

# Risk Management Do's and Don'ts When Engaging Older Adults in Service

## Do:

1. Think about the types of assignments and responsibilities older adult volunteers will have in your organization before you begin a targeted recruitment effort. Respect these valuable volunteers by planning for their involvement in your nonprofit well before they arrive at your new volunteer information session or recruitment drive.
2. Ask prospective older adult volunteers for input about their involvement in your nonprofit. Find out what tasks they are comfortable performing and what tasks or activities they cannot or do not want to perform.
3. Require that older adult volunteers, along with all other volunteers, complete a Medical Information Form containing information on special medical conditions (such as allergies), all medications and at what dosage they are taken, and key contact information in the event of a medical or other emergency.
4. Engage older adults who initiate disclosure of a specific physical or other limitation. Explore with the older adult what they are comfortable doing or how the task or assignment can be modified to address the limitation rather than rule out the possibility of their participating in the activity or contributing to your organization.
5. Learn about the special talents and skills of older adult volunteers.
6. Provide a position description to each older adult volunteer in order to convey your expectations with respect to the volunteer's role and responsibilities in your organization. The job description should provide the kind of information the older adult volunteer will need to determine whether he or she can fully perform the tasks you require.
7. Include specific job requirements (e.g., lifting boxes weighing up to 30 pounds) on your volunteer position descriptions. Spelling out specific tasks lets prospective volunteers know what you require while reducing the chance that a mismatch will be made.
8. Provide an orientation and appropriate training for older adult volunteers. Every volunteer needs information about what you expect, as well as resources available to help them succeed while working for you—just as your staff members do in order to perform as you wish.
9. Create a welcoming environment for older adult volunteers. If there is a substantial learning curve for service, consider pairing new volunteers with experienced “mentor” volunteers who can show them the ropes. Educate all your volunteers how to work with people of all ages as part of their volunteer experience.
10. Strive to provide flexibility in work hours and assignments. Keep in mind that older adults have busy lives that may involve providing child care, caring for parents, managing family matters, other volunteer commitments and more.
11. Remember that patience is a virtue when supervising all volunteers. An older adult whose memory “isn't what it used to be” may be among your most active and valued volunteers. The occasional need to repeat instructions is well worth the benefit you'll reap from dedicated, mature volunteers who believe in your mission. Also, consider whether perhaps it was the instructions that needed fine-tuning and not the senior's hearing or comprehension.

12. Encourage older adult volunteers to ask questions while serving your organization. Like volunteers in other age groups, some older adults may be reluctant to ask questions because they fear that the question suggests ignorance or inattentiveness. Gently encourage questions and make certain all your volunteers know “there is no such thing as a dumb question.”

**Don't:**

1. Don't make assumptions about physical or other challenges facing older adults simply because of their age. Assuming that any volunteer 60 or older will not have the energy for coaching duties, or jobs that require prolonged standing or walking, is a grave mistake.
2. Don't assign older adult volunteers “busy work.” Remember that perhaps more so than other groups of volunteers, older adults infrequently look for “one day” or temporary volunteer opportunities. Don't miss the opportunity to engage a volunteer who will make a meaningful contribution to your nonprofit.
3. Don't exempt older adult volunteers from your screening process because you believe it is disrespectful to screen mature adults or you believe that older people do not pose a risk to vulnerable clients. All prospective workers should be subject to a screening process based on an analysis of the risks of the position. A rigorous process should be employed whenever a volunteer (or paid staff member) will have unsupervised contact with vulnerable clients, whether they are young, disabled, etc.