

Keeping programs and services safe

Risk management is one of the pressing areas of concern for non-profit organizations.

With so many organizations serving vulnerable groups like children and youth, seniors and the disabled, having policies and procedures in place to protect clients, staff and volunteers is a must.

Risk management is about non-profit organizations planning what could happen and taking steps to prevent, minimize and eliminate problems from occurring.

It's more than just buying an insurance policy - it's a complex process that has different components that help make sure the organization is doing all it can to manage and reduce the risks involved, says Janice Bell, director of Volunteer Edmonton.

IDENTIFY PROBLEMS

"A good risk management strategy can help organizations identify problems that could happen before they happen, saving everyone grief and anxiety," she says.

Bell points out that screening volunteer application forms, interviews, reference checks, police and child welfare checks is just one part of managing risk.

Screening helps weed out potentially harmful candidates, and ensures the safety of volunteers and paid staff.

Concerns about what could go wrong runs deep throughout the sector, especially when you consider the sophisticated roles volunteers have within organizations today.

Many volunteers work directly with clients in the community or make major decisions that affect the organization.

Take Terra, a centre for pregnant and parenting teens, for example.

"We know it's very important to screen our volunteers because it's not only the babies we're protecting; many of the mothers here are also minors," says Patricia Peel, co-ordinator of volunteer services.

The area where risk is greatest, according to Peel, is the labour-support coaches, also known as doulas, who work directly one-on-one with expecting mothers.

VOLUNTEER SAFETY

"Part of the policy around our volunteers who work in client homes is that they must notify someone about their whereabouts, whether that is a family member or one of the staff. It's really for our volunteers' safety."

Another major policy is that no volunteer is allowed to transport clients in their vehicles.

"There's too much liability. For example, if the client brings their child, what if there isn't a proper child safety seat available in the car?" Peel explains, adding that the organization has never had any unfortunate incidents happen between clients and volunteers, attributing their success

to their risk management policies.

While implementing risk management policies is necessary, it can also be difficult and time-consuming.

"Some of the challenges have been the time and energy it takes to develop the policies and procedures with the input of as many staff as possible, says Debbie Clark, executive director of Candora Society.

"Also, we have varying levels of literacy and some of the research and rationale to support the procedure and policy development is difficult to understand."



Bell cautions that certain risk management strategies should be tailored to fit the situation.

A volunteer who drives frail seniors to appointments will not have the same level of risk compared to a volunteer who works in an office doing database entry.

"Risk management isn't just about police checks. Rather, determining what kinds of risks are involved with a particular position should give organizations an idea on what kinds of screening measures to use," says Bell. "Avoid screening for the sake of screening. Cumbersome application processes will turn potential volun-

teers away from your organization."

Balancing the need to be thorough yet inclusive is a challenge for any organization, but taking steps to evaluate risk management strategies will benefit not only the organization, but the community as a whole.

"Understanding how to be proactive and identifying problems that could occur will result in an organization that can continue delivering its programs and services," Bell explains.

For more information or suggestions for story ideas, please contact Evelyn Pham, Communications Co-ordinator, at epham@volunteeredmonton.com, call 780-732-6655 or check out our website at www.volunteeredmonton.com.

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