

Strategies for Leveraging Volunteers and Interns in Newcomer Housing Services

In housing programs for refugees and other newcomers, thoughtful engagement of volunteers and interns can expand capacity and enhance program delivery. The four strategies below can help you successfully partner with a “hidden workforce” of volunteers and interns to support newcomers in finding safe, stable housing.

1. Design volunteer and intern roles with motivation in mind.

What motivates a person to freely give their time and effort? While the answer will vary by individual, context, and the nature of the opportunity, [four key factors](#) typically influence volunteer/intern motivation:

- **Self-enhancement** – feeling needed, gaining new perspectives, building self-esteem
- **Expression of values** – helping others, acting on personal beliefs
- **Career orientation** – resume building, gaining practical experience, networking
- **Interpersonal contact** – meeting people, building relationships, creating social ties

With these motivations in mind, you can effectively leverage volunteer and intern support by:

- Making the experience meaningful and mutually beneficial
- Being strategic in your recruitment and screening to ensure committed supporters
- Offering a variety of opportunities to fit different needs (e.g., remote, hybrid, in-person; individual, group; event; community partnerships; corporate engagement)

For more, view [What factors impact volunteer recruitment and retention in nonprofit organizations?](#)

2. Be specific about roles and responsibilities.

Determine which housing activities and roles are appropriate for volunteers and interns, then clearly communicate expectations for their scope of work, responsibilities, and time commitment.

Volunteers are best suited for **structured, trainable tasks** that require a consistent but limited commitment of **1-6 hours/week**. Consider engaging your volunteers in the following:

Day-to-day support tasks for building housing capacity:

- Administrative support
- Research (e.g., identifying current vacancies, exploring new landlord opportunities)
- Outreach (e.g., initiating contact with landlords and other potential housing partners)
- Move-in support (e.g., assisting with home set-ups, furniture delivery)
- Supply kit preparation (e.g., ensuring supply kits are assembled and delivered properly)

“Community ambassador” tasks for focused outreach to their networks:

- Partnership development (e.g., real estate and property management associations)
- Acting as “super” volunteers to recruit, mentor, and support other housing volunteers
- Improving access (e.g., helping newcomers navigate and overcome housing barriers)

Interns (or skilled volunteers) benefit from **clearly defined projects** where they can take ownership, apply their education, and gain professional experience, typically contributing **10-15 hours/week** over a defined period of time. With strong supervision, they can support **more intensive initiatives**, such as research projects or partnership development with external groups like universities, faith-based or ethnic community-based organizations, and coalitions.

Considerations for Organizational Policies

To support client safety, reduce risk, and comply with program requirements, incorporate the following considerations into your organization's volunteer/intern policies:

- Will the volunteer/intern need access to clients' personally identifiable information (PII)?
- Will they be working directly with clients? Minor clients?
- Will they have access to the organization's resources (e.g., for supply kit support)?
- Is the volunteer/intern a minor?
- Is there a risk of physical injury to the volunteer/intern (e.g., carrying heavy boxes)?
- Will they have to transport any materials in their personal vehicles?

Your organization's policies should address all of these considerations. For example, volunteers and interns with access to clients, client PII, or organizational systems must undergo screening (application, interview, background check, organizational agreements) to protect clients, the organization, and its resources.

3. Invest in the relationship with strong onboarding and consistent communication.

Clear communication based on shared goals, knowledge, and respect is crucial to building strong relationships with volunteers and interns. **Establishing expectations** through onboarding and proper training sets the foundation for success. Staff must provide time, energy, accessibility, and support volunteers and interns need, including **weekly check-ins**. Take time to learn their goals, build upon their strengths, and develop their areas of growth. Offer opportunities for them to **connect** with staff and each other through office hours or group meetings. **Gather feedback** through surveys and exit interviews to improve future volunteer/intern experiences.

4. Increase retention by regularly celebrating contributions.

Show appreciation for volunteers and interns by recognizing their everyday contributions. **Highlight unpaid supporters** regularly in your newsletter, on your website, or on social media to celebrate their impact and inspire others to get involved. Additional opportunities for celebration and recruitment include **National Volunteer Week** in April and an end-of-year **appreciation event**.

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