

Choosing a Volunteer Program: Questions to Ask Yourself

Whether you decide to volunteer for a week or three years, committing yourself to service is a big step. Your volunteer year has a big impact upon yourself and upon others. The key to finding a good program is to invest your time in identifying a match between your skills, what you want to do, and the needs of the program.

Here are some recommend questions that you ask yourself as you begin the process of finding a volunteer program:

Reasons: Everybody decides to volunteer for different reasons. *What needs, preferences, and motivations do I have in seeking to do full-time service? Do the program I am considering match those needs, preferences, and motivations? Why do I want to be a volunteer? Am I committed to social justice?*

Expectations: *What do I expect from volunteering? Am I anticipating personal growth? Do I want to change my life? What do I expect from the program and specific placement?*

Personal Values: *What are my values related to service? Do they match the values of the programs I am considering? What gives me satisfaction? At the end of the day, what makes me feel good? What do I find comfort in? What do I like to do with others? How do I spend my time when I'm alone?*

Location: *Where do I hope to go to volunteer? To a rural community? To an urban environment? Within the U.S. or overseas? Is distance from home a concern?*

Community: Many volunteers find living in community to be the most difficult part of their volunteer year. *Am I seeking an experience of community? Do I want to live with other volunteers? How do I interact with others? How do I deal with problems and disagreements? Am I seeking a living experience with a religious community? What are my expectations of a community experience? How large of a community am I willing to live with? How fluid of a community do I want: one that begins at the same time, or one whose members may change frequently?*

Flexibility: *A volunteer year involves a lot of change. Not only will you be living in a new place with new people, but you won't be earning a salary. How do you handle change? Have you ever been far from your family and support system? How will you adjust to living simply?*

Time: *For how long am I willing to commit to full-time volunteer service?*

Relationships: *How will this affect my relationships....with my family? With my friends? With my significant other? Will they accept my choice? Will it be difficult to be far from home?*

Spirituality: *To what extent do I want faith and spirituality to be part of this experience? Do I hope to share my spirituality with my community? At work?*

Work: *What kind of service do I wish to do? Direct service or advocacy? With a certain population or issue (e.g. AIDS patients, the environment, teaching, community organizing, etc.)? Do I hope to gain hands-on experience for a future career, or do I want an experience outside my own field? Am I looking to apply prior work experience to a potential volunteer placement?*

Experience: *What experience of service do I already have? Do I want a similar or different kind of service?*

Skills: *What gifts can I share with others? What are my strengths/weaknesses? What professional skills do I already possess? What skills do I wish to gain?*

Finances: *What financial needs do I have while I am doing full-time service? Will the programs I am considering meet those needs?*

Additional Factors: *Are there any other questions or issues I need to consider? Any physical or emotional health questions or factors? Other factors unique to me?*

Options: Prospective volunteers should fully consider all options in their discernment process. As with any decision, there is ambiguity, and a temptation to make a decision quickly, if only to end the uncertainty. Take your time with the discernment process in order to make a fully informed decision. *What are my other options? Internships, short-term or summer placements, working for a non-profit or social service agency, working with a for-profit business, pursuing further education, religious life.*

Choosing a Volunteer Program: Questions to Ask of the Program

Once you have determined your individual needs, it is time to start asking questions about the programs to see where a match may occur. First, you will want to do background research on the program by visiting the programs' website. Next, contact the volunteer program staff, by phone or by email, to ask them additional questions. Some program staffs are very small, and directors may often be traveling to visit placement sites. Be patient, but persistent, in contacting programs, and allow time to contact programs well in advance of application deadlines. Use the following list of questions as a guide for what information to seek, both in your background research and in your correspondence with program directors.

Goals / Philosophy: *What is the philosophy of the program? Are there any goals the program has for its work with a certain issue or population?*

Qualifications: *Age requirements? Educational level requirements? Particular skills needed? Do I need to have previous experience?*

Work: *What are the service options? Do I have a choice in my placement? Who makes the final selection - the volunteer program or the placement site? Is there a job description? How long is your program?*

Living: *Where will I live? In a community of other volunteers like me? With a religious community? On my own? How large are the communities? Will I have a shared or private bedroom and bathroom? Will I receive a living stipend? Can I bring a car?*

Community: *Does the program offer support to volunteer communities? What kind of support? How structured is the community life?*

Spirituality: *Is there a spiritual component to the program? Does the program provide any support for the spiritual development of its volunteers?*

Support: *What kind of program support will I receive? Is there a support person at each site? Are there people to whom I can turn if I need to talk about an experience or if I am struggling at work or in my community? Will the volunteer program staff make site visits? What do I do if I have a problem at my placement? Will there be retreats? How often will I interact with other volunteers?*

Training: *What kind of training will I receive? Skills training? Language training? Is there an orientation program? Is there any mid-service training or an end-of-service re-entry program? Will you train me to do things I don't know how to do?*

Safety: *Is the area I will work in safe? Is the area I will live in safe? What precautions are taken for the safety of volunteers? (International: is the political situation stable?)*

Finances: *Are there any financial costs to me? Will I receive a stipend? Who pays for housing and meals? Who pays for transportation costs to the site, to training, and back home? Will my student loans be deferred? If not, does the program help volunteers arrange suspension of student loan payments? If I need to raise money, will the volunteer program assist me? Are the donations tax-deductible for my donors?*

Health: *What type of health insurance will I receive? Who pays for the policy? (International: Do I need to get immunization shots?)*

Application Process: *How does the application process work? How long does the process take? Do I need to be interviewed? What paperwork will I need to complete?*

Dates: *When exactly do I have to start? When does the program end? Can I stay longer (extend) if I desire? What happens if I leave early?*

Travel/Vacation: *Do I get a vacation? Can I travel back home for a family emergency or for holidays? Who pays for an emergency trip?*

Former Volunteers: *Volunteers who have gone before you are your best resource in learning about a program. Be sure to ask the program to put you in touch with these volunteers who can share with you their experiences. Can you give me names of people who have participated in your program with whom I can talk or meet?*