

National Resource Center on Nutrition and Aging  
**Tips for Recruiting and Working with Volunteers**  
FOR SENIOR NUTRITION PROGRAMS

*Updated: September 2021*

Throughout the aging network, volunteers play an essential role, donating countless hours of time and expertise. Without them, our programs would have great difficulty carrying out our mission, so it's crucial not to overlook this valuable asset.

Here are some tips to help you recruit, build, and maintain a strong working relationship with volunteers.

**Recruit the right people.** We all want to have plenty of volunteers for our programs, but recruiting the right volunteers is key. One of the best ways to do that is to turn to people you know and trust: staff, current volunteers, friends and neighbors, program partners, and community groups and organizations. Find out who they recommend. You can also reach out to organizations like [AmeriCorps](#), [AmeriCorps Seniors](#), and [VolunteerMatch](#) that match volunteers with opportunities in their communities.

There are a number of traits that make someone a good volunteer. When working with seniors, some key traits to look for include:

- Passion
- Compassion
- Empathy
- Patience
- Reliability

**Screen candidates.** All programs should have a formal screening process to ensure that volunteers are the right match — for both them and you. Have volunteers fill out an application, including providing you with references. And then make sure you follow up with those references. If you don't have a volunteer application, check with other senior or nonprofit organizations in your community or state. Applications range from [simple, straightforward forms](#) to extremely comprehensive volunteer packets that include language on background checks, photo/media permission, and confidentiality, like the one used by the [YMCA of Greater Seattle](#).

In addition to the volunteer application, conduct an internet search to see what, if anything, comes up. For example, if the person is on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, etc.), do a quick scan of those accounts to see if there is anything that raises a red flag.

#### *Working with volunteers under 18*

Many young people are eager to serve their communities and make excellent volunteers. However, there are special considerations when working with those younger than 18. For example, young people often need more oversight and supervision, and they should never be left unattended. It's also important to assign age-appropriate tasks and provide clear instructions. If you're looking for young volunteers, local youth groups, like Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts, schools, and faith-based community service programs are excellent places to start.



Like adults, volunteers under the age of 18 should also complete an [application form](#). Washington State's [Mt. Si Senior Center](#) uses one application for both adults and those under 18. Also, make sure to get parental or guardian consent, either on the application, or on a separate form, like this one from the [Red Cross](#).

**Get to know volunteers.** People volunteer for different reasons. Taking the time to get to know your volunteers not only benefits you but also helps volunteers to feel more connected to your organization. Find out what prompted them to volunteer, what interests them, whether they have specific skills or expertise that complement your staff or even fill a void, and how much time they can commit. Then, when possible, match volunteers with tasks based on their interests, skills, and availability.

**Provide an orientation and training.** Orientation and training aren't just for paid staff. Volunteers should also receive an appropriate introduction. Orientation may be done in-person or virtually. You may want to create a handbook for volunteers that provides an overview of the program, its policies and procedures, and staff. Meals on Wheels People's [Volunteer Handbook](#) is a great example. Volunteers also need to receive adequate training. Explain the task or assignment thoroughly, demonstrate how to do it, and be clear about timing and who they can turn to for help if they have questions.

**Check in and solicit feedback.** Once you train volunteers, don't forget about them. Check-in periodically. Find out how they're doing and whether they have questions or concerns. Ask them for feedback. Because they bring a fresh eye, volunteers often have helpful suggestions for areas that could be improved. Also, keep in mind that communication is two-way, so offer useful feedback along with lots of positive reinforcement and praise. This will help keep volunteers motivated to continue working with you — remember they are offering their time to you for free!

**Communicate.** Just as you keep staff informed, do the same with your volunteers. Communicate regularly. Provide program updates, talk about successes, and let volunteers know how they have made a valuable difference in helping to carry out the mission.

**Show your appreciation.** Finally, don't forget to thank your volunteers. Everyone likes to be appreciated for their time and efforts, and there are many simple and easy ways to do this. Consider spotlighting a volunteer or a group of volunteers in your newsletter or on your website. Host a volunteer appreciation day or event. Or simply say thank you via an email or the next time you see the individual in person.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of our programs, so make sure you take the time to recruit, build, and maintain strong working relationships with this important and valuable asset. It will pay dividends in the form of happy volunteers and goodwill in the community.