

Interviewing Volunteers

Tip Sheet

FUNDED BY THE VICTORIA FOUNDATION



Interviewing Tips for Assessing Volunteers in High-Risk Positions

Many organizations recruit volunteers to help support vulnerable persons and vulnerable populations within their community. In British Columbia vulnerable persons are defined by the Ministry of Justice as “children under the age of 19” and vulnerable adults who are “individuals 19 years or older who receive health services, other than acute care, from a hospital, facility, unit, society, service, holder or registrant.” Non profits have a Duty of Care, which is a legal obligation to take reasonable measures to care for and to protect others. If clients cannot protect, defend or assert themselves – permanently or temporarily – the duty of care becomes more intense and the standard of care becomes higher.

Volunteer managers need tools to effectively assess any volunteer applicant who will have unsupervised contact with a vulnerable person. An important way to assess and manage potential risk is by interviewing prospective volunteers.

Interviews are a part of a screening or assessment process and are typically the first opportunity to get to know volunteers better, to explore their interests, backgrounds, and values, and to assess if a volunteer may be a good fit for a specific volunteer position.

This Tip Sheet has been written by volunteer management specialists who work with vulnerable children and youth. The specialists have decades of experience creating the conditions for successful interviews, always with the intention of creating welcoming spaces to have personal and deep conversations that are equitable and fair, but also robust and curious. Here are their recommendations:

Before the interview:

- **No surprises**
Let prospective volunteers know during the recruitment and application stage if they must participate in an interview with a representative from your organization before they can be considered for the volunteer position. This gives the volunteer an opportunity to self-screen and decide if they wish to continue with the process.
- **Know your applicant**
Familiarize yourself with the prospective volunteer’s application before you begin the interview. If possible, check their references and review their police record checks before-hand. This allows you to note any inconsistent answers.

Interviewing Volunteers Tip Sheet

Ask if your prospective volunteer needs an accommodation for language or communication barriers, physical access, environmental considerations, etc.

Build rapport with the prospective volunteer. If you didn't meet them previously at a recruitment fair, open house or orientation session, etc. try chatting with them casually before the interview. This can be beneficial as it creates familiarity between you and the applicant allowing them to be more comfortable to share during the interview.

During the interview:

- **Location**

Conduct the interview in a private but safe and comfortable space for both you and the prospective volunteer. Whenever possible, conduct interviews in rooms with windows or glass doors so others can see what is happening and seat yourself closest to any exit points in case an emergency situation arises.

Stop the interview if you are feeling unsafe or the prospective volunteer is not participating in the interview in a manner that is appropriate and respectful.

Tell another staff member if you will be meeting the prospective volunteer in the community or at their home so someone knows your whereabouts and expected finish time.

- **Creating a safe space**

Before starting the interview, let your prospective volunteer know that they can take their time answering questions, they are allowed to stop the interview at any time, they can refuse to answer a question, and they are welcome to ask questions of you.

- **Your script and responses**

Volunteer screening interviews should be consistent and include the same questions for every prospective volunteer applying for identical and/or similar roles. It is valuable to have an official script to ensure an unbiased and objective interview for each applicant. This consistency will magnify answers that may spark doubt for that prospective volunteer's suitability to work in a high-risk position within your organization.

It is important to be validating throughout the interview. You do not need to agree with your prospective volunteer's answers as the interview is not a training session – it is an opportunity to talk to them about their background, expectations, and suitability for the role – so keep to the interview script/questions and allow them the time and space to speak openly.

Top Interview Tip: When an interviewee provides an answer that does not meet some or all of the needs try following up with, "tell me more about that." It allows for clarification without leading the interviewee in any one direction.

Interviewing Volunteers Tip Sheet

- **Note taking**

Advise your prospective volunteer that you will be taking notes throughout the interview. Make sure to document the responses to your questions as well as your observations about the prospective volunteer's behaviour, body language, eye contact, frustration levels, etc.

After the interview:

- Follow up with the prospective volunteer and/or references for clarification of any answers that seem uncertain.
- Reflect on evasiveness or terse responses from the prospective volunteer, check for contradictions in the prospective volunteer's responses or inconsistencies between what they've said and what their references have told you.
- Determine your prospective volunteer's suitability for the role for which they have applied and reflect on any doubts that might have been raised. Consider if the volunteer might be more suitable for another volunteer position in your organization or need additional support and training to be successful in the position they have applied for.

Things to think about:

Ensure your interview notes are included in the prospective volunteer's file and are legible and accessible for future staff and/or representatives from your organization.

Establish a process for reviewing the interview with another representative from your organization if you have uncertainties about the prospective volunteer.

The interview is just one part of the prospective volunteer's screening process and should not be the only determining factor for their acceptance into the program. A successful interview does not necessarily mean that this volunteer is suitable for a high-risk volunteer position.

Resources

The Screening Handbook, Public Safety Canada 2012

<https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/scrngng-hndbk/scrngng-hndbk-eng.pdf>

Interviewing Volunteers Tip Sheet

About Volunteer Victoria

The Greater Victoria Volunteer Society, more commonly known as Volunteer Victoria, is a volunteer centre and hub to help volunteers, volunteer managers, and volunteer-led organizations.

Our mission is to *inspire and empower volunteerism!* We:

- Help volunteers and volunteer-led organizations
- Build and share knowledge through the delivery of professional development, training, learning and networking opportunities
- Offer specialized services and resources that advance the quality of volunteer programs and build capacity
- Treat all members, volunteers, partners, staff and stakeholders with fairness, dignity, and respect
- Provide welcoming spaces that embrace diverse ideas, knowledge, cultures, and experiences

Contact Us

Volunteer Victoria
602-620 View Street
Victoria, BC V8W 1J6

Phone: 250.386.2269

Email: volvic@volunteervictoria.bc.ca

Web: volunteervictoria.bc.ca

