

Leading an Effective Volunteer Program



Volunteers can be a tremendous asset. They can also be a burden for the very organizations they are trying to serve. You can be the difference between service that is and service that seems. Here are some ways to make sure the project you're leading turns values into value:

Is the project rooted in partnership?

Service should be done with – not for – the community. Start with an important premise, one that is often overlooked: the people affected by these issues are the experts. A good service project is the byproduct of a respectful, mutually beneficial partnership, through which volunteers can learn from people who have first-hand experience with the issue. In our program, we're working with trusted organizations that have deep roots and strong relationships in the communities we're working in. They are our link to the community and we must remember to always take our cues from our partners and how they want to tackle the issue.

Is the service work needed?

Volunteering isn't about us feeling good. It's about having a real impact on the community. Remember: the community defines what is helpful and what is not and our success is defined by the community's satisfaction, first and foremost. Many effective service organizations and volunteers alike can lose sight of this from time-to-time and can find themselves creating and seeking out "sexy" volunteering projects. Make sure that your partner isn't just creating work for you to do! At the same time, what's needed isn't always the most glamorous.

Planning!

Coordinating volunteers can be like herding cats, so it's critical to get your ducks in a row. Make sure that you and your team are organized and on the same page about all the nitty-gritty details. Then you can focus on the goals you have for the volunteers and the community. Support your partners and make sure they are supporting you. Keeping open lines of communication and walking through the project will make sure everyone knows what to expect. Always make sure that there is sufficient service work for all the volunteers to do. Volunteers can demonstrate their respect and commitment by being on time and ready to roll – and patient if things get off to a bumpy start.

Skills = Success

Dr. King said, "Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve." But not everyone can diagnose high blood pressure or read a balance sheet or play the piano. Volunteers are most effective – and often most passionate – when they channel their skills to address community needs. Reach out in both directions to identify the skills your volunteers have and your partners need. Of course, service experiences can be a great opportunity for volunteers to develop skills.

This document was inspired by many documents that outline the best practices of volunteering. Special thanks to Talya Gillman and Ben Falik for their contributions. Be in touch with any questions (training@weRepair.org).

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Do Volunteers know why they're serving?

In order to do their jobs well, volunteers need to be oriented to the mission of the organization they're working with and understand the context in which they are serving.

There are three important steps to contextual learning: Investigating the social issue, exploring Jewish values and reflection.

Social Issue

Volunteers are more effective in their work when they have an understanding about the social, economic and historical context in which the service occurs. For example, if you are serving food at a soup kitchen, learn about the causes of hunger in your community. Are people not earning enough money to afford food? Is there a lack of access to quality food in the neighborhood? By understanding the context of the issue, participants will better understand the complexity of the situation and can take action on the systemic causes as well as the immediate problems.

Jewish Values

Explore and reflect on Jewish ideas and values that relate to service and the specific issues volunteers are encountering. Volunteering and service are inherently Jewish actions and Judaism has a lot to offer as we grapple with and think about our role as volunteers. Through these activities, your participants can come to realize that they are living Jewishly by engaging in service.

Reflection

At its best, service should spark some uncomfortable questions and challenges about injustice, inequality, and our own role in perpetuating them or bringing about change. Create opportunities for your participants to reflect upon their service, so that they can “think out loud” before, during and/or immediately after the volunteer activity. This allows participants to contemplate their service experience in the greater context of their values and life decisions, enabling them to think about their larger roles in the world. Participants should analyze different points of view and be guided in growing as thoughtful individuals and active citizens.

Evaluation

On an ongoing basis, make sure to assess the quality of service and the progress toward meeting the original goals. You should gather information and data from multiple sources (volunteers, community members, partners). More important than collecting data is using it to improve the service-learning experience, both for participants and for those served, in the future.

Keep On Keepin' On

Empower your participants and their communities to raise awareness about the issues. Through education and lobbying activities, advocate for specific change that you would like people to contribute to. And of course – don't stop serving! There's so much to be done.