

## ABSTRACT

*This article explores the unpleasant task of terminating the services of a volunteer. Included are six alternative strategies drawn from Steve McCurley's article, How to Fire a Volunteer—and Live to Tell About It (1993), offering a variety of options to try before initiating a termination proceeding. Also discussed are organizational policies that should be in place. The volunteer program administrator is charged to plan ahead, take precautionary measures such as performance appraisals and feedback sessions, and document performance problems. A specific method for conducting a termination proceeding, based on a well-tested method used by practitioners in human resource development, is the focus of this article.*

# When All Else Fails: Releasing a Volunteer

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Correcting troublesome volunteer performance problems is an integral component of volunteer program administration. Whether the performance issue emerges under the volunteer administrator's direct supervision or from a decentralized supervisory location, the volunteer program administrator is—or certainly should be—consulted and/or involved. The volunteer program administrator becomes a key player whenever the relationship between a volunteer and the organization shows signs of stress or discord. Arbitrating the needs of both the organization and the volunteer is a skill requiring tact, diplomacy and firmness.

Developing policies and procedures to manage volunteer performance is a process that involves top level input and approval. The process may *begin* at the volunteer program administrator's desk, but the organization's board of directors and top operational staff are participants in the exercise. Policies that respect individual differences and rights are needed. The organization's responsibility for providing adequate training and supervision, not only for the volunteers but also for staff who supervise volunteers, must also be acknowledged.

With careful planning and consideration of a few basic principles, the unpleasant task of releasing a volunteer can be a rare last resort.

## ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES

The following measures should be in place as standard organizational policy long before problems present themselves.

### *Develop a Policy on the Termination of Volunteers*

Determine what volunteer actions or behaviors are inexcusable and would result in termination. This is done in consultation with other key players in the organization. When identified, put them in writing as part of a policy manual. Most organizations would include arriving on the job "under the influence," abusive behavior toward other volunteers, clients or staff, and theft of any kind. Each organization will develop a list pertinent to its own situation.

### *Disseminate the Policy*

Include in every orientation and training session a brief review of inexcusable actions or behaviors and the resulting action the organization will take should a violation occur. For volunteers already in place,

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trained and involved, hold an update session or circulate the policy through internal communication channels or a special mailing. Everyone must be informed about offenses that can lead to termination.

### *Screen Carefully* (Not "Any Warm Body")

Choose carefully! The first opportunity to prevent problems from occurring later is during the interview and screening process. Select individuals who are likely to be assets to the services the organization provides. Develop criteria for selection and placement that can help identify the qualities sought. Find ways to redirect individuals who are not appropriate for the organization.

### *Consider All Alternatives to Termination*

The preceding measures apply primarily to new placements. Sometimes when volunteer performance problems erupt in which dismissal is contemplated, the volunteer has been "inherited." The volunteer program administrator is called on to "fix" a bad situation. In his article *How to Fire a Volunteer—And Live to Tell About It* (1993), Steve McCurley recommends a range of options to try before an impending termination:

- **Resupervise:** Sometimes a new supervisor is the answer to a poor working arrangement.

- **Reassign:** Finding another assignment with a different job description may be the needed "fix." A "promotion" to new levels of responsibility may help, or perhaps the opposite—a job with fewer demands—is the answer.

- **Retrain:** If skills are inadequate or outdated, additional training may be the best route to correcting poor performance.

- **Revitalize:** A leave of absence, recognition for work completed, a new working environment with a change of companions or other "perks" may be the prescription that works.

- **Refer:** When the volunteer and the organization are not compatible, a referral to a volunteer position in another organization

may be the solution. However, referring a volunteer with questionable behavior or integrity to a colleague's organization helps neither program.

- **Retire:** With honors! Groups of retired volunteers can work nicely to provide the social stimulation and identification needed by long-term volunteers. Such a group may find a new lease on life and become a genuine asset.

### *Talk Straight*

Say what you mean to a volunteer in performance appraisals or when giving feedback. Don't misrepresent the volunteer's true status. Avoid insincere evaluations and, above all, use praise appropriately. Positive reinforcement is a powerful tool, so apply it carefully, thoughtfully, and for behaviors that are desired.

### *Document and Proceed Cautiously*

Keep a file for every volunteer. Document all conferences, performance reviews, notes, letters, phone calls, disciplinary feedback. This back-up file will be an invaluable tool if/when a termination is necessary.

Proceed carefully in pre-termination decisions, being sure to collect all facts before taking action. It is best to terminate only for "just cause" based on measurable standards of misconduct or poor performance. Examine all motives to be sure dismissal is not retaliatory or discriminatory. Be sure to follow all organization guidelines and grievance procedures. (Does the organization have them?)

### WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS

When all else fails and a volunteer must be terminated, the volunteer program administrator is the resource for correct procedures as well as sensitive treatment of the vulnerable volunteer. If the volunteer in question has been appropriately supervised, given feedback and suggestions for performance improvement and nothing has worked, then it is time to face reality. The task of releasing a volunteer requires skill, genuine respect for the other person,

and a very clear determination, based on documentation, that the decision is correct. The final decision to remove a person from the organization should occur only after a serious violation of established rules or failure to correct behavior after prior warnings. The termination proceeding is never impromptu, but always requires careful consideration of the rights and best interests of all parties.

This article assumes that the volunteer program administrator has full authority for all matters relating to volunteers; therefore, he or she determines the manner in which a termination proceeding is handled. Should the volunteer program administrator lack authority to remove a troublesome volunteer, the suggestions given in this article may need adjusting.

In every case, a volunteer deserves due process and should never be terminated on impulse. The decision to release a volunteer is highly confidential and the volunteer's privacy and dignity must be protected. Limit discussion to the parties directly involved in making the termination decision. However, be sure to inform the executive director (or unit director) who must concur with the action. Should there be an appeal, these individuals will be familiar with the documentation and rationale for dismissal and will not be caught by surprise.

Never, ever will the action be discussed with others, either before or after it occurs even when pressured by curious colleagues. While it is the released volunteer's prerogative to share information about the action, those involved in the termination must resist responding to probing or curious questions. Once the action has been taken, the subject is closed.

#### CONDUCTING THE TERMINATION: PROCEEDING IN FIVE STEPS

Wessels and Pautsch (1991) have said,

*There are two major pitfalls for supervisors who are uncomfortable with an unpleasant confrontation: being too abrupt or too sympathetic. Either behavior can*

*create further problems. A volunteer who is 'fired' on the spot in front of others can later sue for invasion of privacy, emotional distress or, in some cases, lack of due process.*

Bearing these concerns in mind, the following steps for conducting a termination proceeding were developed by Roy C. Lundin, human resources development consultant, and presented to AVA-Metro Chicago in April 1994.

##### *Step 1*

The separation session should include three to four people: The individual being dismissed; the volunteer program administrator and/or the volunteer's supervisor; and an "ombudsperson."

The task of communicating the separation decision belongs to either the volunteer program administrator or the volunteer's supervisor. (Most likely, the supervisor initiated the termination process.) This is done quickly rather than gradually, or by "beating around the bush." The termination message is conveyed as briefly as possible, ideally by the third sentence. Then the volunteer program administrator or volunteer's supervisor stops talking!

##### *Step 2*

The dismissed individual is given an opportunity to ask any questions. Answers are direct, factual and brief.

The ombudsperson has two functions (this role can be assumed by the volunteer program administrator if the dismissal message is given by the volunteer's supervisor): To ensure that the volunteer program administrator or supervisor has been heard and to support the dismissed individual.

##### *Step 3*

After the dismissal message has been delivered and any questions from the volunteer have been answered the ombudsperson addresses the "messenger," paraphrasing the dismissal statement: "What I heard you say is that (name) has

been separated from (organization) for (reason)?" After this restatement is acknowledged, the ombudsperson directs the following questions to the volunteer program administrator or the volunteer's supervisor:

- a. "Is there anything (name) can say or do that would change your mind?"
- b. "Then this is a final decision?"
- c. "Does (the executive or unit director) concur with the decision?"
- d. "When will this be effective?"
- e. "What will be said to others in the organization?"

If the separation session is managed carefully, directly, and professionally, the dismissed individual will have been forewarned, will be clear about the decision, and will be able to accept the action with minimal rancor toward the agency.

#### *Step 4*

The volunteer program administrator and/or volunteer's supervisor leave permitting the ombudsperson to counsel the dismissed volunteer about other options, perhaps even in the same organization. The ombudsperson must guard against a desire to rectify the situation by retracting the decision, and should focus on helping the volunteer cope with the reality of the dismissal.

#### *Step 5*

The dismissed volunteer must be assured that his or her confidentiality is fully

honored and that no one but the individuals involved (volunteer, volunteer program administrator, the volunteer's supervisor, ombudsperson, and the appropriate unit head or CEO) will know the circumstances of the dismissal. Under no circumstances should anyone but the dismissed volunteer discuss the termination session with anyone else.

#### CONCLUSION

There is no easy method for handling a termination session nor any way to ensure that the process will be pleasant. Avoiding confrontation by using an alternative strategy is certainly a better option. However, when all else fails, the method described here provides a step-by-step process for making the task as fair and straightforward as possible.

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#### REFERENCES

- McCurley, S. (1993). How to fire a volunteer—and live to tell about it. *Grapevine*, Jan/Feb 1993, 8–11.
- Wessels, R.H., and Pautsch, W. (1991). Section 7: Wrongful discharge (employment at will). Exhibit 2: Preventing wrongful discharge. *Labor and employment law desk reference*. October 1991.