

Support to, and working conditions for, volunteers

Information sheet for Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies

Working as a voluntary aid worker in emergencies is very stressful. Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies and their volunteers involved in emergency operations need to be aware of this and know how to prevent and minimise possible negative effects.

Being engaged in voluntary relief work puts the volunteers in an advantaged position, as it allows them to do something active and constructive in the midst of a chaotic situation. Whether indirectly or directly affected by the crisis situation, it will usually have an empowering influence on the volunteer to take an active role rather than being a passive victim.

1. Information and briefing

Staff and volunteers need to understand the purpose of the activities they are carrying out, including any underlying policies and principles.

In addition to understanding the purpose of activities, volunteers also need information. They are in the front-line; working with those affected by the situation, and will be the first to face the beneficiaries' frustration. It is therefore crucial that volunteers receive proper briefings, which at a minimum covers:

- Policies and principles of humanitarian work
- Information about the scale and nature of the emergency
- Updated information about the status of the relief operation
- Information about normal reactions to traumatic events and what the volunteers can do in order to prevent and release stress

Volunteers should then be continuously updated on the above mentioned issues.

2. Working environment

Identification material such as vests, t-shirts, caps and ID-cards should be issued to the volunteers. Such material identifies the volunteers and allows the beneficiaries to spot volunteers easily. Furthermore, identification material is important to protect the volunteers when working in areas with security risks.

In order to allow the volunteers to feel as much ownership as possible towards their work, and to gain from their grass root knowledge, they should be included in the day-to-day planning of activities and tasks in the field to the extent possible. Inclusion in planning lets the volunteers know that their opinions and daily experience are useful and valued, and as such counters burn-out and allows for practical and qualitative adjustments based on the volunteers day-to-day work experience.

Volunteers are not to have any private expenses related to their voluntary engagement. Reasonable expenses incurred by volunteers in the course of carrying out approved volunteering tasks, e.g. transport costs, should be reimbursed. Food and drinks must be made available during long working hours.

In order to prevent burn-out, breaks during working hours should be organised as needed. Likewise it has to be remembered that volunteers need to have time off both to relax and to take care of their own families.

All staff and volunteers are exposed to an increased health risk. The National Society should seek to create a safe working environment for all. Volunteers must be made aware of the particular health risks associated with the emergency operation in which they are engaged e.g. particular illnesses; security risks such as mental burn-out, land mines or ongoing armed hostilities, environmental dangers etc. Protective measures must be put in place as needed, and could include briefings on stress management, vaccinations, mine risk education, identification materials and measures against environmental dangers.

3. Challenges

Volunteers will often have been affected by the same situation they respond to and may have experienced loss of family members or property. Thus, they are in need of support themselves. It is important to consider whether they are able to care for themselves and their families while conducting voluntary work. It also has to be judged whether volunteers who work directly with beneficiaries and who are affected by the crisis themselves have the capacity for helping others in an appropriate way. This judgement should be made as part of the recruitment process.

4. Supervision

The work of volunteers is ideally structured so that they have a supervisor who will oversee their work on a regular basis, conduct briefings, make decisions and give advice. Volunteers also need a supervisor to whom they may refer beneficiaries and others who present issues or questions which the volunteer is not able to deal with alone.

The supervisor should, through regular contact with the volunteers, also regularly evaluate whether each volunteer is capable of continuing the work or if they are becoming tired and in danger of burn-out.

5. Debriefings

On an informal basis, volunteers need to meet and share their experience in order to release emotions, share experience and to learn from others. This should preferably be done together with someone who is trained in peer support structuring the meeting. Therefore, regularly scheduled meetings with the groups of volunteers should be scheduled to prevent stress and burn-out.

Formal debriefings, either in groups or one-on-one, should be conducted by a professional psychologist. This is especially important where volunteers work with beneficiaries having experienced very traumatic events.

6. Appreciation and recognition

All volunteers need appreciation and recognition by management and in the peer group, both formal and informal. It is important to ensure a supportive structure around the work that they do.

7. Engagement contract and recruitment procedures

All volunteers, like any ordinary employees, should receive and sign an engagement contract which states their title, the chain of command (including contact details for supervisor) working place and working hours; describes rights and responsibilities of the volunteer as well as any special conditions, oath of professional secrecy, Code of Conduct and work description. Appropriate insurance should be provided for volunteers and staff alike.

A recruitment procedure for volunteers should be in place to secure that volunteers chosen for emergency response work are mentally and physically fit and able to conduct the work they have volunteered for.

More information on volunteering

For more information on volunteering please visit the web site of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (www.ifrc.org) and look for the Volunteering Policy and other documents related to volunteering. The International Federation Reference Centre on Psychosocial Support can advice on issues in relation to volunteer and staff support, stress management etc. Please visit <http://www.ifrc.org/psychosocial>

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