Guidelines for Volunteer Programs Coordinated by the Friends of the Library

Volunteer Engagement and Applications
Volunteer roles should be designed to address the organization’s strategic needs, while also making the most of today’s volunteer interests, skills, and availability. The Friends leadership should identify opportunities to engage volunteers in the work of the organization. Individuals who volunteer often see working with the Friends as a way to give back to their community and the library. A formal application process should be the entry point for any person wanting to volunteer. The application can be a simple online form or a one-page document asking for contact information, availability, skills, and areas of interest. A request for at least two references is a best practice.

Policies and Procedures
Volunteer policies should be outlined in a written training manual provided to all individuals as part of their orientation. Volunteers need to familiarize themselves with standards expected in their volunteer capacity. The library’s Board of Trustees should have a Board-approved volunteer policy in place that should be provided to the Friends volunteer. The library’s policy may establish a minimum age for volunteers (e.g., 13 years). In some instances, the library may require a criminal background check before a person is considered for volunteer status.

Volunteer Coordinator
The Volunteer Coordinator does not need to be an officer in the organization. This position could be a volunteer supervisor or a library staff member assigned to conduct interviews and place volunteers. There could be a Volunteer Committee of Friends members to carry out these functions. The Coordinator completes the intake process to ensure prospective volunteers are a good fit for the organization, including evaluating basic qualifications and skills. The applications received should be handled in a timely manner. The Coordinator should make every effort to give the volunteer an assignment that aligns with the applicant’s interests and qualifications. If the person does not turn out to be a good fit, are there alternative jobs to suggest?

Volunteer Roles and Position Descriptions
Whether you are looking for a technology expert, social media marketer, or team leader for a major fundraiser, engage volunteers in roles that will leverage the individual’s skill set. Offer flexible schedules or even virtual volunteer opportunities. Potential volunteers should be able to review written position descriptions to determine if the work will be a good investment of their time and talents. The position statements should include a descriptive title, an overview of the work and how it makes a difference, key responsibilities, volunteer qualifications, the training and support to be provided, benefits of serving in this role, the expected time requirements, length of appointment, and a list of collaborators (e.g., the library staff member contact for the Friends). Physical requirements may be listed (e.g., able to lift cartons weighing up to 40 lbs.), but accommodations should be made for people unable to meet those requirements.

Screening and Interviews
Finding the best match between the organization’s needs and the skills, abilities, and interests of potential volunteers strengthens the volunteer program. A group interview might be appropriate for a team of people to work on a book sale. An individual interview would provide a more effective screening process for positions needing a high level of customer service skills for interacting with the public or financial acumen, such as a book sale cashier. Does the person’s skills, motivations, and interests strongly match up with the volunteer position?
Volunteer Service Agreements: Making It Official
Each volunteer should receive a letter of welcome to serve as a document showing they are being appointed to a volunteer position. The placement letter outlines the Friends organizational mission and purpose. Attachments should include a copy of the position description to which the person is assigned, volunteer guidelines, and the code of conduct policy. The Volunteer Coordinator should address any questions raised about the position or any of the attachments. There should be clearly stated expectations for the work, including attendance, punctuality, and notice for absences. The volunteer is asked to sign the agreement and will be provided with a copy. The Volunteer Coordinator should retain the original.

Training and Professional Development
Careful and thorough training increases effectiveness and encourages the efficiency of the volunteer program. All volunteers need to receive an orientation to familiarize them with the people, policies, systems, and procedures relevant to their roles. Who designates the volunteer’s work? Will paid library staff provide direction? The volunteers should receive communications in a timely fashion, especially when the work is collaborative, to keep the entire team informed. Have a volunteer bulletin board where updates can be posted regularly and inform people of changes to procedures via email.

Mentoring new volunteers and coaching existing volunteers is vital for accurate outputs and long-term retention. Introduce the new volunteer to the group’s culture and help the person to understand their role quickly and easily. Volunteers need to have the appropriate space, necessary equipment, and technology in order to be successful in the assigned tasks.

Accountability and Code of Conduct
Volunteers are the face of the Friends of the Library. The image volunteers project to library patrons and the public is important for the continued success of this volunteer organization that supports a vital community resource. Individuals are accountable for their work, have the right to work in a collegial atmosphere, and be able to see how their efforts make a difference.

Confidentiality should be maintained of any privileged information about library business, fellow volunteers, library staff, or patrons, including Friends membership records. Volunteers need to conduct themselves in a manner appropriate to the best interests of the library. All volunteers and patrons must be treated with courtesy, dignity, and respect to promote a healthy volunteer culture.

Volunteers need to be informed of the chain of command to address complaints. Conflicts should be resolved constructively with the volunteer’s supervisor. Making independent decisions outside of customary procedures or not adhering to established job descriptions constitutes inappropriate conduct. Negative, insensitive, and aggressive behaviors cannot be tolerated. Misconduct may lead to terminating a volunteer’s services. Releasing the individual may be in the best interest of the organization and the most responsible course of action.

Volunteer Recognition
Always work to strengthen relationships with existing volunteers. Be supportive and encourage individuals to take on new roles, especially leadership of the Friends, if they are capable and want to continue to stay connected with the organization over many years. Provide feedback and thank volunteers regularly for their efforts, whether small or significant. Authentically acknowledge the effect their important work is having. Tell the community, library leaders, and staff how the volunteers’ contributions are valuable and have made an impact on the library.

Compiled and written by Lisa C. Wemett for FLS. All rights reserved.
Contact FLS/NYLA at: FLS.NYLA@yahoo.com
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