

## Volunteer rights and obligations



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Susan J. Ellis explains rights and obligations that volunteers should comply with. Want to know more about it?

### **Susan J. Ellis**

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**Description:**

President of [Energize, Inc.](#), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism.

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**Volunteering** is about relationships. A person chooses to give precious time and talent in some way in order to help a selected cause. So signing up begins an **ethical contract** between the volunteer and the host organization, which is extended to interactions the volunteer will have with paid staff, other volunteers, and with the recipients of service. Volunteer **“rights and obligations”** will, of course, vary with the circumstances but there are some universal principles worth considering.

1. **Priority rights belong to the people served**, especially if they are vulnerable clients with less social power than the employees and volunteers trying to help them. Nonprofit and government agencies must always assess their actions in terms of the benefit to the service recipient.
2. **Some rights are human**. In other words, volunteers deserve the same respect, courtesy, communication, opportunities, concern for personal comfort and safety, and leadership support in order to succeed in their work as would an employee. Similarly, the giving of time should receive the same appreciation as the giving of money – especially as volunteering inherently requires more personal commitment and risk than writing a check.
3. **Other rights are obtained by earning them**, again whether for paid or unpaid work. Following through on volunteer commitments made and contributing valuable services without recompense deserves such things as: the right to voice an opinion about the process and outcome; public recognition acknowledging specific contributions made; receiving the same reports and meeting invitations as anyone else involved; access to decision-makers to ask questions and raise concerns. However, volunteers (except for those on the board of directors) are not “in charge” and should not expect to make final decisions.
4. **Volunteers deserve respect for their limited time**, which should never be wasted by an organization through lack of preparation or insufficient necessary work available. Also, volunteers have the right not to be taken for granted as willing to do “anything.” They should be offered activities they are qualified to do and like to do – and always work that makes a difference to the organization’s mission.
5. **Volunteers take on the same obligations as paid staff in terms of quality of performance and accountability for actions and promises**. This means that the often-heard statement, “I’m just a volunteer,” is never acceptable. If the cause needs to be supported and people need to be served, volunteers should feel responsible to follow through on their commitments, no matter how small.
6. **Volunteers should see themselves as both insiders and outsiders**. When completing work, volunteers are part of the organization’s corps of workers. But volunteers also represent the public and bring a unique perspective. They should feel obligated to speak up if something they observe is troubling – or great! – and offer help to improve how clients/consumers are served. (Employees legitimately feel constrained to criticize because they need their jobs.) In this way, volunteering is always a political act: it is done for the good of others and influences policy as much as it fills needs.

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