

Vermont Public Library Volunteers – Best Practices for Managers

For many libraries in Vermont, volunteers are a central element to their operations. Your volunteers serve many functions aside from assisting you with general library operations. They are advocates for the library, a connection to your community, and a major system of support. This support can be especially meaningful as you prepare for Town Meeting Day, present your budget, propose a new program, or search for new trustees. Volunteers come from all ages and backgrounds and support their libraries in a variety of ways. This guide will serve as an opportunity for centralizing volunteer management practices. It is important to note that recruitment is discussed before training and orientation; take care to consider what orientation materials you would want prepared before your volunteers begin.

This is not legal advice and should not be considered a replacement for legal advice. You are strongly encouraged to seek legal counsel. In addition to your legal counsel, you are also encouraged to speak to your municipality, the Vermont Department of Labor, and the U.S. Department of Labor to ensure compliance with local, state, and federal laws for volunteers as these departments are responsible for reviewing and revising laws.

Vermont Department of Labor

<https://labor.vermont.gov/>

802-828-4000

U.S. Department of Labor

<https://www.dol.gov/>

1-866-487-2365

Before discussing recruitment, retention, and the management of volunteers, here are some matters to keep in mind:

- Federal guidelines on volunteering are part of the [Fair Labor Standards Act](#)
- [Paid staff are forbidden to perform the same type of service as a volunteer](#)
- [Volunteers should not take the place of paid employees](#)
- [Volunteers and staff alike must ensure patron confidentiality](#)
- If a trustee also volunteers, they volunteer as an individual and not as a trustee; having a separation between these roles is beneficial for both staff and volunteer
- The benefits of volunteering are numerous; the [value of volunteering wheel](#) provides useful information that can be used to advocate for volunteering and volunteers

Recruitment:

Volunteer recruitment can take a variety of pathways. There are many opportunities and sources to find volunteers. Before you place a call for volunteers, carefully analyze the role you need volunteers to take in your institution. What specific tasks would you like for them to do? What type of personality would fit well with that task? It is important to start a dialogue with a person to see where their interests lie; you may be surprised to learn that someone is interested, and is an excellent fit, in a role that seems contradictory to their personality. Evaluate your institution's capacity to manage both current and new volunteers, particularly in relation to existing staff levels and organizational performance.

Job Descriptions

Write a job description for the volunteer role. This will aid you as you search but will also help your volunteer stay on target and know your expectations for them.

[Get Involved: Powered by Your Library](#) has examples of library volunteer position descriptions

[Fletcher Free Public Library volunteer descriptions](#)

[Harford County Public Library volunteer description](#)

[Friends of St. Thomas Public Library volunteer description](#)

Serving as a library trustee is a volunteer position. It comes with more responsibility and authority; it is also certainly a more demanding volunteer role. Take care not to leave this role out as you write volunteer job descriptions.

[Nebraska Library Commission Sample Trustee Job Description](#)

[Portage County Public Library \(WI\) Trustee Job Description](#)

[Geneva Public Library \(NY\) Trustee Job Description](#)

[Oak Park Public Library \(IL\) Trustee Job Description](#)

[Sioux Center Library \(IA\) Trustee Job Description](#)

Job Posting

Once you have your job description prepared, craft a message to include with it. This is very much like a job ad or posting. What is the overall mission of the library? If you have a long-range plan, what are some of your goals and how does this volunteer role fit into it? How does the work of this volunteer benefit the organization and community?

Remember to include the time commitment and to identify any needs. As an example, if you are searching for someone to assist in writing marketing materials, you will need to consider how often those items go out, how long it takes to prepare them, and what type of experience and working style would be well-suited to the role, such as experience in writing, editing, and marketing with a good eye for details.

If the work can be performed remotely, include that in your message. Perhaps the task can be split up and performed by 'micro-volunteers.' These means taking the overall task and splitting it up. Using our

marketing volunteer example, you could look for one to write the items, one to edit them, and another to manage the design elements. Each of these steps could be completed remotely. While it may seem more difficult to find three people to do a task, it could seem more manageable to a volunteer to spend 30-60 minutes a week working remotely to proofread marketing items rather than multiple hours performing all the work. This can also be helpful if you find a volunteer who has experience in one element but not another.

Search Process

At this point, you should be prepared to put out a call for volunteers. The size of this call will depend on the number of roles you are looking to fill. Going through your network is a great start. You can talk to your friends, staff, trustees, Friends group, your community networks (such as civic organizations, churches, and committees), and even casual acquaintances. It is a great idea to cast your net more widely though. This not only gives you a larger pool of potential volunteers but also boosts your ability to be more inclusive. By reaching further than your own network, you are expanding your existing network with those who represent more varied groups. This can help you in connecting with additional demographics within your community. To that end, post everywhere. Yes, put the call out on the library's social media pages, Front Porch Forum, and on flyers in the library, but also put the flyers up around town in municipal offices, grocery stores, restaurants, post offices, and any other wall that will stay still long enough.

[Recruiting and Training Volunteers for Library Advocacy](#) (Niche Academy)

[Energize, Inc. list of resources](#) on recruitment

Expanding your search is also important as you seek new trustees as their roles come with more time requirements and responsibilities. It is great to have dedicated library patrons on your board but it is also a great idea to have those who are not regular users as well. They can provide great insight and serve as avenues to expand the library's outreach.

[Board Planning Matrix](#)

[Recruiting for Board Diversity – Without Disrespecting People of Color](#)

[Building a Better Board of Trustees](#)

[Effective Board Recruitment for Trustees and Friends](#)

[Washington Free Public Library \(IA\) Trustee Search Ad](#)

[Niagara on the Lake Public Library Trustee Search Brochure](#)

Separation of Roles

While individual trustees can be volunteers for their library in a capacity aside from their board service, it is important to remember that they are volunteering their time as an individual and not as a trustee of the library board. There can be challenges in this situation. For one thing, while the board has authority over the library, an individual trustee does not. Additionally, the relationship of supervisor and subordinate flips between when they function as a trustee and when they act as a volunteer. The relationship between both parties can become challenging when operating in these roles. As such, it

may be preferable that trustees do not volunteer for the library outside of their trustee role during their time serving on the board.

Training and Retention:

Once you have put out a call for volunteers, it is possible that you will receive a flood of interested potential volunteers. Make sure that you review all your volunteer needs to ensure that you are utilizing all potential volunteers as appropriately as possible. A volunteer information form can ensure the placement, task, and hours suit the volunteer.

[Sample Volunteer Information Form](#)

If you put out a call for a particular volunteer but receive more interest than you have spots to fill, look at other volunteer needs and assign people to different tasks. Finding space for these volunteers will assist you by encouraging their buy-in to the library and aid you in capacity building to grow your library. It highlights the value these community members find in your institution. Importantly, you may also be providing both a space and an activity that makes the person feel welcomed, respected, and important to the library's function.

Background Checks

Depending on the nature of your library and volunteer opportunities, you may wish to perform a background check on your volunteers. This could be because the position involves work with children or to create consistency with background checking both volunteers and staff. There are legal aspects involved with this decision. You should contact your municipality. If you are a municipal library, you could also reach out to the Vermont League of Cities and Towns.

[Information from the Department of Public Safety](#)

Volunteer Agreement

Utilizing a volunteer agreement serves as a method to track your volunteers and their contact information while also ensuring they are aware of any potential safety concerns.

[The Vermont League of Cities and Towns Sample Volunteer Service Agreement](#)

Orientation and Training

Once your volunteers are ready to start, set them up for success with a standardized orientation and training. It is helpful to have a training manual prepared. This ensures that everyone starts with the same level of knowledge and is prepared for their role. Anyone performing work on behalf of the library should know key details such as the library's operating hours, the general layout of the building, and notable policy details, such as how to get a library card.

[Fresno County Public Library \(CA\)](#)

[Lake Travis Community Library \(TX\)](#)

[Buckeye Public Library \(AZ\)](#)

[Huntington Beach Public Library \(CA\)](#)

[Kern County Public Library \(CA\)](#)

[VolunteerMatch Sample Handbook](#)

[Track It Forward: What is a Volunteer Handbook?](#)

Trustee Training

For trustees, this manual would look different but it is important to include much of the same information. Again, they still need to know basic, general information about the library, but you should include past board meeting minutes, policies, bylaws, and the American Library Association's Bill of Rights. More information regarding trustees can be found on the VTLIB [website](#). Please note that the trustee manual is intended as a reference guide for library trustees around the state. It is not intended to replace the advice of legal counsel and it is not specific to any one library.

[Chief Officers of State Library Agencies Sample Manual](#)

[New Trustee Orientation Checklist](#)

[Northern Saguache County Library District \(CO\)](#)

[Mid-Michigan Library League Trustee Handbook](#)

Communication

Another helpful element is to have one consistent point of contact for the volunteers. You may want a teen librarian to be the point of contact for minors but have someone else for adults. Regardless of how this works for your organization, keep everyone on the same page so that volunteers can receive accurate information. Consistency is key to keeping everyone on the same page.

Volunteer retention efforts can take a variety of forms depending on the individual and you should not underestimate the role of communication in crafting your retention plans. It is helpful to get to know the individuals volunteering so you can have an idea of what motivates them. Communicate your expectations early to them. Keep in regular touch with them about both expectations and why their work matters. You can find interesting ways to demonstrate the impact of their work. No one likes to feel unsure of what they should be doing and if what they are doing matters. Create tangible ways you can illustrate the role volunteers play in your library. People who have benefited from their work could write a thank you card. When discussing the success of your library to your trustees, the press, or in an annual report, include how the volunteers have been an asset and helped the library achieve their goals. Encourage other staff members and trustees to build relationships with the volunteers in the same way they would with coworkers. Check in with them regularly to build warm, welcoming relationships so they enjoy their time volunteering.

[Five Reasons Why Volunteers Quit](#)

[Retention of Volunteers](#)

[Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers](#)

[The Ultimate Volunteer Appreciation Guide](#)

Patron Confidentiality

Patron confidentiality is incredibly important and [legally protected](#); ensure that your volunteers are mindful of this. It may be preferable not have volunteers working at a service desk or utilizing the catalog (or integrated library system) to limit any potential that the volunteer would gain access to confidential and protected patron information; however, many Vermont libraries rely on volunteers to work in circulation to keep the library open and operational. If, for any reason, you have volunteers working at a service desk, you must ensure that they are familiar with confidentiality and protections. Creating a confidentiality statement for them sign is one option that can assist in ensuring their familiarity with this standard. In creating such a document, you should consult with an attorney to ensure that the agreement is legal and does not create a liability issue.

[VolunteerMatch Sample Confidentiality Agreement](#)

Management:

In many instances, the management of your volunteers will mirror how your library oversees staff members. It might be helpful to create a volunteer guidebook with policies that impact them. It does not have to be overly complicated or long. Just a few simple lines for each could suffice; utilize your volunteer handbook and condense it to create a quick guide. You will want to include information on wearing identifying information (badges or logos), how to record their time, patron confidentiality, breaks, emergency response, holiday closings, phone use, and how to report any concerns they may have. It will also be important to discuss any dress code information relevant to your organization. In addition to these elements, you could provide an overview within the document about professionalism. Your volunteers are seen as an extension of your staff and it is important that they reflect the behaviors you want patrons to associate with your institution.

[Hillsboro Public Library \(OR\)](#)

Recording Hours

Tracking volunteer hours is important for many reasons. It is a yardstick to highlight community support, illustrates the role of the library for the community, and shows local leaders the value that residents put into the library. There is a need to balance the benefits of both volunteers and paid staff, particularly in terms of presenting this information to funding authorities.

Legal Considerations

Your volunteers are subject to legal protections. The human resources components relevant to your employees could also be important for your volunteers. To ensure compliance with labor laws, you should seek legal counsel. You are also encouraged to speak to your municipality, the Vermont Department of Labor, and the Federal Department of Labor.

Minor volunteers are subject to additional legal protections. You may want to be mindful of these matters in terms of the age of the volunteer, the task they are assigned, and the hours they work. Please consult with your legal counsel and the Vermont Department of Labor to ensure compliance with the law.

[Vermont Department of Labor information for employers of minors](#)

[Additional resources on teen volunteering](#)

Final Thoughts

Volunteers are a key part of any public library; their work assists the library by permitting paid staff more time to devote to specialized tasks and may aid in keeping the library open to the public for additional hours. This information is intended to assist library staff in providing an excellent volunteer experience for both volunteer and library. This is not legal advice and should not be considered as a replacement for legal advice. You are strongly encouraged to seek legal counsel. In addition to your legal counsel, you are also encouraged to speak to your municipality, the Vermont Department of Labor, and the U.S. Department of Labor to ensure compliance with local, state, and federal laws for volunteers as these departments are responsible for reviewing and revising laws.

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