

Volunteering in response to COVID-19: spontaneous volunteers



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Psychosocial Centre



International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

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Please contact the PS Centre should you wish to translate or adapt any part of *Volunteering in response to COVID-19: spontaneous volunteers*

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Welcome to the Red Cross and Red Crescent

Thank you for volunteering with the Red Cross Red Crescent in response to COVID-19. This leaflet introduces you to volunteering with us, welcoming you to the Movement and gives you basic information about being a volunteer. We will support you in all aspects of your work as a volunteer. We welcome you to our community of volunteers.

Spontaneous volunteers

Spontaneous volunteers are people who are not affiliated with any voluntary organization and yet offer support in the response or recovery phases of a major incident, without extensive pre-planning. Spontaneous volunteers are often from the affected community. Knowing the situation on the ground is a great asset in responses to crisis. However, it is important to say that volunteers may also find that they are affected more than they expect because they are responding in their own local communities.

All volunteers must be over 18 years of age. They usually work in pairs or teams under the guidance of a volunteer team leader.

If at any point, you decide for some reason that volunteering with us is not for you, then please let your team leader know.

Seven fundamental principles

The Red Cross and Red Crescent is the world's largest volunteer organization. There are Red Cross or Red Crescent National Societies in 192 countries. We help people in local communities in great need in their everyday lives and respond to crisis situations when they happen.

The Red Cross Red Crescent mandate is to assist states whilst also maintaining our independence. The Red Cross and Red Crescent emblems are protected as symbols of neutral and independent assistance. This means that volunteers often find themselves working with public authorities.

When you wear the emblem as a Red Cross Red Crescent volunteer, this is a commitment to the seven fundamental principles of the Movement which are humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality. You should always wear a vest, cap or ID badge to be clearly identifiable as a Red Cross Red Crescent volunteer.

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

HUMANITY

IMPARTIALITY

NEUTRALITY

INDEPENDENCE

VOLUNTARY SERVICE

UNITY

UNIVERSALITY

Respect instructions

It is vital to our work that volunteers must follow the instructions given by the Red Cross Red Crescent as well as any of the authorities involved in a crisis event such as the police, or civil protection services. These parties are trained to assess the situation and decide on the best course of action. Not following instructions may compromise safety and complicate the response. Volunteers are expected to follow and respect the chain of command. Before engaging in any activities for the day, it is therefore crucial that as a volunteer you know who your team leader is.

Safety

Safety is a major concern. This includes your safety as a volunteer. It is vital that volunteers stay safe in order to help other people. Do not take risks that may compromise your safety or the safety of others, as this can have serious consequences. If a situation seems un-safe, seek out your team leader and team members and bring your concern to their attention.

Volunteering in response to covid-19

All guidance about COVID-19 issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) and your national health authorities must be strictly followed. Before you begin any shift or start a new activity, please check the latest updates about COVID-19.

Briefings

Volunteers should always be given a briefing before beginning their activities. The volunteer team leader will give details about what needs to be done and about the location. They will say who you will be working with and what your role is as a volunteer. They will let you know, when and where to meet when you are finished so that you can report back and hand in any materials you may have used. We recommend you take notes during the briefing to keep track of all this information. Put important phone numbers into your contacts list on your phone and/or write them down on this leaflet.

Assigning tasks and the right to decline

The volunteer team leader will assign tasks to a group of volunteers. When signing up as a volunteer, it is helpful for team leaders to know what skills and capacities you have that could be useful in the volunteering work you are doing.

You have the right to decline any task assigned. Volunteers should never be asked to volunteer in situations where there are risks of violence or danger. There may be personal reasons why volunteers are not able to go ahead with volunteering at a particular time. The self-care of volunteers is very important to us. We understand if volunteers need to decline a task. This could be for a variety of reasons, for example:

- A volunteer is close to those needing support or is in a similar situation.
- A volunteer doesn't feel well or needs to rest.
- The work situation and conditions are too demanding.
- The tasks assigned exceed capacities and competencies.

Child protection

Child protection is very important in crisis situations especially since children (any person under 18 years) face many risks when crises occur. Taking good care of children and ensuring not to do harm is an imperative. Volunteers are obliged both by law and according to our code of conduct not to abuse, exploit or injure a child.

Avoid being alone with a child. If coming into face to face contact with a child that needs to speak to a trusted adult in confidence, find somewhere to speak with the child in sight but out of hearing of others. You could also link with another volunteer so that there are two volunteers present. This has the dual function of ensuring the safety of both parties.

If a child calls a Red Cross Red Crescent hotline and there are any concerns, the call should be referred to trained volunteers who have been trained in Psychological First Aid for children and child protection. If there are any concerns for the well-being of a child, volunteers must in all cases report to the team leader and the authorities.

Confidentiality

Volunteers must observe confidentiality in all that they do during and after volunteering work. This includes everything they have seen, heard and read. In a crisis situation you may be told private stories and these must be kept confidential and not shared with those outside the organization or with the media. Consent from the involved parties must always be obtained to take photos or videos, etc. Special rules apply to those under 18, where the consent of caregivers is needed for photos, etc. The only exception to this is if you suspect that anyone under the age of 18 is at risk of harm due to abuse, exploitation or neglect, or if they tell you about any incidents that have occurred. You are under a duty to report this concern to the authorities. If you are in any doubt about what you should do, please consult your team leader.

Team support

Volunteers will often work in pairs even when sent out as part of a team. Keeping an eye out for the well-being of other team members is a priority. Caring for others and for yourself is important for any operation to be successful. Remember to take breaks, and to drink and eat during the operation. Even taking short breaks will ensure that the team members have the capacity to go on for longer.

News and social media

The news media is always interested in what is going on during crisis events and emergency situations. COVID-19 is no different. At this time, the dignity of all those being featured in the media should be maintained. This is especially important in relation to children. Volunteers are free to talk to the media about what they are doing, with the approval of their team leader. However, they must take care not to discuss any individual cases, as this could risk people being identified. Consent must always be requested for photos, videos, interviews, etc. and, as mentioned above, consent for the participation of children in any type of media can only be granted by their caregivers.

Social media is also currently featuring lots of news about the response to COVID-19 on personal accounts and public platforms. Discuss how (or if) volunteers are permitted to use their own social media accounts with your team leader. Be mindful that under no circumstances are volunteers allowed to take photos or videos for private use.

Do no harm

Everyone must observe the principle of 'do no harm'. Volunteers should be constantly mindful of securing the dignity of those they are helping. They should consider if their interventions are benefitting those in need and if there are any personal motives clouding their judgement about their volunteering. Please bring any issues to your team leader.

Reporting back and duty to inform

Volunteers must always report back to let the team leader know that they have finished the tasks assigned to them. This typically covers how the assignment went, what was done, if they had any problems and if there are any situations of concern where further support is needed. Volunteers can also request support if they have concerns for their own well-being.

Psychosocial support in response to COVID-19

During distressing times, psychosocial support is more important than ever. As a volunteer you may be in contact with people who are struggling to find ways to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Here is some advice which you can offer:

- Keep in touch with people you feel comfortable with by phone, email, social media, etc.
- Check in with people regularly by phone especially with children, youth, and older people to show your interest and concern.
- When you talk, help one another by referring to good and bad experiences. Try to end conversations with good experiences.
- Respect the fact that you or the person you are speaking to may not feel like talking about what is happening.
- As far as possible, be physically active and keep regular meal times. Try to maintain regular sleep routines. This is especially important for people in quarantine.
- Follow advice given by the authorities about dealing with COVID-19.
- Do not access news about COVID-19 all the time. Limit how long you spend looking at the news about the virus.
- Family and friends who are not with you may be very worried about you and therefore may be sending messages to you all the time. Arrange agreed times in advance when you let them know how you are so that they (and you) don't get too distressed unnecessarily.

Psychosocial support to children

Here is some advice that you can offer to people involved in looking after children and keeping them safe and well:

- Children need to be physically and emotionally near their family and friends in times of distress. This can be difficult if the guidance about COVID-19 means that everyone has to minimise close contact. Make regular times to contact family and friends by phone or social media. It could be fun to make up a sign language with children for different kind of hugs.
- Make sure children (young and older) know how to wash their hands and use hand sanitizer and to do this regularly. Teach them how to cough into their elbow and make sure they too keep a physical distance from other people and not shake hands.
- Be as calm as possible in what you say as a caregiver and how you act in order to create a safe environment for children.
- Allocate specific times with children to do things with them that they like, such as games and other stimulating activities. Take time too to teach them how to have a quiet time each day. Develop a list of things with them that they could do in their quiet times such as reading, drawing or listening to music.
- If children are worrying a lot about COVID-19, teach them relaxation exercises such as simple breathing exercises.
- When children ask questions about COVID-19, they need simple, concrete answers. Be honest and truthful, but try not to overwhelm them or expose them to scary information. Take time to explain the situation to them in a way that is suitable to their age and developmental level.
- Remember to give information but protect them from too much exposure to distressing radio, tv or social media messages.
- Be careful not to let your own worries distress children so they make the worry their own.

Additional resources

Additional COVID-19 and MHPSS related resources including podcasts can be found on the [IFRC PS Centre's website](#), as well as materials in different languages. The website will be updated as new resources become available.

<https://pscentre.org/archives/resource-category/covid19>

[Guidelines for Caring for Staff and Volunteers in Crises](#)

[Online PFA training for COVID-19](#)

[A Guide to Psychological First Aid for Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies](#)

[Basic Psychological First Aid for Children- training module 3](#)

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