

The North of England Refugee Service

Volunteer Policy

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Summary:

This policy sets out the North of England Refugee Service's (NERS) policy in respect to volunteering and the procedures and guidelines, which should be followed by staff and volunteers.

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The North of England Refugee Service is an independent, charitable organisation that exists to meet the needs and represent the interests of asylum seekers and refugees who are settling or have settled within its area of remit, that is the counties of Northumberland, Tyne & Wear, Cumbria, Durham and the Tees Valley. As an organisation we are very committed to volunteering and we recognise the vital role that volunteers have to play within our service.

1.0 Statement of Volunteers' Involvement with NERS

1.1 We aim to provide valuable volunteering opportunities for the mutual benefit of the volunteer, NERS and the clients of NERS, and therefore maximise the potential of volunteers throughout NERS. We recognise that there are positive reasons for involving volunteers in our organisation and these are set out below:

1.2 Resources and Quality

Involving volunteers increases the amount of work that NERS can commit to. By giving volunteers adequate training and support, they improve the quality of service that we give to our clients and the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation as a whole. Senior Management Team and the Board of Directors ensure that resources for volunteering are included in the annual planning process.

1.3 Diversity

Volunteers increase the range of skills, interests, life experiences and cultural backgrounds within NERS.

1.4 Accountability

Involving volunteers in the work that NERS does is an important way of providing accountability. Volunteers look at the work we do with a fresh perspective and more objectivity. This is essential to the health of any team and provides an additional safeguard for our clients.

1.5 Awareness

Volunteers raise awareness about the situation that is facing asylum seekers and refugees in the North East and refugees on a worldwide scale to people outside of NERS. They therefore help dispel myths and misconceptions about asylum seekers and so help with our campaigning and advocacy.

1.6 Integration

Volunteers of different nationalities and cultures working together to achieve shared aims, creates a unique opportunity to develop cross-

cultural relations and understanding within NERS and in the local community.

1.7 Volunteer Personal Development

NERS believes that volunteering is a two way process. Volunteers give their time freely to enrich the work that we do in assisting our vulnerable community of refugees and asylum seekers while, at the same time, we encourage the volunteers to set up long term achievable goals and work towards them through the volunteering opportunities that NERS offers.

2.0 Objectives of the Policy

2.1 The principal objective of the NERS Volunteer Policy is to define good practice on volunteering for use throughout the organisation as is spelt out in the Investing in Volunteers Quality Mark.

2.2 Good volunteering practice is essential as it:

- a) ensures that there is a high standard of service delivery to our clients;
- b) gives a framework which allows the involvement of volunteers within NERS;
- c) ensures the standardisation of volunteering practices throughout NERS.

3.0 Paid staff and volunteers

3.1 Cooperation between staff and volunteers

The relationship between staff and volunteers is complementary and mutually supportive. Staff are consulted throughout volunteer initiatives and different areas of responsibility clearly defined and agreed, so volunteers are not relied on to deliver contracted services and so staff do not feel threatened by the presence of volunteers. Staff involvement and co-operation in making sure volunteers receive the respect and recognition they deserve is vital.

3.2 An extra service

Wherever possible the tasks carried out by volunteers are an “add on” to services offered by paid staff, opening up new areas of work where the resources for paid staff do not exist.

3.3 Staff involvement

Staff, are given the opportunity where appropriate, to get involved in volunteer management, support, supervision and training since these are good opportunities for developing understanding between staff and volunteers within NERS. This aspect of work is included in paid staff job descriptions, where it is a regular feature of the work.

4.0 Planning new volunteer opportunities

4.1 Assessing the need for volunteers

Initial research is undertaken into the need for volunteers. It is the responsibility of the Regional Volunteer Co-ordinator, working with staff, to identify ways in which the work of NERS can be extended by the involvement of volunteers.

4.2 Volunteer task descriptions

Volunteer role descriptions are drawn up by the Regional Volunteer Co-ordinator in consultation with the staff from all the four NERS offices, prior to the recruitment of volunteers. This is a useful way to focus on what the organisation expects of its volunteers and how they will fit into its structure. It also gives volunteers an idea of what will be expected of them.

4.3 Volunteering terms of reference

Volunteering terms of reference is signed by all volunteers, and this clearly outlines what is expected of the volunteer and what they can expect from NERS. This covers the responsibilities of the volunteer and the responsibilities of NERS. Volunteering terms of reference do not in any way constitute a formal employment contract. Volunteering terms of reference also clearly states that all volunteering opportunities in NERS are reviewed and approved on a six monthly basis.

Volunteering opportunities could be extended or terminated according to services and clients support needs.

5.0 Recruitment

5.1 Advertising

NERS is committed to equal opportunities in its recruitment of volunteers and we aim to have a volunteer population that reflects the external environment and in responding to our services/clients needs. As part of this all volunteer opportunities are advertised widely, in ways that are accessible to all sections of the community.

5.2 Dealing with enquiries

Enquiries from volunteers contacting NERS to look for volunteering opportunities are dealt by the Regional Volunteer Co-ordinator and his team. All initial enquiries about volunteering opportunities are responded to within reasonable practical time normally within 10 working days.

5.3 Information about volunteering

Adequate and up-to-date information is given to all potential volunteers about the volunteering opportunities within NERS. This includes information about the organisation as a whole and the task description for each position.

6.0 Selection

6.1 Application forms

All potential volunteers complete standardised application forms, as it is vital to keep records of the volunteers involved with the organisation.

6.2 Interview

An informal interview is given to all prospective volunteers. Ideally the Volunteer Co-ordinators conduct the interviews.

6.3 Selection Criteria

Selection criteria are made clear before the interview and volunteer suitability is assessed against this criteria. Selection is based on reaching a minimum of these criteria and responding to changing services and clients support needs.

6.4 References

NERS has a policy of taking up two references for each volunteer in line with its policy for taking up references for its paid staff. At least one reference is normally from a previous employer (paid or voluntary work). Relatives and partners are not acceptable as references. A police check will be carried out on all volunteers, before they start work with NERS. NERS does acknowledge the difficulty that some of our potential volunteers (i.e. asylum seekers and refugees) may have in providing adequate references and will not exclude these individuals solely on this basis. (Refer to Equal Opportunities Policy). In such instances extensive risk assessments are undertaken.

6.5 Induction

A standardised induction session is given, prior to the volunteer commencing their voluntary work. The idea of this induction is to introduce the volunteer into NERS as a whole, the team they are working within and their role as a volunteer. This is to ensure that volunteers are clear about the voluntary role they are about to undertake. Volunteers are given a Volunteer Induction Pack to which they can refer to while volunteering at NERS.

7.0 Equal Opportunities

7.1 NERS is an equal opportunities employer and ensures that no prospective or actual volunteer is discriminated against, on the basis of race, sex, nationality, marital status, employment status, sexual orientation, class, disability, age, religious belief or political persuasion, or is disadvantaged by any condition or requirement which is not demonstrably justifiable. Copies of NERS equal opportunities policy are available from the Volunteer Co-ordinators and from the NERS Quality manual, which is available in all NERS offices.

7.2 For monitoring purposes, volunteers on joining NERS will be able to Complete the Equal opportunities monitoring form which is attached to the main application form.

8.0 Supporting Volunteers

8.1 Training

Volunteers' training needs are assessed, and on-going training is arranged and provided for in the business plan and budget.

8.2 Supervision

Volunteer "Volunteer Co-ordinators", in consultation with staff, supervise volunteers, in the three outlying NERS offices. Volunteers are given regular supervision, as deemed appropriate, by the Volunteer Coordinator of each team. The aim of supervision is to have a fixed time where a volunteer can talk about all aspects of their volunteering, including their training and self-development needs.

8.3 Volunteer Forums

NERS recognises that it is sometimes easy to feel isolated from the rest of the organisation. It is therefore committed to ensuring that volunteers are kept informed of what is happening within the organisation. It ensures as practically as possible that volunteer meetings are established at regular intervals, as appropriate to each team, where volunteers can meet other volunteers and staff. This will be an opportunity to exchange ideas,

feelings and information about volunteering and NERS as a whole. NERS volunteers are also included in NERS team meetings, away days and self assessment days.

8.4 Dealing with problems

NERS has grievance and disciplinary procedures to ensure that complaints are dealt with fairly and consistently. Copies of these procedures are given to volunteers when they commence volunteering. Briefing on these procedures is given to them during induction.

9.0 Links with other policies

9.1 Health and Safety

NERS Volunteers have a safe working environment in compliance with Health and Safety legislation. It is also important to ensure that volunteers have space and any materials they need to work efficiently. The Health and Safety representative with a Volunteer Co-ordinator, take responsibility for ensuring that new volunteers know the Health and Safety rules, Fire Drill procedures etc. during their induction session or on their first day. Volunteers have free access to a copy of Health and Safety guidelines within each team.

9.2 Equal Opportunities of Clients

NERS extends its equal opportunities policy to clients, particularly in respect of equal access to services, advice etc. and has drawn up guidelines in respect of this. Volunteers are made aware of this policy and a copy of the guidelines is included in the Volunteer Induction Pack.

9.3 Confidentiality

All volunteers are required to sign an undertaking (appendix to Confidentiality Policy) to respect the confidentiality of information relating to individual clients acquired as a direct result of their voluntary work with NERS. A guideline on confidentiality is included in the Volunteer Induction Pack. A serious breach of confidentiality could lead to disciplinary action procedures being implemented.

9.4 Boundaries

In order to provide an effective service, clear professional boundaries are required between clients and volunteers. NERS has therefore drawn up guidelines in relation to this. A copy of these guidelines is included in the Volunteer Induction Pack.

9.5 Volunteer task guidelines

NERS provides guidelines detailing which tasks volunteers are permitted to undertake and which tasks trained and accredited staff must perform, to ensure the organisation complies with its legal requirements. A copy of these guidelines is included in the Volunteer Induction Pack.

9.6 Volunteers are signposted to the Quality Manual in each office.

10. Volunteers' Entitlements

10.1 Expenses

NERS aims to eliminate financial barriers to volunteering by reimbursing reasonable "out of pocket" expenses. This would normally cover the actual cost of travel on public transport by the cheapest means, within the sub regional boundaries up to a radius of 25 miles return journey to and from the place of volunteering which is explained within the organisation's guidelines. NERS covers the cost of lunch, up to £2.50, when volunteers have made themselves available for a minimum of one full session per day (4 hours). It is the responsibility of volunteer coordinators to ensure that volunteers ensure that there is no abuse by authorising all claim forms before reimbursement. The level of reimbursement is explained to the volunteer at the initial interview and induction session.

10.2 References for Volunteers

NERS acts as a referee for those volunteers who have fulfilled an agreed minimum commitment. This reference is prepared by Regional Volunteer Co-ordinator or Area Manager, on written request and signed by the CEO.

11. Expectations of the North of England Refugee Service

11.1 Commitment

NERS expects that volunteers commit themselves to an agreed minimum amount of time. This is a matter for discussion between the Volunteer Co-ordinator and the volunteer and will depend upon the role of the volunteer. It is important that volunteers fulfil this minimum commitment as it allows the team the volunteer is working in to plan its workload. It is also expected that volunteers should give as much notice to their team as possible, if for any reason, they cannot attend.

11.2 Level of competence

It is important that the needs of the team within which the volunteer is working are met on an on-going basis. It is therefore necessary to ensure

that volunteers reach and maintain an appropriate level of professional competence in the work they do and it may be necessary to monitor this at regular intervals.

11.3 Leaving the organisation

When a volunteer decides to leave NERS it is requested that volunteers let their team know, through the Volunteer Co-ordinator, as far in advance as possible. This means that steps can then be taken to replace the volunteer in order to ensure continuity in the work done by NERS.

11.4 Evaluation of volunteering

NERS recognises the importance of evaluating the way in which it works with volunteers. Volunteers are therefore asked to participate in exit interviews or questionnaires so that NERS receives feedback on individuals' experiences of volunteering.

11.5 Using the North of England Refugee Services' name

Volunteers cannot speak as public representatives of NERS unless they have been specifically asked by the CEO to do so. This particularly relates to any dealings with the media. Volunteers must not speak to the media about NERS without agreement of the CEO. Any media enquiries should be referred to the CEO.

11.6 Code of conduct for volunteers

As with staff, it is expected that volunteers conduct their work in a professional way and in a way that won't bring themselves and/or NERS into disrepute. All volunteers are expected to abide by these principles. Although there is no dress code, volunteers are encouraged to be sensitive and sensible to clients, staff, their peers' cultures and the general public in the way in which they make themselves presentable.

12. Reviewing the Policy

12.1 NERS is committed to a regular review of how the volunteer policy is working. Review of the policy will be carried out by the Quality Task Group every 2 years. Any feedback from volunteers or staff is much appreciated and should be given to the Quality Task Group.

Approved by the Board of Directors: Signature.....
Position.....
Date:.....