use of your talents and abilities
- Achieve new skills
- Earn job references
- Explore career possibilities
- Improve communications skills
- Earn academic credit
- Develop a greater knowledge & understanding for people in your community
- Learn to appreciate your own blessings
- Meet new people & make new friends
- Feel great about helping those in need
- Become more confident in your abilities
- Give back to your community

WHAT TO EXPECT

As a volunteer, you can expect the following steps will occur when you approach an organization. If you are volunteering to work on a short-term project, the process will likely be less involved.

YOUR INTERVIEW

After you have selected the organization you would like to volunteer with, you should contact the organization's volunteer coordinator. Frequently, this coordinator has many other duties--and may have a variety of titles--but is responsible for matching volunteers with appropriate jobs within the organization. You may be asked to complete an application form before you meet for the interview. References may also be requested (required if working with children).

At the interview, you will have an opportunity to discuss your interests, skills and availability. During your meeting, the volunteer coordinator should give you a brief overview of the organization's structure and purpose, as well as discuss possible volunteer opportunities. You should ask about the basic requirements of each volunteer job you are considering--often the coordinator will be able to provide you with job descriptions to review.

Here are a few specific points to ask about:

- The time commitment required
- Specific tasks and duties
- How this job contributes to the organization
- How you will be oriented and trained
- Who will supervise you and provide help if you have questions/concerns
- How you will document your hours

Together, you and the coordinator will be able to determine if a volunteer job is right for you. If it is, you and the coordinator will arrange a starting date and work schedule. In some cases, the coordinator will call you a few days after the interview. If none of the available positions are just right for you, the coordinator may refer you back to United Way's VAC. We serve as a clearinghouse for volunteer opportunities and can often provide you with several other referrals.

Note: Some volunteer jobs require specialized training or a long-term commitment before you can start volunteering. This is especially true in areas such as crisis counseling, literacy tutoring, acting as a Big Brother/Big Sister, or serving on an advisory board.

BEFORE YOU START

You should meet with the person who will act as your immediate supervisor, be given a tour of the facility, and be introduced to staff members and fellow volunteers. You should also expect an orientation. An orientation can take many forms, but in general it will cover the following information:

- 1) Description of the organization and its mission, goals and structure
- 2) Overview of where to find things (i.e., supplies, copier, fax machine, telephone, bathroom, etc.)
- 3) Review of important rules
- 4) How your efforts will contribute to the organization
- 5) Additional specific training

ON THE JOB

Ask questions and solicit feedback! Some organizations perform annual evaluations to document volunteer performance & progress. An evaluation also gives you an opportunity to record experience and skills gained on the job. Feel free to ask your supervisor, "How am I doing?" throughout the year, as well. Above all else, you should enjoy the work you have chosen!

UPON LEAVING

If you should need to resign, be sure to give your supervisor as much advance notice as possible (two weeks is customary in the workplace). After all, the organization is counting on you! Be prepared to participate in an exit interview; it will serve to wrap up any loose ends concerning your responsibilities and give you the chance to share suggestions you may have for improvements.

CODE OF ETHICS

Each organization is different, and many have their own code of ethics staff members and volunteers abide by. United Way proposes that all volunteers keep this universal volunteer code in mind:

- *As a volunteer, I realize that I am subject to a code of ethics similar to that which binds professionals in the field in which I work. I, like them, assume certain responsibilities and am accountable for any work that I undertake.*
- *I interpret “volunteer” to mean that I have agreed to work without compensation in money. However, having accepted a working role in this organization, I expect to do my work according to standards, just as paid staff would expect to do theirs.*
- *I will be: open-minded in my attitude toward my work; willing to be trained for my job; committed to the task at hand; consistent in maintaining communication with all appropriate staff.*
- *I believe that I have an obligation to my work, to those who direct it, to my colleagues, to those we serve, and to the public.*

The United Way Volunteer Action Center is your volunteer resource! We maintain a database of organizations seeking volunteers and work to match volunteers to their open positions. We also maintain an extensive library addressing hundreds of volunteer-related issues. You can call/e-mail us, or visit us Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. – 5 p.m.

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