

## Health and Safety Guidelines for Employee Volunteering Programmes in New Zealand

Tim Burns

Executive Director, Volunteering New Zealand  
Level 7, 75 Ghuznee Street, P.O. Box 24526 Manners Street  
Wellington, New Zealand

Tel. +64 4 3843636 \* FAX +64 4 3843637 \* E-mail: ed@volunteeringnz.org.nz

### Abstract

*Formalised employee volunteering has arrived and is growing in New Zealand. In many instances this involves groups of employees undertaking projects which may involve skills, equipment, and/or settings quite different from their usual workplaces. There are special health and safety issues involved and the question has been asked as to whether the participating employer organisations and the host community organisations know about and follow appropriate health and safety precautions for these situations; interim data collected to date suggest they may not be. Volunteering New Zealand is therefore beginning to develop new guidelines that may be used by employers, their employee volunteers, and host community organisations participating in these projects.*

### Key Words:

employee, corporate volunteers, health, safety, risk management

### Introduction

As in other industrial countries, New Zealand has experienced the introduction and growth of formal employee volunteering programmes during the last few years. The practice of allowing employees time away from work, often on pay, to undertake an unpaid volunteer role for a community organisation is not new (Benjamin, 2001; Brown & Ashcraft, 2005; Pirtle, 2004). However, in New Zealand it has previously been allowed on an *ad hoc*, individual basis with the employer likely having no pre-established policies addressing for whom, how, and/or when this should be allowed.

Increasing numbers of businesses (as well as some government agencies and larger non-profit organisations) are developing specific employer volunteering programmes. These programmes may entail simply allowing staff members paid leave to work for a community non-profit organisation of their choice. However in many cases, groups of employees are

undertaking specific projects as peers and teams.

Data regarding the growth in employee volunteering is only starting to be collected formally, and so is currently limited. However, annual data collected by Volunteering New Zealand from regional volunteer centres provide an indication of the growth starting to occur in such programmes. Volunteer centres are taking on a brokering role, matching groups of employee volunteers with suitable community organisations needing assistance with a project. In the two years data have been collected from New Zealand's 14 volunteer centres (Volunteering NZ, 2008), six centres in each year reported some involvement. However only four could be considered to have established and growing programmes.

The data were collected for the years ending 30 June 2007 and 2008. In both years, the number of companies participating was the same: 72. There was

growth, however, in the number of projects undertaken, from 147 in 2007 to 188 in 2008 (a 28% increase) and even greater growth in the staff numbers involved: 1,500 in 2007 compared with 2,641 in 2008 (a 76% increase).

### **Accident Compensation Cover Raises Larger Health and Safety Issues**

The New Zealand Department of Labour (the government agency responsible for policy issues related to New Zealand's accident compensation scheme) noted this increase and questioned what type of accident coverage should apply to employees being paid by their employer yet away from their normal work place while on a community volunteering project. The basic question was considering which part of New Zealand's current accident compensation scheme covered such employee volunteers. The main issue was what wages (if any) would be paid an employee during the first week of absence, if absent from work following an accident while undertaking employee volunteering and being paid for that time.

Follow-up discussions with a group of key employers involved in employee volunteering raised the question, "What is being done to prevent potential accidents, or at least minimize their likelihood?" There was recognition that specific health and safety risks existed in employee volunteering activities. For instance, it is quite typical for a group of employees who usually work in an office to go into an outdoor situation as employee volunteers, working with equipment that has potential to cause injury. Or, there are other potential hazards where they are working as volunteers.

Going into new and unfamiliar environments as employee volunteers also adds other dimensions to good health and safety practices. Employers have new

responsibilities to ensure that their employee volunteers are properly briefed on where they are going and potential safety hazards they may encounter, and that they are given any special training needed for the task to be done and provided with the correct equipment if needed. Equally so, a community organisation hosting employee volunteers has the responsibility to ensure the employer is provided with all necessary information about the project, the site where the volunteer work is to take place, and any potential hazards that could be encountered. The host organisation also has a responsibility to minimise any potential risks at the volunteer work site. The participating employee volunteers must accept responsibility for following the guidelines provided in preparation for the volunteer project and to work in a safe manner.

### **Development of Employee Volunteering Health and Safety Guidelines**

However, the discussion group acknowledged that these steps might not always be followed. There was no data on whether companies involved in employee volunteering were using any special health and safety guidelines for their employee teams. There was agreement that guidelines which could be used by any organisation participating in employee volunteering would be of value, and that such guidelines should cover the responsibilities of the employer, their employee volunteers, and the host community organisations.

As a first step, there needed to be a better understanding of what was currently happening. Volunteering New Zealand has thus been conducting an on-line survey seeking responses from companies and other organisations participating in employee volunteering. Survey questions include one asking if the company has formalised health and safety guidelines for the employee

volunteering programme. While the survey is still underway, the clear majority of respondents to date do not have any such guidelines. This in itself indicates a need for and critical value in developing guidelines which establish key principles and procedures to be followed by employers, their employee volunteers, and host community organisations.

Volunteering New Zealand will undertake the development of the guidelines, working in conjunction with those who have been involved in employee volunteering programmes including volunteer centres, participating companies, host community organisations, and individual employees who have participated in volunteer projects. Legal aspects will need to be reviewed and input will be sought from the Occupational Safety and Health unit in the Department of Labour. It is envisaged that the guidelines will be printed in limited numbers yet made available online through the Volunteering New Zealand website, with links to other websites likely to be accessed by those needing this information. Funding to meet the costs of the project has been made available by Mobil Oil New Zealand who

assisted Volunteering Australia in producing a similar resource a few years ago. The guidelines are expected to be published by the end of 2009.

### References

- Benjamin, E.J. (2001). A look inside corporate employee volunteer programs. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 19(2), 16-32.
- Brown, W.A., & Ashcraft, R.F. (2005). Corporate employee volunteer programs: Considering the interests of multiple stakeholders. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 23(2), 15-19.
- Pirtle, C. (2004). Utilizing employees as volunteers. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 22(3), 33-35.
- Volunteering New Zealand. (2008). *Volunteer Centre data for 2007/08*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.

---

### About the Author

Tim Burns became the first full time Executive Director of Volunteering New Zealand in May of 2005. He has brought to the position extensive experience in the management of national organisations, public communications, and government relations. He has also been a volunteer over many years, mainly in governance and committee roles but also in sports and church activities. One of these roles was chairing the establishment committee and serving as foundation President of Hospice New Zealand, the national organisation for hospices and palliative care services in New Zealand.