Tip Sheet: Client Volunteers in Shelters

In a well-operated shelter, clients develop a sense of community, and some residents want to assist other clients as Red Cross volunteers. These clients can help support the daily operation of the shelter. Helping to operate the shelter provides clients with meaningful activities, improves morale, and may reduce the staffing needs of the Red Cross and its partners.

Clients Are Different from Other Red Cross Volunteers

Remember that clients are not event-based volunteers (EBVs). Shelter residents:

- Have not been oriented to Red Cross fundamental principles;
- Have not been made aware of Sheltering procedures;
- Have not been background checked;
- Have a primary focus of developing their own recovery plan. Engaging in shelter-support tasks must not shift their focus from their recovery.

These concerns mean that there is a limited subset of tasks that clients may be asked to support.

Making Opportunities Available

All clients should be given the opportunity to participate as volunteer workers.

- Make an announcement that you are seeking volunteers in a residents meeting;
- Create a list of volunteers;
- Rotate through the list when tasks are available.

Tasks for Client Volunteers

Keep the assignment of client volunteers specific and task-oriented. Tasks may be as short as 10-15 minutes and normally should not take longer than 1 hour. If completing a task requires more time, use several client volunteers.

Tasks should be relatively simple and clearly explained to the client volunteer, and volunteers should be paired with a Red Cross worker carrying out the task or work under a supervisor.

Appropriate Tasks for Client Volunteers:

- Wiping down tables before or after meals;
- Picking up litter in the dormitory, shelter, or on shelter grounds;
- Emptying trash containers;
- Unloading and stacking supplies;
- Helping with inventories of supplies;
- Helping at the information desk;
- Helping distribute personal supplies at the distribution desk;

- Sweeping floors;
- Refilling soap dispensers and replacing hand sanitizer bottles;
- Taking down and cleaning used tables, chairs, or cots.

Inappropriate Tasks for a Client Volunteer

- Anything a Red Cross volunteer would not be asked to do;
- Anything that puts them at risk, including heavy lifting;
- Anything involving confidential information;
- Anything involving children or vulnerable persons;
- Anything involving use of any machinery;
- Tasks involving government agencies or partners;
- Anything that would imply they have any level of authority over other clients.

Some Do's and Don'ts for Client Volunteers

Do …

- Set boundaries and expectations for the task to be accomplished.
- Provide training.
- Make it clear to whom client volunteers report and should go with any questions.
- Encourage client volunteers to report items that are outside their purview (like facility repairs needed) to their supervisor.
- *Provide* recognition during shelter resident meetings, perhaps with a small trinket or pin as a memento (only if there are enough for every client volunteer).
- Avoid any appearance of favoritism involving client volunteers.
- Avoid any appearance that client volunteers have a special position or authority in the shelter.
- Let the district and/or DRO Headquarters know if the shelter is receiving significant help from client volunteers so they can better allocate EBVs to where they are most needed.
- Encourage clients to volunteer again with the Red Cross once their recovery is complete.

Do Not …

- Allow client volunteers to wear Red Cross branded clothing or a vest.
- Create an ID badge for them. It can be misinterpreted by others.
- Allow client volunteers to work without a Red Cross person nearby, just as we prefer Red Cross volunteers to work in partnership.
- Allow client volunteers to ride in a Red Cross vehicle without approval from the district or DRO Headquarters. Their work should be confined to the shelter site.
- Include client volunteers in Red Cross volunteer staff meetings. Hold a separate meeting for them if necessary or desired.