

VOLUNTEER

Claims Lessons Learned: Why Proper Oversight Matters

Volunteers are the backbone and the lifeblood of ministries; without them, it would be impossible to accomplish their missions. While churches using volunteers to perform tasks is beneficial and necessary, it is also critical to maintaining proper oversight of volunteers to ensure safety.

Picture an ordinary Tuesday at the food pantry when people are beginning to line up outside. Volunteers are feverishly setting up to receive people coming for food—Covid-19 has been unforgiving to many families, and the community is counting on their ministry to help meet the rising need. A plan is devised to "divide and conquer" that day; volunteers will take care of the food pantry while staff focuses on other duties.

Some volunteers end up canceling due to illness, which leaves the food pantry understaffed. The volunteers on duty decide they can manage and don't ask for help. As the doors swing open to receive visitors, it becomes even busier than usual; a quiet gentleman with a cane appears to be unsteady, but he manages to escape the attention of volunteers and leaves while carrying many bags of groceries. On his trek back to the parking lot, he stumbles and takes a nasty spill that causes his ankle to break in several places. He cannot work or pay his medical bills, so he files a lawsuit against the church.

Another church was confronted with a claim that occurred with volunteers cooking for a church potluck dinner. Many volunteers showed up with crockpots in tow, but there wasn't enough space or outlets.

The volunteers decided to pop up a card table and run an extension cord across the kitchen to plug in the multiple crockpots. Unfortunately, one of the volunteers tripped over

the extension cord and required surgery to place a pin in her arm after sustaining the fall. She also filed a lawsuit against the church to help pay for medical bills and loss of wages during her recovery.

Everyone had the best intentions in both instances, but things can still go wrong without proper oversight. Allowing volunteers to operate without guidance could compromise the safety of others and themselves. If your ministry has a food pantry, give thoughtful consideration to accommodating individuals who might need assistance, perhaps having volunteers on hand who can help carry groceries or packing items beforehand and offering a drive-through for those who do not ambulate well.

Although receiving guests for the potluck dinner is important, the safety of the participants needs to be a primary consideration. Develop safety standards and post signage for anyone using the kitchen, and make sure they are aware of potential safety hazards that are not permitted. Consider a layout for receiving guests that minimize risks and allow people to prepare and serve food safely; suggest using this layout with any group using the kitchen. Have a policy requiring staff to make rounds and check in to ensure safety standards are constantly being observed.

In a busy world that continues to spin, ministries try to stay relevant and helpful in their communities. Insurance Board encourages your ministry to consider what proper oversight should look like while conducting outreach ministries and other activities. Make sure volunteers have a clear understanding of duties and policies; this will help ensure the safety and well-being of all.