



Risky Business: A Serious Look at Volunteer Risks and What You Can Do About Them

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Background

- **Risk Alternatives** – Improving resilience in the nonprofit sector, one nonprofit at a time
- **Ted Bilich** – CEO
- **Linda Lenrow Lopez** – Director of Operations



Objectives

- What are the risks?
- Legal framework – and why it doesn't matter
- What to do



What are the biggest issues you're facing right now with volunteers?

Definitions

- Risk = Uncertainty
- Threat = Downside Risk
- Opportunity = Upside Risk

What are the downside risks?

What are the downside risks?



FAIL



Sobering . . .

“As you consider how to best manage the risks [of using volunteers] to your organization, ask yourself these five questions:

- 1. How much trouble can volunteers really get in to? A lot.**
- 2. Are we responsible? In a word, yes.**
- 3. How bad can the damage be? Pretty bad.**
- 4. What are the chances of something actually happening? Pretty high.”**

[From Risk Management for Volunteers - 5 Questions Your Nonprofit Should Be Asking (Oct. 3, 2016)]

How can bad things happen?

Failure to **plan**

Failure to **screen**

Failure to **train**

Failure to **supervise**

Failure to **equip**

Failure to **maintain**



Legal Framework

Volunteer Immunity



Charitable Immunity



BUT IT JUST DOESN'T MATTER!

What to do?



Screening and Selection



Why Screen?

- Mutual understanding of roles
- Reject potential bad apples
- Permits **self**-screening



Screening Best Practices

- Develop position description and threat assessment
- Match rigor to risk (vulnerable populations, hazardous activities, special trust, important to mission and reputation)
- Adopt screening criteria and process
- Apply screening process the same way every time
- Follow the results every time

Background Check Best Practices

- Use an outside service (ask insurer about discounts)
- If doing criminal check, establish criteria for relevance
- Obtain permission
- Suggested language:

"My signature below certifies that all statements made on this application are true, complete and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief. I understand these statements are subject to verification. I understand that falsification on this application can disqualify me from consideration or result in my volunteer services being denied."

[According to *Managing Volunteers: Balancing Risk and Reward* (Nonprofit Insurance Alliance)]

What if screening fails?

- Act swiftly!
- Myths about problem volunteers
 - Ignoring the problem will make it go away
 - No one else notices
 - I can fix the problem person
 - There's good in everyone – I just need to give them a chance
 - If I confront them, it will make it worse
 - If I confront them, they will leave and the program will die
 - If I'm really caring and accepting, I can handle them
 - If I push them out, they will be mad at me

[From Sue Vineyard, Eight Myths About Difficult Volunteers
<https://www.energizeinc.com/art/eight-myths-about-difficult-volunteers>]

Training Best Practices

- Orientation/Messaging
- Responsibilities
- Skills
- Policies and procedures briefing
- Safety briefing
- Protocol for reporting problems, concerns and improvements



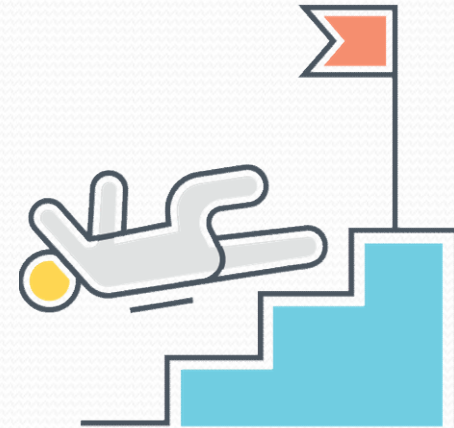
Supervising Best Practices

- Provide explicit instructions on **activities to perform**
- Provide explicit instructions about **permissible and impermissible actions**
- Emphasize that **safety** of clients and volunteers are top priorities
- **Discipline** for failure to conform to instructions
- Make sure **first aid, protective equipment** available
- Prepare **action plans** for client injuries and volunteer injuries



Elements of Injury Action Plan

- Emphasize compassion
- Document incident
- Find cause
- Check about insurance coverage
- Follow-up to prevent recurrence



[According to *Managing Volunteers: Balancing Risk and Reward* (Nonprofit Insurance Alliance)]

Shifting Volunteer Threats

Waivers



Insurance



Addressing Engagement Threats

- Explain how making a difference
- Keep informed
- Solicit ideas
- Feature in reports, newsletters, and presentations
- Provide awards
- Send thank you cards
- Consider a recognition event

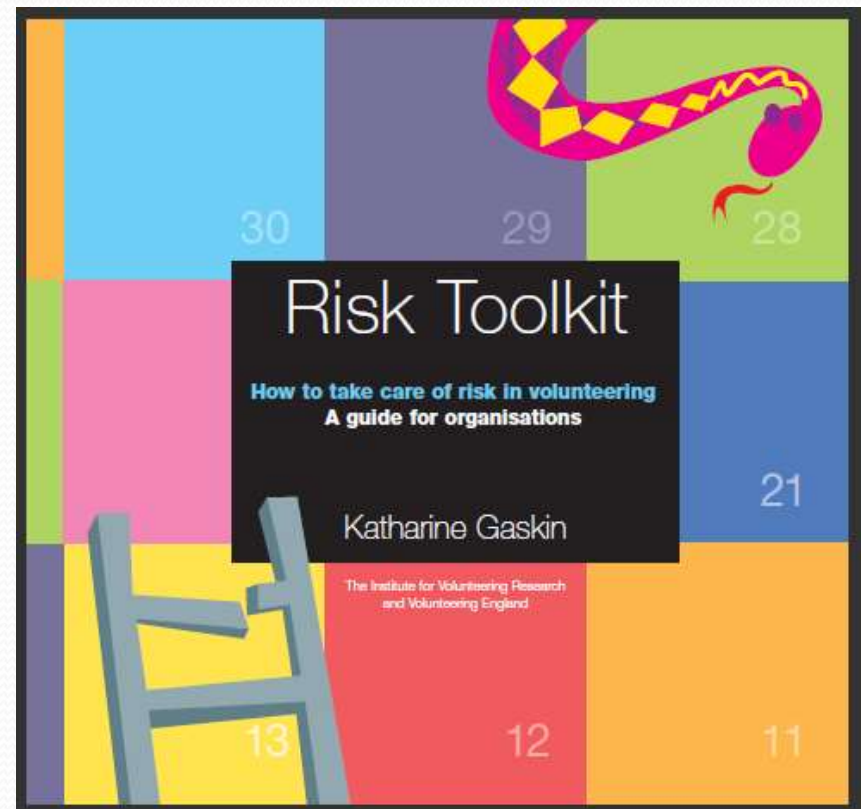
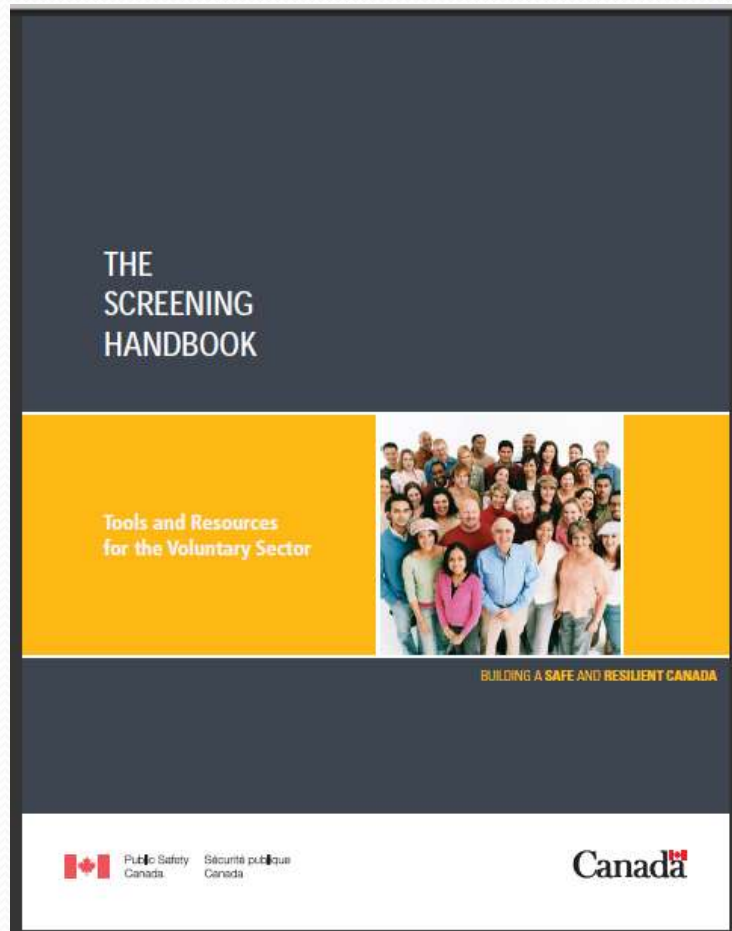


Action Plan for **Your** Volunteer Threats

1. Identify where and how you use volunteers
2. Prioritize the volunteer roles according to your initial sense of where the greatest threats lie. Focus on those roles first
3. Ask all relevant parties for input
4. Evaluate all areas of delivery of services, looking for risks, and using this presentation as a guide
5. Review policies and procedures for compliance with laws, licensing, etc.
6. Evaluate screening, training, supervision, and engagement
7. Review prior incident records, looking for patterns
8. Ask peer organizations for their experiences and materials
9. Inspect the place where services are rendered, looking for potential issues (safety, ease of supervision, available equipment, etc.)

[Adapted from *Risk Toolkit for Volunteers* (Katharine Gaskin)]

Resources



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