

Voluntary Action-**Leeds** Releasing Volunteers

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RELEASING VOLUNTEERS

From time to time there comes a point at which the relationship between volunteer and organisation cannot continue. This may happen at any stage - during recruitment, selection, interviewing, training, induction, when the volunteer has started their work or after a period of volunteering. The aim of this paper is to look at the issues associated with releasing volunteers, to introduce the term counselling out, what it means, the reasons for it and suggest appropriate approaches to use.

'Counselling out', what is it?

There is some debate as to whether or not 'counselling' is the most appropriate word to use. However, as counselling is a process often defined as 'to help others help themselves', it would seem to be a legitimate term. In other words, 'counselling out' may be seen as enabling a volunteer to see that it is not appropriate for them to do, or continue to do, voluntary work within that organisation. Whatever, it is a procedure which needs to be carried out tactfully and with some sensitivity - it is NOT just a case of 'getting rid of' or 'finishing' a volunteer. With this in mind, it is important for organisations to have 'counselling out' procedures within their 'Volunteer Policy'.

How is the decision made?

There can be several reasons for volunteers being asked to leave, or not being accepted to, an organisation. These may include:

- Not meeting the criteria as set out in person specifications and/or job descriptions.
- Inappropriate behaviour (e.g. embezzling funds, assaulting a client etc.)
- Continued absence or unreliability.
- Refusing to attend training.
- Refusing to give suitable references, disclose past convictions etc.
- Certain convictions (e.g. child abuse etc.).
- Knowingly giving false information.

- Expressing views and attitudes, which are racist, homophobic, sexist etc.
- Refusing to accept and adopt the 'ethos' of the organisation.
- A 'gut reaction' of the person recruiting -a very difficult one to define or justify!
- Self-selection (or deselecting), for whatever reason (s), by the volunteer themselves.

It should be made clear once more at this point, that whatever the reason for not continuing to work with a volunteer, organisations should endeavour to involve this person in the decision making process as much as possible.

Are there possible ways to address this situation?

Talking - the obvious starting point with regard to any issue or problem concerning volunteers is to discuss the matter with them. Many misunderstandings can be resolved through talking and listening!

Training - this may enable someone to develop in order to become more skilled and knowledgeable, and thus more suitable, to do the job. The training may be additional to that which the volunteer has already received, or could be specialised and focused on a specific topic. However, organisations need to be wary of spending too much time and resources on retraining and should ideally place a time limit on it.

Offering alternatives - there could be one or several reasons why a volunteer is deemed unsuitable for a specific role. Yet, given the opportunity, the same volunteer may prove more than adequate at achieving other tasks. In other words, attempts should be made to offer volunteers alternative opportunities. Again, further training may be needed but investing the time and effort will, hopefully, bring rewards.

If no alternative roles can be found, the least that can be done is to refer the volunteer on to another organisation. This could be another voluntary organisation which is deemed more suitable or somewhere such as a Volunteer Bureau where a prospective volunteer could look at a much wider range of opportunities. Everyone has the right to do some type of voluntary work.

What other issues need to be considered?

Complaints procedures - ideally as part of their 'Volunteer Policy', volunteers should have access to the organisation's 'Complaints Procedure'. This, along with the

'counselling out procedure' should provide a set of guidelines of how to address issues which arise through inappropriate volunteer placements. There is no 'perfect' example but if organisations take the above points into consideration they will, arguably, be seen to be as fair as possible to volunteers.

Personal issues - the person responsible for asking a volunteer to leave should do so in a straightforward but sensitive manner. The reasons may well be 'clear cut' but a volunteer still needs something positive to take with them. Listening to the volunteers side of the story is only fair and could help an organisation to become more aware on certain issues, leading it to review their policies and procedures.

Sharing information - there may be instances where an organisation obtains information on a person which they feel needs to be shared with others. For example, there may have been a complaint made against a volunteer by a client. This has been investigated, substantiated and the volunteer asked to leave. It may be appropriate to share this information with certain other organisations, despite the issues raised regarding confidentiality and prejudice. Yes, this situation may be difficult, it will entail thorough investigation and careful consideration. If, however, it is felt there is a possibility of placing an already vulnerable person at potentially even greater risk, then the reasons for disclosing this information will be justified. In other words, it is, under certain circumstances, appropriate to disclose certain information to other bodies on a '**need to know**' basis.

This does not, and **should** not, necessarily mean the volunteer is prevented from doing any further voluntary work. Rather, work undertaken in the future should be concerned with not placing clients (or the volunteer) in an unnecessarily vulnerable/stressful situation.