



PROMISING PRACTICE: USING VOLUNTEERS FOR CULTURAL ORIENTATION

OVERVIEW

Delivery of Cultural Orientation (CO) happens throughout the refugee resettlement process and, as such, relies on the support and abilities of various individuals. While resettlement staff serve a critical role in delivering CO, some organizations have also opted to utilize volunteers in CO delivery.

The term “volunteer” in this document is defined broadly to include students, interns, and AmeriCorps members as well as individuals from faith-based groups and the general community. Volunteers can have different roles in the implementation of CO, including serving as interpreters, working as CO trainers, assisting with childcare, providing transportation, or contributing to curriculum design. The use of volunteers for CO benefits refugees, the staff working with refugees, and the larger community.

While many nonprofit organizations utilize volunteers, proper recruitment and management of volunteers is necessary to advance and enhance services and meet the needs of those served. To prevent or alleviate challenges presented by using volunteers, organizations will need to conduct an assessment of their needs, plan carefully, and oversee volunteer activities closely. This promising practice aims to provide guidance to organizations interested in using volunteers as a part of CO delivery.

APPLICATION

GOAL OF PROMISING PRACTICE

By using volunteers for CO, you will be able to:

- Support staff to develop and deliver a successful CO program at your office
- Enhance refugee learning and engagement by customizing and reiterating key CO messages based on refugees' needs
- Create additional opportunities for refugees to integrate into their communities, while also increasing community involvement in the refugee resettlement process

WHAT TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU BEGIN



WHO IS INVOLVED

Successful recruitment and management of volunteers requires engagement of various staff, starting with clear guidance and support from organizational leadership. Depending on the agency, organizational leadership may include national program management staff, who may provide guidelines, processes, and tools.

Affiliate and field offices that have been successful at using volunteers in CO usually have a designated staff member for volunteer recruitment and management. However, a point of contact for volunteers can also be a caseworker, manager, or a committed volunteer. Regardless of the title, the selected individual should have experience managing volunteers, be knowledgeable about the refugee resettlement program, and have strong communication skills.



MATERIALS AND RESOURCES NEEDED

In using volunteers for CO, you will need to ensure you have in place a structured volunteer management system to include key components such as the recruitment process, onboarding requirements, and volunteers' roles and responsibilities. The volunteer management system should also include the monitoring and tracking of volunteers' contact information, hours, attendance, and other logistical information. You may have access to additional information and perhaps even volunteer management software either at your own offices or from your Resettlement Agency national office.



TIMING

The time needed to recruit, train, and manage volunteers for CO will vary based on the scope of work required of them. In some cases, volunteers may be used for short-term projects or to complete an internship over a few months, while other volunteers may make longer commitments, such as delivering CO on an ongoing basis for a year or more. Regardless of the scope, you will need to invest the proper time to recruit, onboard, and continually engage with volunteers throughout their service.

PRACTICE IN ACTION

CWS' AmeriCorps Program

For the past three years, Church World Service (CWS) has implemented the Refugee AmeriCorps Initiative, an 11-member program across 10 operating sites. AmeriCorps members focus on providing intensive community orientation in the areas of housing and health to refugees who have been in the U.S. five years or less. Through this model, CWS has been able to provide in-home and in-the-community one-on-one and group education in these areas. Members are able to tailor activities to the client's needs and ensure the client's confidence to navigate housing and health topics. The program's success has relied on a robust onboarding process, including a firm grasp of adult learning theories, continuing education through regular Community of Practice calls that facilitate knowledge exchange, and regular monitoring and tracking of AmeriCorps members' progress.

STEP BY STEP GUIDE

1

ASSESS NEED

The first step to using volunteers for CO is to assess CO needs at your organization and clearly define how volunteers will assist in addressing those needs. For example, do you need a volunteer with specific expertise to support a CO topic that has been challenging for refugees to understand like transportation or healthcare? Do you need a volunteer to help with one-on-one or group-based CO? As a part of assessing needs, consider the population you are serving, arrival patterns, and the local community. You should also consider staff capacity to recruit, support, and manage volunteers.

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CREATE VOLUNTEER JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Once you have a clear vision of how you want to use volunteers to support your CO delivery, you will need to create job descriptions for the volunteer roles you have in mind. This is an opportunity to clearly outline the responsibilities of the volunteers and the expected outcomes of their work. The job descriptions should also define the expected time commitment, the staff and refugee populations the volunteers will be working with, and any necessary or preferred skills or certifications.

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RECRUIT AND SELECT

After developing a volunteer job description, the next step is to create a volunteer recruitment and selection strategy. Consider potential opportunities to find volunteers. For example, do you have existing volunteers that might be interested in CO specifically? Can you establish partnerships with local universities or faith-based groups? Do you need to attend outreach events, facilitate meetings with businesses or corporations in your community, or host information sessions? Your recruitment strategy should include targets for number of people engaged and actual volunteers recruited. This practice will help monitor the ongoing time commitment required to recruit new volunteers. Based on recruitment efforts, you can then select volunteers through an interview process to ensure they are an appropriate match for the volunteer job description.

PRACTICE IN ACTION

Adaptive approaches for volunteers engaging in CO

HIAS has established a robust volunteer management toolkit and provides its sites with access to volunteer management software. Drawing on these resources, their affiliates have adopted different approaches in using volunteers to deliver CO. At HIAS New York, volunteers can opt to teach specific CO topics on dates that work for their schedules, while also ensuring there is available interpretation for refugees. All volunteers that provide CO go through the standard volunteer onboarding procedures and an additional training on administering CO. Many of the volunteers have teaching or facilitation experience. Volunteers are also encouraged to complete CORE's Online CO Certification Course.

Another HIAS model for using volunteers for CO is the Welcome Group model. For more than two years, the Jewish Family and Community Services East Bay in Walnut Creek, California has utilized this model, whereby four to eight volunteers are vetted and trained together and assigned to a refugee family. Volunteering starts three to ten days after the family's arrival and continues for about six months. As a part of their role, these volunteers support CO delivery by familiarizing refugee clients to the neighborhood and teaching them about public transportation. A key component of the Welcome Groups is to reinforce the volunteer role as a partner with resettlement staff during the refugee family's first 90 days in the U.S. Another benefit of the Welcome Groups, other than assisting with CO and other resettlement activities, is the additional assistance they provide to the families and the lasting friendships that can continue beyond the first months after arrival.

STEP BY STEP GUIDE CONTINUED

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ONBOARD

The onboarding process is critical not only for volunteers, but also for the staff and refugees who will be engaging with them. You should have clear onboarding and training plans. Onboarding should cover the fundamentals of refugee resettlement and CO delivery, as well as provide training on how to work effectively with resettlement staff, refugees, and interpreters. During the onboarding process, it is vital to review the volunteer job description and articulate the importance of CO in the resettlement process. New volunteers should also have clear guidance on how to access ongoing support and engagement from you or other staff members at your office.

The following is a list of recommended actions to include as a part of onboarding volunteers for CO:

- Provide an orientation of your refugee resettlement program
- Review roles and responsibilities and establish expectations
- Complete a volunteer commitment form or similar document
- Use **CORE's CO Provider Onboarding Toolkit**
- Provide the volunteer with a copy of the **CO Objectives and Indicators**
- Ask the volunteer to complete the **Online CO Certification Course**
- Teach the volunteer about refugee resettlement and working with interpreters
- Give guidance on confidentiality and the expected code of conduct
- Share backgrounders on refugee populations
- Provide information and training on conducting evaluations for CO
- Facilitate shadowing of CO staff and observation of other resettlement activities
- Have the volunteer practice applying adult learning principles
- Create a plan and schedule for follow-up support and additional training

PRACTICE IN ACTION

Building Long-Term Volunteer Programs

The CO programs at both the North Carolina office of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) and the Boise, Idaho office of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) have benefited from long-term volunteers.

For three years, USCRI North Carolina has utilized two volunteers for CO delivery. Originally, the volunteers started as a part of USCRI's Welcome Home Project, where they prepared and set up apartments for refugees and provided mentoring to newly arrived families. In conducting a regular check-in with the volunteers, USCRI North Carolina asked them about the possibility of delivering CO. In preparing them to take on this new role, the volunteers underwent additional training with USCRI and took CORE's Online CO Certification Course. Their service has enhanced CO at the site on multiple levels. The volunteers enjoy the experience and have worked on improving delivery, including participating in CORE's CO Knowledge Exchange Workshop. They have also trained a third volunteer. For the refugees, this model of CO promotes further integration into their communities and creates additional avenues to communicate about their experiences. Finally, the use of volunteers has allowed caseworkers, who previously delivered CO, to focus on other services.

At IRC Boise, the use of long-term volunteers started five years ago. Prior to using volunteers, CO was delivered by case workers. The office was experiencing challenges with administering CO due to staff time constraints and the need to provide childcare services during CO. To address these needs, the site secured a space in a local church which had a room for childcare. At the same time, they identified volunteers to provide childcare and assist in CO delivery. They have three consistent volunteers, who are also involved in other activities at the office, which strengthens their commitment and gives them a better understanding of the entire resettlement process. These volunteers also meet periodically to identify ways of enhancing CO delivery by focusing on different topics and their own teaching styles.

STEP BY STEP GUIDE CONTINUED

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MANAGE

As a part of the ongoing management of volunteers, you should determine the process you will use to supervise and recognize volunteers. When volunteers are managed effectively, volunteer accountability and satisfaction are impacted favorably as well as demands on staff time. Without a plan for ongoing engagement, volunteers can lose interest, resulting in higher volunteer turnover, or they may digress from CO topics or miscommunicate information to refugees.

Ongoing management processes should consider who will supervise the volunteer, the supervision mechanism, performance evaluation (including collecting feedback from refugees as appropriate), and the delivery of feedback. In some cases, if you have multiple volunteers, it may be beneficial to provide opportunities for them to exchange and learn from each other's experiences. Additionally, you should consider how you will recognize each individual's service and develop a transition process for when a volunteer departs. Transition plans should include collecting and centralizing any materials or resources the volunteer created or used, documenting lessons learned, logging their activities with recommendations for continuation, and if possible, conducting an in-person exit interview.

PRACTICE IN ACTION

Volunteers as CO experts at Interfaith Refugee Ministry

About three years ago, Interfaith Refugee Ministry (IRM), an Episcopal Migration Ministries' affiliate in New Bern, North Carolina, asked the fire department to speak to the refugee community about fire safety. When the fire department requested to return each quarter, IRM realized they could build a CO program with other volunteers who could become an expert on a given CO topic.

Today, IRM has a continuous CO course, providing ongoing classes to clients as long as they wish. Classes are held four days a week for an hour and a half each day. IRM is able to hold these classes, in part, thanks to the volunteers that teach the classes. Volunteers from the community interested in teaching CO first speak with IRM to learn the overarching topics and process of CO. The volunteer is able to decide which topic most interests them and they are then trained thoroughly on that topic using CORE materials and other local resources.

The community has shown a sustained interest in this CO initiative and the CO coordinator currently only teaches CO in cases of volunteer absence. Volunteers and community members provide snacks for all CO classes and clients continue to be interested in attending. On any given day, 15 to 22 clients will attend CO classes, regardless of their arrival date.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

The following are a list of tips and recommendations based on feedback collected from CO leaders as well as research on volunteer use by nonprofits:

- **Conduct a needs assessment** to identify any gaps in CO provision and where volunteers can assist in filling those gaps.
- **Establish clear roles**, responsibilities, and **expectations** for volunteers.
- Develop and implement a standard **process for recruitment, onboarding, and continued management** of volunteers.
- Provide **continued training** and **leadership opportunities** for volunteers.
- Establish a method to **track volunteer contributions**, including hours served, which can help demonstrate capacity and need when applying for federal programs and grants.

Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange

8719 Colesville Road, 3rd Floor • Silver Spring, MD 20910

www.coresourceexchange.org



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