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safety in online volunteering programs

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Most people have a fun, safe trip on the information superhighway. However, while the vast majority of online experiences are positive, there is a dark side to cyberspace: individuals who attempt to exploit children, women and others through the Internet; programmers who create computer viruses that can be transmitted via e-mail and can disable a software program or an entire computer system; and materials on the Internet that are adult-oriented and not appropriate for children.

Fear of exploitation and abuse, or fear of exposure to sexually-explicit material, shouldn't be factors that prevent an agency from engaging in virtual volunteering, nor should these be reasons for parents to prevent children from engaging in online community service opportunities. There are several simple measures an agency can employ to ensure the safety of all participants in a virtual volunteering program. Online safety suggestions offered here by the Virtual Volunteering Project are based on practices by other agencies involving children and volunteers via the Internet, guidelines by various organizations concerned with children and Internet safety, and our own practices.

Just as with face-to-face volunteering programs, a virtual volunteering program needs to have safeguards in place to protect everyone involved, and ensure participants safety and privacy. A virtual volunteering program can bring volunteers together with staff only, or with other volunteers and clients of an agency. **It's up to the sponsoring agency to decide who will interact with online volunteers.**

The Virtual Volunteering Project advocates that agencies pattern online volunteering interactions after their existing offline, face-to-face volunteering activities and experiences. If your agency staff does not have experience with managing programs involving mentoring, tutoring, coaching or other face-to-face volunteering activities, your agency is probably NOT ready to engage in such activities via the Internet.

We encourage organizations not to approach their online safety guidelines from a fear-based reaction; a culture of fear can lead to so much distrust that it defeats the purpose and benefits of an online volunteering program. **There is risk in any volunteering program, online or face-to-face** . Exercising common sense, adapting your existing offline prevention systems to cyberspace, following the law and establishing good tracking of volunteer activities and supervision of interactions are the best online safety measures.

DISCLAIMER: These materials are NOT a substitute for legal advice . Laws concerning youth, at-risk populations and privacy vary significantly from state to state and apply differently to different organizations and activities.

- General safety guidelines for all online volunteering programs

  Creating basic policies and procedures, access to volunteer information, and exploring issues around confidentiality, privacy and security.

- Involving youth as online volunteers

  Suggestions, options and examples for those managing such programs, including how to communicate with parents. If youth are going to do anything online as part of their participation with your organization, this resource is for you.

- Bringing together youth and adult online volunteers

  Suggestions for staff, parents and youth.

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