

Voluntary and Community Action

Volunteering and State Benefits

Volunteering Information Sheet No. 12

March 2009

There is a lot of confusion over whether volunteering affects an individual's benefits. This is not helped by the fact that many benefits advisers are poorly informed about volunteering and often give people the wrong advice. In actual fact the rules are quite simple, and it's well worth knowing them so that you can advise volunteers on any queries.

Volunteering Information Sheets

The Volunteer Centre has produced a series of Information Sheets on:

- setting up and managing a volunteer programme
- recruitment and development of volunteers and trustees.



They are available to download from our website or by contacting the Volunteer Centre (details on back page).

Definitions of Voluntary Work

All benefits rulings agree that voluntary work is work for a not-for-profit organisation, or work for someone who is not a member of your family, where only reasonable expenses are paid.

Job Seeker's Allowance

People on Job Seekers Allowance can do as much voluntary work as they want as long as they remain available for and are actively seeking work. This will mean that they will have to show that they are looking for work and applying for jobs where appropriate. As an organisation you will have to give your volunteers some flexibility, as they will need to visit the Job Centre for meetings and to sign on, and will need to attend interviews when they come up. If an individual is volunteering, then they are entitled to 48 hours' notice if they are asked to attend an interview, and a week's notice before starting work. These are concessions to the 24 hour notice normally allowed.

Income Support

Volunteering should not affect someone's Income Support as long as they are not receiving any

money other than reimbursement of expenses.

Incapacity Benefit

There is a lot of confusion over Incapacity Benefit because there used to be a rule that individuals in receipt of the benefit could only volunteer for 16 hours a week. This rule no longer applies, although many people are still being told that it does. If you are in receipt of Incapacity Benefit then you can volunteer for as long as you want. People often worry that starting to volunteer will automatically trigger an investigation into their need to claim Incapacity Benefit, but in fact this very rarely happens.

Occasionally there is also some confusion about volunteering and 'permitted work' (similar to the old 'therapeutic earnings'). The permitted work rule applies only to paid work and should not affect volunteers. Claimants should be entitled to volunteer without it being recognised as permitted work.

Disability Living Allowance

Disability Living Allowance is an allowance paid in acknowledgement of the fact that life for someone with a disability may be more expensive – for instance, someone



with mobility problems may be reliant on taxis. Volunteering will not affect whether an individual receives this benefit or not.

Expenses and Benefits

Apart from DLA, the above benefits are open only to people who are not in paid employment. Any kind of paid work would jeopardise an individual's right to claim benefits, and they may find that their payments are docked or suspended. However, expenses do not constitute a payment, so volunteers can receive reimbursement of reasonable out-of-pocket expenses (any expenses that they have incurred because they are volunteering) without their benefits being affected.

Informing Benefits Advisers

It is good practice to inform volunteers that it is compulsory for volunteers to notify benefits advisers, although the organisation cannot force the issue if the volunteer decides not to disclose this information. Because of negative attitudes and lack of information on the part of advisers, many people feel more comfortable keeping their volunteering secret. As an organisation you have no duty to inform the benefits office of who is volunteering for you, so

leave it up to the individual volunteer to decide. Do bear in mind that if someone has not informed the benefits office that they are volunteering, they may be wary of their name or photograph appearing in any publicity, so do always check first before 'outing' someone as a volunteer.

Occasionally a volunteer may have problems convincing their benefits adviser that they are volunteering and not working. If this is the case, the volunteer manager should be prepared to talk to the benefits adviser on behalf of the volunteer, providing information about what the organisation does and the volunteer's role at the organisation. If the volunteer still has problems then it may be worthwhile sending a letter to the Benefits Office and / or providing a copy of the volunteer's expenses/claims as this will enable the volunteer manager to show the volunteer is getting a reimbursement rather than a payment.

Further Information and Resources

- Volunteer Expenses, Volunteering Information Sheet, Voluntary and Community Action, March 2007.
- Volunteer England website, www.volunteering.org.uk

ON 9 OCTOBER 2006 THE DEPARTMENT OF WORK AND PENSIONS ANNOUNCED THAT THEY WILL ALLOW ALL VOLUNTEERS TO BE REIMBURSED FOR THEIR MEAL EXPENSES.



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How can the Volunteer Centre help?

If you are a voluntary organisation or community group operating in southern Bedfordshire, we can help by:

- promoting your volunteering opportunities and signposting volunteers to your organisation
- providing information, guidance and training in all aspects of good practice and volunteer management.

Please give us a call on 01525 850559 or email volunteer@action-centralbeds.org.uk to arrange a meeting.