



Engaging Volunteers through ISOTURES: Volunteer Orientation¹

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Overview

Orientation is the process of preparing a volunteer for successful involvement by providing general information that all volunteers should know and specifics related to the volunteer role to be performed by a volunteer. In the Volunteer Life Cycle, orientation is a component of the Decision to Volunteer and frequently overlaps with recruitment and selection, because the potential volunteer needs to have some of the orientation before deciding to volunteer. A volunteer administrator's role can be illustrated using a triangle (Figure 1). As a 4-H agent, effective communication, at orientation and beyond, between paid staff and volunteers is critical for success.

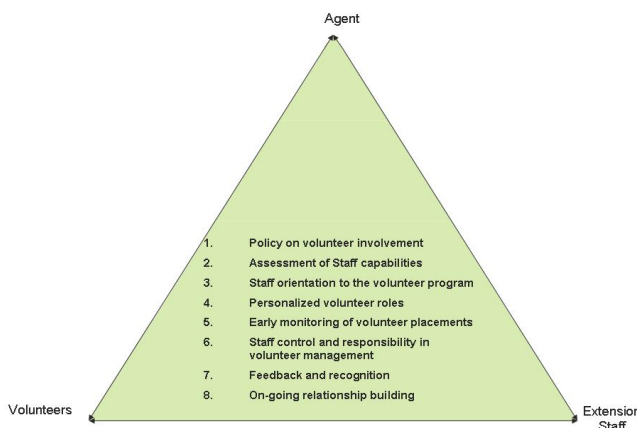


Figure 1. Dynamics of effective volunteer program management

In this section, the following will be addressed:

- Why orientation should be provided
- Subjects to cover during volunteer orientation
- Presentation methods

Why Orientation

Effective orientation allows the Extension professional to provide an overview of the organization, share expectations, and review philosophy, policies, and procedures. At the same time, the new volunteer has an opportunity to ask questions about the volunteer role, meet their peers, interact with the Extension professional, and gain knowledge about the 4-H Youth Development

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program. In addition, volunteer orientation facilitates University of Florida policy (6C1-3.0031):

4 (a) Upon selection, the department / operational unit shall assign each volunteer specific tasks or duties and provide appropriate training. The services expected of each volunteer(s) should be provided to him or her in writing.

What Subjects to Cover during Orientation

McCurley and Lynch (2006) discuss three important themes related to volunteer orientation:

- Cause
- Systems
- Social environment

Incorporating these themes as a strategic approach to a county 4-H volunteer orientation will increase the success of volunteers in the program.

Cause Orientation

Cause orientation provides an opportunity to introduce volunteers to the purpose of 4-H at the county and state level. Typically, this part of the orientation provides insight into:

- Youth development.
- Specifics about the volunteer role to be performed.
- How the volunteer role supports youth involved in 4-H.
- Overview of youth involved in the program.
- Overview of adults involved in the program.
- A description of the mission and values of the county 4-H program.
- A description of the history of the county 4-H program

- A description of the 4-H opportunities for youth (4-H clubs, 4-H in the Classroom, Camping, etc.).
- A description of other youth organizations in the county and their distinguishing differences from 4-H.
- A description of organizations in the county collaborating with 4-H.
- A description of the future plans and vision of the county 4-H program.

The presentation should be a discussion rather than a dry description. The intention of this portion of the orientation is to allow the volunteer to begin to learn and adopt the basic values of 4-H. It is important to keep volunteers in the discussion of the philosophy and the 4-H approach to youth development. It may also be useful to use stories to highlight legendary leaders in the county 4-H program and exemplary volunteers.

The goal of the discussion is to allow volunteers to make an intellectual and emotional commitment to the basic purpose of the county 4-H program, to consciously decide that they believe in and are willing to work toward achieving the mission of 4-H. It is also designed to give volunteers sufficient background to explain the 4-H mission, vision and values if ever asked to do so. Volunteers that do not have this background information may give erroneous information about the county 4-H program.

This part of orientation will also give 4-H agents an opportunity to learn about the philosophy of each volunteer and to determine the motivation of a volunteer. This reinforces matching the right volunteer to the right role!

Systems Orientation

Systems orientation involves introducing the volunteer to the system of volunteer management within the county 4-H program. The simplest way to develop the agenda for this part of orientation is to ask "What would I like to know about this place in order to understand how it works?"

The purpose of this portion of the orientation session is to provide an organizational context for the volunteer and how they fit into the processes of Extension and the county 4-H program. It is often presented in a factual manner including charts and handouts followed by a question and answer period to clarify issues. It can be made more interesting by including an introduction to the CED, faculty and other staff as-well-as inviting key volunteers and role playing.

It would include presentation and discussion of:

- The role of the County Extension Director.
- The role of other county faculty.
- The role of county support staff.
- An introduction of facilities and equipment
- The organizational structure of the county 4-H program.
- The 4-H organizational chart.
- Policies and procedures.
- A description of volunteer benefits.*
- Record-keeping requirements.
- Timelines.

**University policy 6C1-3.0031 3(b) Volunteers shall be advised that they are entitled to workers' compensation and state liability protection under the same conditions as state employees. Volunteers shall be eligible for the other benefits listed in sections 110.502 and 110.504 of Florida Statutes only as approved by the college, school, division, or operational unit.*

Social Orientation

In addition to an introduction to the 4-H cause and Extension system, new volunteers need to be aware of social community that exists in the 4-H program. Keep in mind that for many volunteers the reason they chose to become involved is for social interaction. The purpose of social orientation is to

show new volunteers who they will be working with, and welcoming them into the social context of Extension and 4-H. Use this part of the orientation to incorporate the following:

- Introduce new volunteers to the County Extension Director and other key Extension office leaders.
- Consider asking key office leaders to participate in volunteer orientation.
- Welcome statements to new volunteers by 4-H staff and key volunteers.
- A description of the culture and etiquette of the 4-H program (ie. dress code, values, norms).

How Orientation should be Presented

There are multiple methods for providing orientation. It might be conducted one-on-one, in small groups or in several shorter sessions. In addition, parts of the orientation could be made available in electronic format such as Articulate®. In their article titled *Orchestrating Volunteer Orientation: Introducing the O.B.O.E. Model*, Culp et al. (2005) provide one strategy of conducting orientation. Consult with the Regional Specialized 4-H Agent in the district or the State Volunteer Specialist for other strategies related to volunteer orientation. Sample orientation agendas are available on the 4-H Faculty and Staff website that encompass all the essential aspects of volunteer orientation.

Goals for an Effective Orientation

- Don't overwhelm volunteers; inspire them.
- Get to know one another and familiarize them with the 4-H program.
- Make it fun! Move away from lecture style when possible.
- Train in any specific skills necessary, especially communication skills.
- Connect them to the larger level picture of their work; include other programs coordinated by the Extension office.

Conclusion

Orientation is the process of preparing a volunteer for successful involvement by providing general information that all volunteers should know and specifics related to the volunteer role to be performed by a volunteer. Successful orientation should address cause orientation, systems orientation and social orientation. When completed orientation should have addressed the following questions:

1. Why should I be volunteering for 4-H?
2. How will I be working here?
3. Where do I fit in with everyone else?

These questions must be addressed during orientation for a new volunteer to feel comfortable and move toward the volunteer activity of the Volunteer Life Cycle. Consistent with the Volunteer Life Cycle model, a volunteer that does not feel these aspects could feel unfulfilled and abandon 4-H for another organization.

Attending orientation should not be optional for volunteers. Even volunteers participating in one-day events should receive a short orientation, focusing on the cause and brief description of 4-H. This will remind them of why they are involved in 4-H and open the door to further involvement.

One way of understanding the importance of orientation is to simply consider this quote by McCurley and Lynch:

Orientation is the process of learning one's direction and bearings in the world; a person without orientation is, to put it simply, lost.

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References

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