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Identifying Who Is and Is Not a “Volunteer”

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Last week I received an e-mail from colleague Kristi Ondo, a hospital director of volunteer services. She wrote:

I'd like to run a current frustration by you, hoping you can help me focus my arguments. I am part of a committee of volunteer resources managers who have been asked to develop “benchmarking” guides, especially in defining categories of volunteers such as “junior volunteers.” Some have been trying to include a “financially compensated” category. I am adamant that to be a volunteer you cannot be paid...therefore we should not include anyone receiving money – and perhaps the IRS would frown upon it should the organization be audited. Some of my colleagues are still trying to convince their executives of their expertise in the field and are looking for external validation of what they think volunteer services should include. What do you think?

I suspect that every reader has engaged in this sort of discussion/debate/argument more than once. I've sure lost count! But it surprised me to see that I have never devoted a Hot Topic to the theme of “who's a volunteer?” – although I've written about it in several books and articles. So, I am sharing and expanding my response to Kristi with all of you.



The fundamental flaw in this age-old debate is that we seek clear, definitive answers, when there are far too many nuances for that. I've listed just a few questions below to prove it:

- What does the term “financially compensated” mean? Is it an actual salary (going on payroll)?¹ A stipend (its own kettle of fish)? The living allowance paid to AmeriCorps members?
 - What about getting reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses or discounts for meals and store purchases?
 - Where do paid internships fit into the picture?²
 - Is the amount paid a fixed, pre-determined sum or does it vary with the level of activity and the skills of the person doing it?

- Do you consider a businessperson as “financially compensated” if s/he is volunteering for you during the business day and still receives normal pay from the employing company (“work release time”)?
 - What about people in external job training programs who get paid by those programs for their time with you?
 - Or do you only mean “financially compensated by the institution receiving the services”?
 - What about the volunteers who serve on the board of directors, often on their employers’ dime? (And does anyone connect the expertise of the volunteer resources manager to the challenges of keeping volunteer board members engaged?)
- What about *mandated* service? Rarely is money paid to someone “doing time” by order of the court. So is the person a “volunteer”? Is there a distinction between a court-ordered volunteer and a young person required to do a certain number of hours of service in order to graduate?
- Are you also debating whether academic credit is “compensation” to a student volunteer? Does it matter if the service earns full course credit, partial course credit, or just contributes to a research paper?
 - Does earning any type of college credit make that student different from a young person who volunteers independent of the classroom or a teenager fulfilling required high school service hours?
 - What if the student volunteer hopes to put the experience on a resume in order to get a job later?
 - Are *all* students – earning any type of credit or not – coordinated by the volunteer office? Why not?
- In terms of the responsibilities of volunteer management, don’t the people in all of these categories share the same needs to be interviewed and screened, put into short-term work that uses their skills well, oriented to the organization, supervised/coordinated, and be recognized for their help? Isn’t that what we do?³
- Here’s another by-the-way: Why the need to segregate “junior volunteers”? There are some brilliant and talented 16-year-olds who can do all sorts of advanced work – why shouldn’t they be allowed into roles adults fill (are they the “real” volunteers)? And why couldn’t an older person with a developmental disability be able to fill a role you thought was meant for a teenager? (Do not confuse the need for *policies* in working with volunteers under the age of 18 with the issue of the definition of a volunteer.)
- Finally, who decides whether the word volunteer should be applied? Is it the person donating time (the “volunteer”) or the recipient of the service (the organization, or even the client)? Is it based on money, degree of choice, or something else? Whose *perspective* counts more?

All of the questions above are rhetorical and my posing them should not be misinterpreted as a position! But I do think the complexities show the limits of the word “volunteer,” as I explain in the 2010 Hot Topic, [The Word "Volunteer" Can Reveal, Conceal, or Confuse](#).

In addition, people can move from one situation to another. What happens if some of the people required to give you time, such as court-ordered workers or students earning academic credit, like the work so much that they give you more time at each shift than required? Or then continue serving way after the minimum hours are fulfilled? Do they somehow transmute into “pure” volunteers the moment the last second expires? Maybe it is more important why people *continue their commitment*, than what brought them to us in the first place.

Explaining Volunteer Complexity: It's Not Easy

We tend to think of an organization's workers as paid or unpaid, employees or volunteers. But we pay full-time employees, part-time employees, seasonal workers, temp workers, and consultants in different ways. Perhaps this is important at budget time or in reporting to the IRS, but in daily practice, the human resources or personnel department *fills positions to get work done*.

So does the volunteer resources office. Only our work force is much more complex and the mistake is to treat “volunteers” as a single cohort or as interchangeable parts. For management purposes and evaluation of impact we should be reporting on *the work performed* by the people we recruit, not on how they came to us or whether some third party is involved.

Certainly there are times when we should indeed report on the diversity of the corps of volunteers because such data illuminate the range and quality of time donors we have brought into the organization. We can also present information on how different it is to work with students than with pro bono consultants and how both are different from partnering with faith communities. Planning for and coordinating those differences is part of the job of volunteer management – and we always need to educate up about that.

It's also necessary to determine policies and provide tools as needed: volunteers under age 18 will need to get parental permission; court-ordered workers will require authorized confirmation of hours onsite; someone in a wheelchair will need physical accommodation; and so on. But what's important is that they all be helped to accomplish their assigned activities.

I am also aware that the problem can lie with more traditional volunteers – who do not receive money or credit and who often give many hours over many years – who question why so many different sorts of participants are seen as equivalent to them. They can even be insulted at being paired with someone ordered to work by the court or resent seeing younger student interns given higher status. But the answer is to educate current volunteers, not refuse the services of those outside historical boundaries. I was once seriously asked by a colleague: “Is it all right to say thank you to the work-release inmates from our local prison who helped to build the carnival booths?” When is it **not** OK to express appreciation?!

Recognizing the Real Issue

Kristi's debate is not about benchmarks and definitions. Her committee is actually struggling with a fundamental question of vital concern to any leader of volunteers: What is the **purpose** of the volunteer resources function in our organizations and does everyone understand it? Is the purpose limited to *bringing in volunteers* (under some strict definition) or is it *to meet the needs of clients, the community, and the institution by mobilizing human talent that does not have to go on payroll*? In other words, volunteer involvement is all about *solutions*. Why can't a volunteer department be considered the "community mobilization unit" and have authority over a range of different types of service activities?

Here's a way to determine whether or not an offer to contribute time and skills should be accepted by the volunteer involvement office. How would you answer these two questions:

- Should your organization turn away this source of help?
- If your office does not welcome and support the work contributed, who else in the organization can or will?

We can call the people we recruit and coordinate volunteers or Martians or anything else. Restrictive definitions and limiting silos are self-defeating. Fighting to delineate "volunteers" from other sorts of help only reduces the role we play and misses enormous opportunities for tapping community resources.

So...what do you think?

1 The issue of an audit by the IRS is a red herring, in my opinion. If an organization gives monetary compensation of any kind to anyone, that would be done openly and reported in financial reports. It does not matter which department administers those people. It does not matter if they call them "volunteers." What matters is that amounts are properly recorded and reported – including issuing 1099s to anyone receiving more than \$600 a year without deduction of payroll taxes. But someone in accounting or legal has to understand that the organization should be able to explain why such individuals were not made employees – and the compensated volunteers need to know that, if they receive more than \$600, they must report the money as income on their personal income tax return.

2 See this excellent article published in *Blue Avocado* for further discussion on volunteer "interns": <http://www.blueavocado.org/content/legalities-nonprofit-internships>. Also, last year Rob Jackson and I wrote a *Points of View* essay for *e-Volunteerism*, "[The Sparking Controversy about Volunteer Internships](#)," discussing the rise in successful lawsuits around the world by unpaid interns demanding financial compensation.

3 For more details on the wide range of people and types of service that fall under the umbrella of volunteering today, see chapter 7 ("Tapping into the Full Spectrum of Community Resources") of my book, *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Successful Volunteer Involvement*.

Related Topics: [Internships](#) | [Definitions of "Volunteer"](#) | [Philosophy](#) | [Trends and Issues](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Submitted on 12 August 2014 by Kristi Ondo, Director, Volunteer Services, Holy Spirit Health System, Camp Hill/PA, USA

My feeling matches Candace's. Therefore, we only call them "volunteer." There need not be a separate category for them as "financially compensated" or otherwise. They are simply a volunteer with our organization and what happens outside of our health system is between them and RSVP or other organization. Just as if a family pays an allowance to a teen for volunteering, I would still just call them "junior volunteer." I am not calling for disqualifying them, just asking that we not give credence to it by making it a category. What each DVS decides to do with their policies is up to them.

Submitted on 07 August 2014 by Joan Myers-Reif, Associate Director of Alumni Volunteer Programs, George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA

Thank you for this Hot Topic Susan!

This is a question that comes up often at my institution so I look forward to sharing your wisdom and clarity with the many schools and units within my organization.

Submitted on 06 August 2014 by Christine, Volunteer Program Manager, state government natural resources, , USA

This is such a great question! I look forward to returning throughout the month and reading others responses.

I work for a large, statewide, natural resources agency in state government.

We really struggled with this question. Recently, we updated all of our program policies and procedures and finally came up with a definition of "volunteer" that works for us. (Please pardon the repeated use of the word "department". I had to edit a bit as I am not representing my employer in this comment.)

Volunteer: A volunteer is a person who, of his or her own free choice, performs any assigned or authorized duties for the department.

A volunteer receives no wages and is registered and accepted as a volunteer by the department for the purpose of engaging in volunteer service.

A volunteer may be granted reimbursement for actual expenses necessarily incurred in performing his or her assigned or authorized duties.

Members of advisory boards or groups established by the department are considered volunteers if they are not paid wages for their participation.

Authorized duties are those that have been approved by department staff.

Individuals, groups and organizations who receive technical or professional assistance from the department but perform work independent of the department are not considered volunteers in those instances that they are performing tasks that have not been authorized or assigned by department staff.

Paid staff hired by volunteer groups or organizations are not considered volunteers.

Submitted on 06 August 2014 by Mike Feszczak, Volunteer Manager, Local Government, South Australia, Australia

Thank you Susan for raising this and Candace for providing a practical answer. Like Manitoba, certain groups of unemployed people (eg those over 55yrs), can claim a government benefit if they do a minimum of 15 hours volunteering each week.

Some people don't like this group being included as volunteers, but they choose to volunteer for this allowance and choose our organisation to volunteer with. In addition many volunteer more hours than required or remain as volunteers after the requirement has ceased.

Submitted on 05 August 2014 by Candace Gower, Coordinator, Volunteer Services, CNIB-Manitoba Division, Manitoba, Canada

We have had the debate of, Who is a Volunteer, many times where I work. It was determined that a person who receives cash compensation from our organization would not be considered a volunteer. It does not matter whether the cash compensation is an honorarium or a regular paid amount. We specified cash, as we do purchase gift cards for volunteers to show our appreciation to long time volunteers or those that donate an extraordinary amount of time.

If the volunteer is receiving some type of compensation, either monetary or otherwise, from a third party (school, court mandated, internship, workplace), that is between them and the organization providing it. As far as our organization is concerned they are volunteers to us. This distinction is especially important since Manitoba provides a monetary volunteer benefit to those individuals on Employment and Income Assistance.

Had we decided upon a stricter policy disqualifying any individual that received any type of financial compensation, as being considered and recorded as a volunteer, then recruitment would be more difficult and the number of volunteer hours we track would be considerably lower. And most importantly, we would be overlooking many talented people that are able to contribute to our organization.

Comments from Readers

Submitted on May 9th, 2015

Judith Waite Allee, Board member, Volunteers Administrators Network of Central Ohio, Columbus OH, USA

One exciting outcome for me was to involve parent education participants as volunteer educators, facilitators, and parent buddies. Same with Bridges Out of Poverty participants. It's a notch up the ladder on the value of participation, the level of learning, including sometimes vocational skills. Just a side note about providing 1099's to anyone who receives more than \$600 in the USA: Although the organization doesn't have to provide a 1099 if the amount is less than \$600, I wouldn't imply that the person doesn't have to report the income. That may not be true. It is unlikely the IRS would pick it up unless there were other red flags, but it could happen. If someone is receiving food stamps, Medicaid, or other benefits, any money received and unreported could be considered fraud. For our Bridges Out of Poverty program, our local agency determined we could provide gift cards, not cash, without affecting benefits. That was, I believe, a specific determination, not an overall policy. Also, though this could be a stretch, someone on probation can be sent back to jail for violations that would otherwise be no big deal. I'm no expert, just want to point out some unintended consequences that might need to be thought through, depending on your population.

Submitted on May 9th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Thank you, Judith, for this excellent advice. Better safe than sorry for reporting purposes and I'm sure volunteers receiving less than \$600 appreciate understanding their possible tax requirements.

- Susan

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