Volunteer toronto

Removing Barriers to Volunteering

Resource Guide & Workbook

Compiled by Engaging Organizations Department

Using this Resource Guide & Workbook

The Removing Barriers to Volunteering resource guide & workbook has been compiled by Volunteer Toronto to help community groups, non-profits and charitable organizations identify and reduce barriers to potential volunteers. It is important to remember that these are guidelines informed by best practices; you can adapt them to your situation as needed.

Removing Barriers to Volunteering

While nearly half of all Canadians volunteer, many face **barriers** to accessing meaningful volunteer roles. These barriers range from personal challenges affecting how people interact to systemic obstacles that many people face every day. These barriers can relate to identities, abilities and societal changes.

This workbook features resources to increase your awareness of these barriers and help you overcome them, improving access to volunteering for more people across the city.

The contents of this workbook are as follows:

Defining Barriers

Oxford Dictionaries defines a barrier as "a circumstance or obstacle that keeps people or things apart or prevents communication or progress." When applying this to volunteering, a barrier is what keeps someone from being able to volunteer, or volunteer effectively. Anyone can encounter a barrier when accessing a volunteer role, whether they are unable to use an online application or their language skills prevent them from offering services in a particular role.

Common barriers to volunteering include:

- **Language:** a role may require a specific level of a certain language skill

- **Physical**: a role may require sitting, standing, moving quickly or other physical requirements

- **Skill level**: a role may require (or be perceived to require) a certain level of proficiency with a skill

- **Time:** a role may require much more time than might be needed, or not enough time for a volunteer's interest

- **Location**: a role may take place in a location that is not easily accessible, or limited to those with access to personal transportation

- **Financial**: a role may require a certain level of wealth for a volunteer to be able to give their time

- **Expectation**: a role may have expectations that are unrealistic to some or many volunteers

When barriers exist, they are often encountered in the recruitment and screening process. Volunteers will **self-screen** when they see a barrier in a role and deem themselves unable or perhaps unqualified to apply for the role. This means you might be missing out on great volunteers! The goal of recognizing and overcoming your barriers will allow you to increase access.

Access is the "right or opportunity to use or benefit from something" (Oxford Dictionaries). Volunteering allows people to offer their time but also benefit from the experience – increasing access to volunteering gives more people the opportunity to give their time and expertise. Access is often used to refer to people with disabilities, but providing access should be a universal goal across your volunteer program.

Quick tips for increasing access:

- **Recruit widely**: post your position descriptions and role needs in multiple locations, including physical postings in your community

- **List only required qualifications**: if a role only needs basic English skills, write the posting in basic English and make this requirement clear

- **Provide accommodation:** when someone is interested in a role but needs some help with the screening process, or even slight alterations to the role to be successful, you have a duty to accommodate to the best of your ability

- **Target potential for access:** if a community or group is commonly disadvantaged or unrepresented because of a barrier, try to prioritize how you can increase access for them

Identifying barriers

In order to remove barriers to volunteering in your volunteer program, you need to identify what barriers exist. Use the chart below to determine the barriers currently in place:

Barrier Type	Your Barriers
What language(s) is/are required for volunteer roles?	
What physical requirements are expected of a volunteer role?	
Can volunteers be accommodated if they are unable to meet any physical requirements?	
What skills should volunteers have coming into the role?	
Can skills be learned?	
When does the role take place? (Time in the day, day of the week/month, frequency)	
Is there flexibility in role timing to adapt to volunteer schedules?	
Where does the role take place? (Proximity to transit, physical accessibility)	
Are there multiple options for accessing the space where the role takes place?	
Do volunteers need to pay anything to volunteer? (Membership, donation)	
Are expectations realistic for volunteer roles?	
Do volunteer roles have clear duties & responsibilities?	

Inclusive Communications

Using the two examples below, identify the barriers to help you think about ways to communicate more inclusively in position descriptions and volunteer newsletters.

Position Description Example

Title: Office Move Volunteer
City: Toronto
Location: 5 minutes' walk from Spadina Subway station
Length of position: Short-term

Description

Our organization is seeking multiple volunteers to work together assisting with our upcoming office move. We're looking for men who can pack, lift and unpack our moving boxes, tech supplies, files and more. The move will take place over a 3 week period and will include walking boxes from our old to our new office (approximately 800 metres away).

> **Men aren't the only people who can do this role, and it's possible that those who are unable to walk may still be able to assist.**

Responsibilities

- Pack and organize materials arranged by organization staff
- Ensure boxes and other moving items are secured
- Lift and carry items to the new office
- Unpack boxes for staff to organize
- Short-term commitment over 3-week move period

> **Some of these responsibilities make sense based on the needs of the role, but this might be a lot to ask of volunteers.**

Requirements

- For men only due to heavy lifting of the role
- Moving experience preferred
- Excellent teamwork skills
- Be professional and on-time

> **How does professionalism impact the role? This might be a barrier to people who are unable to identify a "professionalism" skill; the specific time of the role (is it only during the weekday?) is missing.**

Additional Information

Required language: English or French

Task requirements: carrying & lifting, walking, standing, communication

> **For language, what level of fluency is required? How much English or French would a candidate need to know or use? Could instructions be written for people less fluent in a spoken language?**

Benefits

Reference letter at the end of the move

> **Volunteers might need to get travel reimbursed to remove a cost and travel barrier.**

How to Apply

Please send your resume, a brief explanation of why you're the right fit for this role, and a Police Reference Check to movevolunteer@ourorganization.ca

> **A police check seems unnecessary and produces a barrier to individuals with criminal records that are unrelated to the role needs.**

Volunteer Newsletter Example

December is here, volunteers! Check out what's in this month's Volunteer Newsletter:

New roles for the new year! Take a look at the volunteer portal for some great new roles coming up soon for our longer-term volunteers. Looking for a change of pace? Check out our new "Leadership Mentor" roles and learn more about the new tech volunteering opportunities.

> **Could you provide more information about these or specifically call out useful skills that could benefit volunteers looking to do these roles?**

New computers are here at last! We've finally finished the upgrade of our computers to Windows 10 across the organization; and we'll be switching all staff and volunteers using computers to the new browsers and e-mail clients. We know many volunteers use the computers for their work, but we haven't checked if the screen-reading, voice-dictation and magnifying software still works, so hopefully they do but you'll have to check for yourself!

> **The accessibility functions may not work on the new computers you require everyone to use, make sure of this before you switch everyone over or existing volunteers may face a barrier. Volunteers with a lower technological or computer literacy may also have a hard time adapting to changes without proper training and/or support.**

Dress code reminder. After last week's event, the staff team wanted to send out the dress code again for everyone to remember, so that we don't have incidents re-occur:

> "Men can wear slacks, clean jeans (no rips), khakis or plain shorts with sleeved shirts (no tank tops) or sweaters; men must wear closed-toe shoes. Women can wear a skirt or long pants (no shorts) with blouse or any other shirt that covers the shoulders; women can wear sandals or closed-toe shoes with no higher than 2-inch heel or wedge. "

Does the dress code create barriers for anyone? What standards exist for different volunteer roles? The dress code shouldn't have different requirements based on gender.

Celebrating Faroukh! One of our longest-serving volunteers, Faroukh, has decided to move with his family in another city, so he'll be leaving us. Thank you for your many years of service and dedication Faroukh! We'll miss you! Sign Faroukh's digital thank you card here.

Girl's Night Social – Coming in January! After our last volunteer social, we decided to change things up by having a women-only event in January to avoid the relationship problems we've addressed in the past (and remember the policy in your handbook). Keep your eyes on your e-mails for our upcoming volunteer "Girl's Night!" There'll be great snacks and fun activities – and remember, ladies only!

This social is filled with potential barriers for volunteers – who is welcome or considered a "lady" for the purpose of the social? Do other volunteers have an opportunity for social opportunities? Consider how this might be very alienating to women who have relationships with women as there is a normative expectation of attendee's sexual orientations.

That's all for this month's Volunteer Newsletter, as always e-mail us if you have any questions!

Could volunteers receive the newsletter beyond e-mail? Can they reply without an e-mail address!

Inclusive Volunteer Programs

One way to ensure that barriers are removed or addressed in your organization is to make sure you're compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). Not only does this increase access for people with disabilities, it can create an inclusive and accessible organization for all clients and volunteers.

The Customer Service Standard of the AODA requires that your volunteers and anyone who works with clients:

• Adhere to the principles of independence, dignity, integration and equal opportunity in all experiences with people with disabilities

• Understand and support the use of assistive devices, support animals and support persons

• Communicate in a manner that respects people's needs

• Understand your organization's feedback process

As part of an inclusive volunteer program and organization, staff and volunteers should be aware of attitude, physical and communication barriers. Attitude barriers could include stereotypes and language that focuses on a person's disability rather than on their abilities. Physical barriers tend to be the most obvious, such as the lack of ramps or appropriate accessible washrooms. Communication barriers might include providing information only in print in one font size, or having a website that is not properly viewable in a high contrast mode. Be aware of these barriers to make a more welcoming workplace.

Volunteer managers need to be aware of the other standards of the AODA, which can impact accessible volunteer recruitment. This includes providing multiple methods of contact & feedback (e-mail, physical mail, voicemail/telephone), creating an accessible website, accessible recruitment & screening and providing accommodations to volunteers. For example, if a volunteer is able to do the specific task, such as data entry, but has limited language skills, then they can still do the role with less communication as long as the specific duties are being completed. Consider ways to minimize barriers to volunteers if they are able to do the specific requirements of the task – how can this be reflected in organizational policies or practices?

Removing Barriers Worksheet

When you've identified what barriers volunteers might face in recruitment, you can determine the opportunities for removing these barriers. Using this chart, think about how specific recruitment barriers might be overcome – add to the examples and provide your own.

Recruitment Barrier	Opportunity
Position promotion may not reach everyone	• Promote in diverse communities (physical and online message/bulletin boards, community events, organizational cross-promotion) • •
Self-screening from language materials	• Provide materials, forms, letters of agreement – in clear, basic language • If fluency is required, evaluate literacy and fluency at the screening and selection level, don't turn away potential volunteers sight unseen • •
Candidates may not understand what is required in the role	• Provide full information about steps involved in the process and why each step is required • Include general information about volunteering (not limited to your organization) at info sessions or in info packages • •

Recruitment Barrier	Opportunity
Screening process is unclear	• Be flexible with references and other screening requirements, if that is appropriate and possible for the position • Ensure mandates and expectations are clearly stated • •
Organization isn't prepared to remove barriers	• Encourage staff to develop opportunities with removing barriers in mind • Support the creation of a diverse staff and volunteer environment to support the organization's community • •
Think of other barriers your organization may face	*Think of solutions and opportunities for success*

Technology in Removing Barriers

Using technology allows you to increase access to volunteer opportunities and address barriers that may be prominent in your community. For example, you may work with a lot of volunteers with limited technological literacy, which presents an opportunity to provide training or learning on this technology. Use the guide below to determine how technology can help you remove barriers to volunteering:

	Strategies	Opportunities
Recruitment	• Provide materials in digital format • Allow for online, e-mail & in-person applications • Use social media & be aware of access limitations • Acknowledge opportunities for virtual volunteering	
Training	• Offer training digitally (live webinar, online training) • Provide a variety of formats for training (visual, auditory, interactive) • Create training videos to enhance learning and access • Use online translation technology to provide translated information	
Supervision	• Determine tasks that can be enhanced using technology or assistive devices • Use online tools for task management, accessible anywhere • Utilize collaboration tools that allow different opportunities for people to share thoughts • Provide training on using technology to enhance volunteer program (train staff overall, train volunteers on specific software)	
Communication	• Offer different methods to get information (accessible website, captioned videos, TTY phone system) • Consider social media accessibility • Identify alternatives to e-mail or provide volunteers with their own e-mail account • Ensure language and tech-literacy is accounted for in determining portal use	

With notes from volunteer.ca/pwd/technology

Overcoming Barriers in Orientation & Training

Orientation and training is vital for all volunteers to do their role safely and effectively. However, some volunteers may face barriers in attending, accessing or even understanding orientation. In order to remove these barriers and provide all possible opportunities to volunteers, consider the following:

- **Provide multiple means of representation:** Give volunteers various ways of acquiring information and knowledge
  - ➢ Written handbook/guidelines (large font, multiple languages if needed)
  - ➢ Teaching each other
  - ➢
  - ➢

- **Provide multiple means of expression:** provide volunteers with alternatives for demonstrating what they know
  - ➢ Think-pair-share (volunteers can communicate their learning with a partner)
  - ➢ Different expression opportunities (speaking, writing, modelling learned behaviour)
  - ➢
  - ➢

- **Provide multiple means of engagement:** Provide different ways to motivate, stimulate learner
  - ➢ Use activities & interactive elements
  - ➢ Give everyone a chance to catch up
  - ➢
  - ➢

Use this chart to determine what barriers may already be in place in your orientation & training and how you might overcome them through making changes:

Element	Barrier	What can be added, removed or changed to enhance access?
Timing – Time of day, frequency, length of orientation and/or training		
Materials – Handouts, slides, signs, nametags, etc.		
Environment – Room, building, location, physical accessibility		
Activities – Individual, partner, group, social vs. solitary		
Communication – Content, speed, language, between volunteers		

Language & Volunteering

One of the most common barriers to volunteering is language. This refers to the language the role operates in, the level of language proficiency required for the recruitment and screening process and the way language is used when providing supervision and support. The "Identifying Barriers" worksheet on page 4 will help you determine where language might cause a barrier – use this resource to expand on the nature of this barrier to remove it for potential volunteers.

Language in the Role

Start with these questions:

1. What language does your organization and/or program operate in?

2. What level of language proficiency in this language is required?

3. If the language is different from your organization's primary operational language, do you have a supervisor who speaks this language?

4. Can the volunteer speaking this language get support for their program from you or another organization?

In answering these questions, you may be able to determine whether a barrier exists. For instance, if your organization and all programs operate in English, it's likely you have plenty of supervisors and support structures who can aid volunteers in English. However, if you have a program where advanced proficiency in English is not needed (such as recreational or arts programs), then this can help you determine the answer to question 2 – a good recreational program leader or assistant may need to show what they're teaching, for example, but may not require advanced English skills. Use this to help answer the next set of questions.

Language in Recruitment

1. What language is your position description written in? Or, how complex is the language of the position description?

2. Is a written component (cover letter, application questions) required for recruitment?

3. What language skills are needed for screening?

Continuing the example of a low-language program, the position description could be written in simpler terms, perhaps addressing only technical knowledge that might be needed. If your program runs in a specific language and you're looking for speakers of that language, you should only post the position description in that language to guarantee candidates have the knowledge you're looking for. For screening, consider how an in-person interview may be a challenge for people facing language or communication barriers – could an e-mail or group interview make things easier?

Language in Supervision

1. Will language proficiency impact the frequency and quality of feedback for volunteers?

2. Are all languages of volunteer programs spoken by people in the organization?

3. Is the language of the program reflective of the languages spoken in the served community? (And required to serve those in the community?)

As before, having someone who speaks the same language among staff and/or supervisors can provide support for volunteers. More importantly, all volunteers should be able to receive the same level of supervision based on the needs of the role and be given the opportunity to provide and receive feedback in that language. This includes more basic proficiencies in English, for example, that can be easily understood by volunteers. Once you've answered all of these questions, you can be better suited to support the language needs of your volunteers and the programs you offer to the community.

Rights of Volunteers

Volunteers offer you their time, energy, skills, experience and expertise – in return you're able to meet their motivations to give back to the community, serve a cause, gain social relationships and more. Volunteering isn't about getting free work and within your organization you should establish the rights volunteers have – along with their responsibilities. The Guiding Principles of the Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement recognize the rights of volunteers to a safe and supportive environment to do their work along with their responsibilities to assist the organization through their role. You should consider volunteer rights and responsibilities as a means to address and eliminate barriers for volunteers.

Volunteer Rights

Using the first few examples, determine the rights your volunteers have in your organization. Volunteers have to the right to:

- Be treated fairly, equitably and with respect

- Expect that their time will be used effectively

- Offer suggestions and be heard

- Be supported to do their role safely and effectively

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Volunteer Responsibilities

Using the first few examples, determine the rights your volunteers have in your organization. Volunteers have to the right to:

- Treating their role and the organization with respect

- Serving as an ambassador of the organization

- Following policies and procedures relevant to their role and work

- Fulfilling the requirements of their role within the expected timeframe

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Inspired by the Volunteer Canada's Volunteer Management Handbook

Changing Volunteer Roles to Meet Needs

Volunteers can often encounter barriers once they've already begun doing their role. In most cases, it's easy to make small changes that can help volunteers overcome these challenges, such as providing snacks for long shifts or changing equipment/furniture to better meet needs. In some cases, however, volunteers may not be able to meet the needs of the role appropriately due to external factors or changes to the role itself. For example, a volunteer required to walk around may no longer be able to walk and thus can't do the role in the same way.

Your first step when volunteers face barriers is to consider the accommodations within the realm of possibility – this means changes that can be made that won't cause "undue hardship," such as drastic changes to programming or additional costs that your organization can't afford. If accommodation isn't an option, you can consider offering volunteers the opportunity to change roles or responsibilities. In either case, you should:

- Ask the volunteer what accommodations could help them be successful in the role
- Ask the volunteer if they believe they can continue in the role, and what changes might need to be made to facilitate this
- Work with the volunteer to determine other opportunities within the organization
- Talk to the volunteer about what they want to contribute or how they can continue to contribute

Remember to focus on volunteer skills and abilities to help determine what they can still offer your organization – just because they face a barrier in a current role, there could be opportunities for them elsewhere. Use this chart to help identify a volunteer's possibilities:

Volunteer Skills	Volunteer Abilities (& tasks completed well)	Volunteer Opportunity (time availability, interests, suggestions)

Volunteer Toronto

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Next Steps

To continue your volunteer management journey, there are a number of other workbooks created by Volunteer Toronto to assist you every step of the way:

Basic

- Planning, Recruiting & Selecting
- Training, Supervising & Supporting
- Evaluating, Retaining & Developing
- Engaging Group Volunteers
- Professional Development for Managers of Volunteers
- Measuring Impact of Volunteer Programs

Intermediate

- Planning for Volunteer Involvement
- Volunteer Recruitment
- Volunteer Selection
- Training & Orientation
- Volunteer Retention & Recognition
- Volunteer Supervision
- Preparing for Volunteer Fairs

Advanced

- Accessibility and the AODA
- Giving Volunteers Feedback
- Short Term Volunteers
- Long Term Volunteers
- Volunteer Boundaries & Dismissal
- Volunteer Handbook Sample
- Volunteer Communities & Mentorship

Check out our **Online Learning Centre** for a variety of courses to further enhance your learning and improve your practice.

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