



Guidance for Supporting Volunteers

when engaging with displaced people

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 **Volunteer
Ireland**
Obair Dheonach Éireann

Supporting volunteers engaging with displaced people

The Fundamentals

Many organisations involved in supporting those displaced from their country of origin will engage volunteers as a fundamental part of service delivery. With that comes specific and unique challenges.

The purpose of this document is to support you, and those who volunteer with you, in what can be an emotionally but very rewarding experience.

With some extra planning we can address the new dynamics that this type of volunteer involvement brings to ensure a positive experience for all involved

Things we need to consider include:

- Creating clear, defined role descriptions to mitigate risk
- Having a thorough selection process
- Proper management of your volunteers shifts
- Signposting volunteers to psychological supports (if applicable)
- Knowing how to address challenges facing volunteers
- Creating constant two-way communication with the volunteer bases
- Establishing a permanent onsite escalation point for volunteers
- Communal downtime for volunteers and staff
- Establishment and maintenance of boundaries – what is acceptable and what isn't

Why is this different?

Supporting those who have been displaced from their home countries is an emotional experience. Never have we experienced anything like this on this scale and that brings unique challenges.

While our staff and volunteers provide support to those in need we must also be cognisant of and sensitive to that extra emotional load this highly rewarding type of volunteering brings.

We have a duty to proactively put processes in place to look after the mental and emotional well being of all involved within our organisation to ensure we provide the best possible service to those who are relying on it in these challenging times.



Developing a Role Description

About Volunteer Role Descriptions

Defining and managing the work of volunteers is fundamental to good volunteer management practice. Volunteers without role descriptions can feel unsupported in their work and inadequately trained. Role descriptions are useful risk management tools that protect your organisation and the volunteer particularly when a volunteer may be acting outside the scope of their role or contrary to instruction.

Why is a Role Description important?

A role description is always important. It is even more so when volunteers are in emotionally charged roles such as supporting displaced people. A role description will clarify both the volunteers and the organisations responsibilities and support arrangements. It will help volunteers to be clear about what is expected of them and feel confident in their role. As well as this, a clear role description increases the likelihood of appointing suitable candidates for the tasks in hand.

How to design a Role Description

- **What?** List tasks in order of priority
- **When?** What is the required minimum / maximum time commitment?
- **Where?** Work place including any other sites
- **With whom?** Will they work with paid staff? Will they work alone?
- **Support and training** Who is the designated supervisor? What training is provided?
- **Administration** What expenses do you offer? What other assistance?
- **Expectations / Benefits** What does the role offer or not offer? Personal development? A chance to change things?

Importantly, it provides you with a documented basis from which you can provide guidance, advice and support and is something you can fall back on if you find yourself needing to 'performance manage' a volunteer. To summarise, they are a useful risk management tool that protects the organisation and the volunteer.

Important ways to ensure you are providing the very best duty of care to your volunteers whilst engaging with displaced people

Having a thorough selection process

At times of urgent need, it can be tempting to relax our usual selection process as we need bodies on the ground quickly. Unfortunately, during these times people may choose to volunteer with your organisation who may not be as suitable as you would like. Therefore, it is particularly important that we do not let up on our recruitment processes. Always interview, get references and Garda Vet (if required) all potential volunteers.

Proper management of your volunteers shifts

Within your volunteer role description, the volunteers minimum and maximum hours of volunteering will be clearly stated. When doing this type of volunteering, people often want to stay well past their shift to help. However, it is crucial that these set shift patterns are maintained in order to prevent the volunteer from burning out.

Signposting volunteers to psychological supports (if applicable)

- <https://mymind.org/free-counselling> – specific for volunteers engaging with displaced people
- <https://theopencommunity.ie/host-supports/> – Support and resources for people hosting refugees but training available for all. Modules include: An introduction to Trauma and How it Affects People, Supporting People who have Experienced Trauma
- Contact the HSE in your region who have been running a number of webinars on topics. Access one here: **HSE Announces New Training – Understanding Trauma – HSE.ie**

Knowing how to address challenges facing volunteers

Always emphasise the importance of the need for volunteers to follow processes and procedures. Create a checklist of processes your volunteers can refer to on challenges that you know will occur as well as challenges that have the potential to occur.

Establishing a permanent onsite escalation point for volunteers

Following on from the above, ensure your volunteers know who they can contact out of hours or if particular problems arise. Have a list of people or organisations they can contact for support so they don't feel they have to provide it themselves.

Creating constant two-way communication with the volunteer bases

Frequently check in with your volunteers. Ask them questions about their experience. Give them the opportunity to tell you what they need. And then act on any requests, if you can, to demonstrate you are listening. If you are unable to act on their requests, explain why and try to guide them to an organisation or person that can.

Communal downtime for volunteers and staff

Come together as a group when you can to provide mutual support and recognition of a job well done. For example, it can be difficult for all when a group of people move on.



From talking to other volunteer managers that are working with volunteers supporting displaced people from Ukraine and other countries we are told that the biggest challenge is volunteers simply not following direction.

This is due mainly to the factors we have mentioned previously, that of the emotional connectedness of the role and the wish to do the right thing.

Unfortunately, by making emotional decisions and acting on them, volunteers can create situations that are difficult to contain and may do more harm than good.

Establish & Maintain Boundaries

Safeguard your volunteers

Establishing and maintaining boundaries is essential and it protects your volunteers, the people they are supporting, your organisation and helps to avoid emotional stress. An awareness must be sought of the line between openness and simply going too far.

Remind volunteers frequently about the importance of boundaries and the necessity to protect themselves. Advise against sharing phone numbers or social media details.

Try to provide closure for volunteers when required. Keep them busy at times when emotions may be high.

Talk about the importance of safeguarding themselves and remind them it's ok to feel emotions, it's ok to cry and it's ok to ask for help.

As always, thank your volunteers for their commitment and remind them what an amazing thing they are doing not only for the people they support but also for themselves.