

How to Maximize Your Experience as an ONS Volunteer

ONS member volunteers are vital to the success of ONS. Member volunteers drive the organization's strategic initiatives and guide programming. Each product and service that ONS creates is developed with the goal of meeting the needs of oncology nurses; therefore, it is essential that member volunteers be integrally involved from conception to development and implementation of each ONS initiative. In short, ONS cannot reach its goals without the hard work and generous support of its member volunteers.

The more than 3,000 national and local volunteer opportunities at ONS include boards, project teams, advisory panels, committees, special interest groups, chapters, and reviewers. Being a volunteer is a great way for individuals to contribute to the ONS mission of promoting excellence in cancer care while networking with colleagues and learning new skills and knowledge.

This pamphlet can help you understand how volunteers support the organization and how to maximize your experience as a volunteer. If you need additional information, note that former volunteers are often very happy to serve as advisors or mentors. Just contact the National Office for more information.

How you were selected to serve

Volunteers, like you, come to ONS and its affiliates in a variety of ways. Some are elected or appointed, while others apply or submit a letter of interest. ONS always strives to establish culturally diverse volunteer teams. ONS projects are knowledge-based.

In most cases, volunteer leaders or staff members select volunteers by reviewing the applications or letters of interest for the specific projects or tasks. It is crucial to the success of projects that the right volunteers with the right skills or knowledge are selected for the right projects at the right time. To ensure the best matching of volunteers, the volunteer leader and/or staff person reviews applications for the following.

- Interests and abilities for a particular project.
- Ability to commit time and attention to the project.
- Broad-base diversity (geographic, practice, education level).
- Fit with the organization, its style of operation, and its mission.

What to request prior to starting a volunteer assignment

To make sure you understand your commitment, ask for the following items.

- Clearly identified project description, timeline, and goal
- Volunteer leader and staff contact information
- Your role and unique contribution to the project team

Tips for board, team, or panel members

If you are selected to serve on a board, team, panel, or other group, consider the following.

- Listen closely to the team members and leader to identify areas where your expertise is needed and will be helpful to the project's goal.
- Participate actively in the work of the group (identify yourself if you are on a conference call). You are on the team because of your unique strengths and skills.
- Be sure you know how to contact the team leader and the team's staff contact, and contact them as soon as possible with questions, issues, or problems.
- If you must miss a conference call, let the group's staff contact know as soon as possible and make plans to find out what you missed.

- If something happens in your life or work that makes it difficult for you to complete your assigned work for the project, let the team leader and staff contact know as soon as possible so that plans can be made to get the work done in a timely fashion.
- Ask your staff contact what expenses may be reimbursed for the project (e.g., travel, meals, parking).

Tips for team leaders

If you are selected to serve as a Team Leader, you will need to do the following.

- Identify your primary staff contact, and communicate with this person as much as possible throughout each component of the project. The staff member can help you stay organized and identify the resources and timelines that will help you accomplish your goals for your project.
- Delineate your leadership responsibilities as well as those of your staff contact, taking advantage of each person's skills, knowledge, and resources.
- Clarify the goals of the team with your staff contact, and refer back to them throughout the process.
- Identify the characteristics and qualifications of potential team members, and review applications with your staff contact in the selection of team members.
- Work with your staff contact to identify the project's charge, workload, timeline, meetings, conference calls, and other needs of team members. You can then share this information with those identified to serve on the team.
- Work with your staff contact to orient team members to the history, goals, timelines, and expectations of the project. Help team members understand why they were invited to participate and what their expected contribution will be.
- Plan conference calls and team meetings (if budgeted) with your staff contact. Staff will coordinate conference calls and communicate the details to the team members.
- Establish a plan with your staff contact for recording notes at conference calls and meetings. Review any notes that go out to the team with your staff contact to be sure they accurately reflect both your and the staff's understanding of the discussion and next steps.
- Work closely with your staff contact to keep the team's work on the established timelines.
- Throughout the work and discussions of the team, carefully monitor the work and participation of each team member to be sure everyone has an opportunity to contribute his or her expertise and knowledge to the project.
- If a team member is not participating effectively, work closely with your staff contact to develop strategies to increase or improve the contributions of that team member.
- At the completion of the project, review the process and outcomes with your staff contact and plan an evaluation with the team members either verbally or electronically. You also will be asked to submit a summary of the project.
- Work with your staff contact to thank the team members verbally (or via note) for all of their contributions.

Communication

Open and respectful communication is an integral part of the group process. Remember, team members will represent a variety of backgrounds, roles, experiences, and viewpoints. This diversity is important so that the end result is appropriate for a broad audience. Before you judge, take a moment to consider all viewpoints and allow yourself to think in ways you may not have done before. In the end, the group almost always comes to a better conclusion than its individual members. Consider the following:

- You were chosen to serve on this group because of your unique skills and talents. Be sure to share your ideas and actively contribute to the group.
- Be sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak and contribute. When people are not actively participating, draw them out and help them to feel comfortable and important.
- Ask questions. If you do not understand or agree with decisions that are being made, speak up. The group may need to be reminded of the goals and objectives throughout the process.
- Accept and support decisions once they are made and move on. Otherwise, the group may not be able to accomplish its goals.

Remember, everyone on your team wants to be successful. By working together, communicating clearly, and resolving conflicts quickly, the team can better serve the organization and its members.

Group dynamics

Effective groups are comprised of very different people with diverse backgrounds and experience. It is important to be sensitive to others' points of views and give everyone an opportunity to participate.

- Being a member of a project team, advisory panel, or other group requires team members to work to build consensus and agreement. When a group convenes for the first time, set some ground rules that address how the team will communicate and address potential conflict.
- Group members need to leave their egos and personal agendas at the door.
- If a group has trouble coming to consensus on a decision, more information may be needed to help team members get a better understanding of the consequences of each alternative choice. Depending on the situation, the team leader may need to make a decision without unanimous support. Team members need to accept and support decisions and move forward so the group process can be effective.
- Conflict is a natural part of the group process and even can lead to improved outcomes. However, conflicts can also leave team members with a negative experience. Therefore, conflict should be identified and addressed in a direct manner.
- Conflicts can arise if expectations and roles are not clearly defined. Work with your fellow team members and staff contact to articulate these expectations and roles and help guide the team toward resolution.
- Avoiding conflict by excluding team members or going outside the team is not appropriate.
- If a conflict cannot be resolved within the group, team members may need to take the issue to the next level. Your staff contact can provide you with the reporting relationship of the group and assist in resolving conflicts.
- If at any time you have a conflict with your staff contact, be forthright and honest in trying to resolve it. A meeting with the staff contact and his or her supervisor may help.

- No matter the conflict, team members should always approach the situation with the group's goals and objectives in mind and with respect for their fellow team members.

Evaluation

You may be asked to complete forms throughout the group process, such as a log of your time spent. At the end of a project or commitment, you may be asked complete an evaluation of the experience. Future teams rely upon the feedback provided to help improve volunteer experiences. Be honest and forthright on these assessments and speak directly to your staff contact or team leader with any other feedback.

ONS would simply **not** be the successful organization that it is today were it not for the countless hours of work and support given by its volunteers. If you are an ONS volunteer, we sincerely thank you. And, if you haven't yet volunteered for ONS, please consider doing so. You will be helping the largest professional oncology association in the world truly reach its vision of transforming cancer care!