

TOGETHER WE CAN

A GUIDE TO FAMILY SUPPORT VOLUNTEERING

TOP TIPS FOR DEVELOPING A FAMILY SUPPORT VOLUNTEERING SERVICE

Together We Can is a collection of resources for organisations developing a service where volunteers support families of a child with a life-limiting or life-threatening condition. The resources were developed and tested specifically for this purpose with volunteers working in the homes of a child with a life-limiting condition, but might be useful for any organisation developing volunteer services.

TOP TIPS FOR DEVELOPING A FAMILY SUPPORT VOLUNTEERING SERVICE

A selection of organisations that set up services where volunteers supported families of children with a life-limiting or life-threatening condition provided the following tips for others wanting to set up Family Support Volunteering services:

Strategy

- Strong leadership and executive-level ownership is important to encourage set-up, allow staff time to concentrate on the programme and embed it in strategic priorities. For sustainability, it is important to embed volunteer support strategically within an organisation's priorities rather than seeing it as an ad hoc add-on service.
- Getting staff engagement and buy-in is important so that staff do not feel threatened by volunteer roles, see how volunteers are an addition to the services provided and understand the benefits of referring families.

Scope

- Volunteer support is feasible within both voluntary and statutory sectors. It may work well for voluntary and statutory services to work in partnership to promote volunteering and support family referrals.
- Promote flexibility. Try to ensure volunteers understand the importance of being flexible, both with their time and their idea of the sort of support they'd like to be giving to families. Reinforcing that all support is equally valuable and makes a considerable difference to families increases the likelihood of volunteers and families being matched going ahead as well as managing volunteers' expectations.
- Opportunities for occasional volunteering, where a volunteer provides a one-off piece of support, can be very valuable for families. Volunteers may benefit from being reminded of the potential value such provision can offer.
- Deliver training that is relevant to the volunteer role. This may involve negotiations around any mandatory or core training your organisation has in place.

Timeframe

- It takes time to establish a volunteer support programme. It may take organisations longer than they expect to recruit and train volunteers and match them with families.
- There are seasonal variations that affect the availability of staff, families and volunteers. For example, in winter children may be more likely to be ill which affects families' ability to welcome a volunteer as well as NHS and hospice service availability due to increased demand and staff shortages.
- Volunteers may be most easily recruited near the start of the calendar year and academic years. Building in seasonal fluctuations to timelines will help to promote realistic planning.

Engagement

- Involve all stakeholders from the beginning and throughout: Informal working agreements or 'contracts' might help organisations feel comfortable about working together or referring families to the volunteer service.
- Build relationships with stakeholders and professionals: Success of the service hinges on people being aware it exists. Introducing the service once to one team is not enough. Be sure to attend regular team meetings / caseload reviews of health and social service team meetings. These teams have lots going on and staff turnover is relatively high so in person promotion of services can help.
- Be aware of resistance factors. Don't underestimate the amount of time and effort you will need to put in to see a shift in thinking within your organisation and staff teams making referrals for volunteer support.

Realistic expectations

- Factor set-up time into the project. Some teams found they needed to allow up to six months to recruit volunteers, train them, get checks completed, identify key professionals and build all-important relationships to start getting referrals. Matching families with volunteers can be a bit of an art and getting to grips with it takes time and experience.
- Set realistic targets. Devise targets based on your setting and what will be sustainable. Keep in mind seasonal variations and the impact of things like school holidays on volunteer and family availability. Having targets to aim for can help to drive the service to success, but these should not be used to demotivate people. A realistic and sustainable target for a full-time volunteer manager might be to recruit and retain 25 volunteers over a one year period. Using graphs to track increases in the total number of volunteers and families taking part can help to motivate people and show changes over time.
- Manage volunteers' expectations from the start. Make sure to be clear about what is expected of volunteers, the boundaries of the role, the commitment required, the length of the training process and the potential delay in finding a family that they match with.

Practicalities

- In geographical areas with a wide population spread, volunteers may need to travel some distance to provide support for families. This will make additional demands on volunteers' available time. The associated financial costs should also be considered when budgeting for the service.
- It may be useful to keep volunteer support targeted to a narrow geographic region or to roll out volunteer support in phases so that volunteers do not have to travel too far to families and so there are similarities in demographic characteristics of families and volunteers.

Resources

- There are costs associated with providing volunteer support and ringfenced capacity is needed to provide training and ongoing supervision of volunteers.
- A range of policy templates, training materials and guidelines exist to help organisations setting up volunteer support schemes. However these resources should be adapted for local contexts rather than seen as a one size fits all approach.

Longevity

- Think about sustainability from day one. This relates not just to funding and a business case, but also in terms of the service. It is a lot easier to start a service which has clear and strict guidelines (e.g. no giving out personal numbers, compulsory supervision attendance, no 1:1/telephone supervision, caps on family to volunteer matches), than try and implement these at a later date once your service has become too large.