

Risks and Perceived Risks of Being a Meals on Wheels Volunteer

by Suzanne Liddle

Health and Home Care Society of BC (Care BC) has been delivering Meals on Wheels in Vancouver and Richmond since 1967. A Chinese Meals on Wheels Program has also been operating since 1996 to cater to an increasing population of Chinese seniors.

Care BC's programs focus on supporting seniors, caregivers and other people at risk of isolation: we deliver approximately 500 meals with the support of an average of 60 volunteers per day. Running a large volunteer program (we currently have a team of over 330 volunteers) working with a vulnerable population carries a number of inherent risks.

To control and minimize risk, the program has undergone a process of risk assessment. This process is vital as it helps to protect clients, volunteers and the organization itself from potential harm. Risk assessment is also an important component in showing that volunteers are valued; it is much more than simple health and safety. For the purposes of this article I will discuss a selection of identified risks involved in the Meals on Wheels Program.

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Risk to the client:

Reliance on volunteers to deliver meals

The structure of any Meals on Wheels program is that it is completely reliant on volunteers to ensure that food gets delivered to clients each day. This in itself creates the risk of non-

delivery if a volunteer forgets, cancels at the last minute or does not show up. For this reason volunteers are asked to provide as much notice as possible if they need time off. A list of spare volunteers is in place for last-minute cancellations and staff can deliver if necessary to ensure that clients always receive their food.

Volunteer access to vulnerable clients

Volunteers need to know names, addresses and sometimes other information pertinent to delivering meals. For this reason, it is vital that volunteers are appropriately screened, oriented and managed. Volunteers must go through a recruitment process that includes a criminal records check, reference check and orientation to ensure that they are the right person for the role. Ongoing communication with clients, family members, caregivers or case managers is a key element here. Volunteers are also required to keep in regular contact with the office. Volunteers sign a confidentiality agreement and have ongoing supervision. Client feedback about volunteers is also encouraged. Volunteers must destroy all paperwork listing client information at the end of each day.

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Risk to the volunteer:

Entering clients' homes

Having access to a client's home is a risk to the volunteer as it makes them vulnerable to personal injury as well as potential accusations of theft or abuse. This risk may increase if working with senior clients who are mildly confused. Part of the volunteer role is to perform an informal safety check and to report any potential hazards. Volunteers also sign a liability waiver so that they are aware they are responsible for any damage or injury. Care BC communicates on a regular basis with both clients and their families or caseworkers and will act immediately on any concerns raised. Meals

on Wheels is often part of a larger network of support helping seniors to age in their own homes.

Risk to the organization:

Volunteer demographics

Due to the timing of Meals on Wheels deliveries, 11 am to 1 pm, the volunteer base is mostly retired people. This is a risk as it makes the program reliant on volunteers who tend to take extended vacations and have last-minute family commitments and illnesses. Care BC makes every effort to diversify our volunteer base by connecting with companies or organizations that can work as a team, promoting to stay-at-home parents whose children are in school and also reaching out to the university student population.

Risk to client, volunteers and the organization:

Boundaries

Setting boundaries around appropriate client and volunteer relationships is incredibly important. Volunteers are there to deliver food and also take time to check in with the client. However, they do not have time to stay for longer than ten minutes and are not required to perform any household chores or personal care. This is communicated clearly to all volunteers during orientation. Care BC is very supportive of clients and volunteers forming positive relationships, but our role is to pass on concerns or information regarding clients to family members or emergency contacts rather than taking direct action. There have been occasions when clients and volunteers have had visits outside of Meals on Wheels delivery times.

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When this happens, Care BC asks that volunteers let us know. We then reinforce that if they choose to visit a client they are doing so

as an individual and not as a volunteer or representative of Care BC. We will inform the client's family member or contacts of the situation to make sure that this is clear to all parties.

The risk to the volunteer here is that they may start to feel responsible for the client's needs which may be too much for them to take on and have a negative effect on that relationship. The risk to the client is that they may develop inappropriate expectations of the support that a volunteer can provide to them and end up being disappointed. Overstepping boundaries can also affect the organization as volunteers may act outside of their role and potentially harm the reputation of the program.

Risk to vulnerable adults is greater if the client is emotionally or socially isolated. Problems are more likely to occur if volunteers are inadequately trained, poorly managed or lacking support. For these reasons the most important component in Care BC's risk management is communication. Feedback from both clients and volunteers is taken on a daily basis over the phone, via email and in person to

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ensure that we have a committed, flexible and caring team of volunteers who are appropriately supervised and trained. We strive to create the safest possible environment for both clients and volunteers.

Suzanne Liddle has been working in volunteer management for five years and has spent much of this time with programs aimed at supporting seniors. Originally from Northern Ireland, Suzanne worked in the nonprofit sector in Belfast before relocating to Vancouver last year and joining the team at Care B.C.