

Tips for setting up volunteer grievance policies and procedures

Why have a volunteer grievance policy?

Having a volunteer grievance policy can reduce the potential for things to go wrong in your organisation. It can be a tool to help address problems that arise in organisations quickly and fairly and to keep the focus of your organisation on its mission.

One of the rights of volunteers is to have access to a grievance procedure so that individuals and organisations can work through problems that can arise in the course of volunteering. *The Volunteer Rights and Volunteers Checklist* outlines the right of volunteers to a grievance policy.

Tips for setting up *volunteer grievance policies and procedures* can help you to develop a grievance policy in your organisation, or if you are a volunteer, to understand what features a grievance policy should have.

A sound grievance policy for volunteers can help your organisation to:

- work through problems or disputes that arise within organisations;
- reassure volunteers that such problems can be dealt with in a systematic and consistent fashion and without resort to 'ad hoc' decision making.
- reassure volunteers that their dispute can be settled as close as possible to the source of the dispute in the first instance, or if necessary, through the involvement of leaders in the organisation.
- Ensure that all people, either those with the grievance or anyone having a grievance raised with regards to their behavior, can be treated fairly and without bias.

Maintaining a grievance policy and related procedures, and keeping your volunteers aware of how they can have recourse to it if necessary, will help your organisation to achieve the 'best practice' volunteer management standards outlined in the *National Standards for Involving Volunteers in Not for Profit Organisations*.

When may a grievance policy be required?

The types of problems that can be addressed by recourse to a grievance policy include the following types of disputes:

- Personal or work-related disputes between volunteers, or between volunteers and paid workers in an organisation.
- The breakdown of working relationships due to personality conflicts.
- Disputes arising over disciplinary issues.
- Misunderstandings about the nature of volunteers roles, for example the boundaries of volunteer roles.
- Differing treatment between groups of volunteers or individual volunteers (or perceptions of such differing treatment).
- Inappropriate behavior such as bullying, harassment or unwanted touching. In some instances this behavior can be criminal and decisions will need to be made by individuals and organisations about whether to involve the police.
- Addressing any instance where a volunteer or group of volunteers has a complaint or dispute with another volunteer, group of volunteers, other worker or the organisation more broadly.

Establishing Grievance Policies and Procedures

Grievances are best addressed by organisations as both policies and procedures:

Policies and procedures – what is the difference?

What is a policy: sets out an organisations values or position on a particular issue. It is a statement or guideline that says how the organisation intends to operate and how it expects its staff to act.

What is a procedure: A procedure describes actions. It provides a clear step-by-step guide to help people put into practice an organisation's policy on a particular issue.

From Volunteering Australia's *Start Smart* resource for designing a general volunteering policy

Grievance policies

The ideal grievance policy will be a short statement of policy outlining the general approach to dealing with grievances in the organisation. It shouldn't need to be longer than one page. Many organisations link a grievance policy to a larger volunteer management policy in their organisation.

Your grievance policy should briefly outline your organisations values or position on how it intends to resolve grievances, including brief statements on how the organisation intends to operate and how it expects its staff to act.

The grievance policy should:

- Outline the general approach and principles of the policy.
- Outline the scope of the policy: who can use the grievance policy?
- Be as brief and easy to understand as possible
- Carry the signature of the president or CEO to indicate their support for the policy.
- Note how it links to a broader volunteer policy or other related policies and procedures in your volunteer management program.

Outlining a set of principles to guide the resolution of grievances is a valuable first step. All procedures should be framed in accordance with the principles. Some possible principles might include:

- Confidentiality
- Fairness (i.e. grievances are resolved without bias)
- Timeliness
- Grievances are resolved as close to the source as possible
- Free of unfair repercussions

Developing the grievance policy in consultation with others in your organisation (including volunteers, any paid workers and the board or CEO) will ensure your grievance policy is as relevant to your organisation as possible, and engender a strong sense of ownership of the policy.

Once the policy (and the supporting procedures) have been finalised it is important to communicate the policy throughout the wider organisation. Reviewing the policy regularly – at least once a year – will help to ensure it is relevant and serving your organisation and its volunteers well.

A General Volunteer Policy

A general volunteer policy helps volunteers to understand their rights and responsibilities. It also explains how your organisation will involve them in its work and how they will be managed. Good policies also provide fairness and consistency. Volunteers know that decisions will be made following the same process, rather than in an arbitrary, ad hoc fashion.

How to go about setting up a general volunteer policy is addressed in the Start Smart resource. A grievance policy is a specific policy that will slot into or sit under the general policy.

Grievance procedures

Grievance procedures should be framed by the general approach and principles outlined in the grievance policy. Whereas this policy describes the general approach and principles for resolving grievances, grievance procedures outline the specific steps people can take to try to resolve their grievance as easily and sensitively as possible.

Different organisations handle grievances differently. Factors such as organisational size, culture and structure will influence how organisations create procedures to resolve grievances. Grievance procedures might include:

- Designated grievance ‘contacts’ in your organisation. More than one grievance contact will help to minimize potential conflicts of interest. Grievance contacts should act as a source of advice for informally clarifying the nature of grievances. Where a staged procedure is in place, these contacts can have formalised role in guiding parties through the procedural stages.
- A staged process. A staged process is consistent with the principles of timeliness and solving problems close to their source. For example, in the first instance volunteers can attempt to resolve grievances informally with only a few people involved. If the grievance is not resolved, different stages of the procedure can be utilised, involving higher level personnel and more formal processes such as conciliation or mediation.
- Guidelines for documentation. While informal grievance resolution may not require any documentation, where grievances remain it may be helpful to request written statements or to develop other documentation. Whether or not this information is kept securely or destroyed, consistency is important and information management guidelines should be outlined clearly in the procedures, as well as reiterated to people involved in a reported grievance.
- Guidelines for withdrawing grievances. It will often be appropriate to give people raising grievances the right to withdraw grievances at any time in the process.
- Guidelines for alerting the CEO or President of the organisation to grievances that involve threats to physical safety or criminal behavior (or potentially criminal behavior). Where criminal, or potentially criminal, behavior is involved volunteers should be alerted to this along with their right to pursue the matter with police. In some instances alternative legal avenues (i.e. under civil law) may be available to volunteers.

Checklist

A Grievance Policy

Does the grievance policy:

- Outline principles to frame the resolution of grievances?
- Link to an overarching volunteer management policy?
- Link to related policies and procedures in the organisation?
- Apply to all volunteers and paid workers within the organisation?
- Carry the signature of the CEO or President?

Has the grievance policy been:

- Developed in consultation with volunteers and paid workers (or a representative group) affected by it?
- Communicated to all volunteers and paid workers subject to it?
- Flagged for (at least) annual review?

Grievance Procedures

Are the grievance procedures:

- Consistent with the grievance policy?

Do the grievance procedures:

- Designate a number of people to act as contact points for people raising grievances?
- Provide a 'staged' means for volunteers to attempt to resolve grievances informally and close to the source, with recourse to more formal processes if required?
- Outline protocols for managing/keeping/destroying documentation relating to grievances?

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