



Preparing people to lead extraordinary lives

Taking Steps toward Community Engagement

This is a small guide to help you get involved with local community organizations. These tips will guide you through finding a site, setting up a placement, and getting comfortable with your role. Use these steps and your best judgment. Good luck!

Finding a Site

Look through the Community Service booklet

University ministry regularly publishes a community service booklet that highlights many community organizations in the surrounding neighborhoods. Look for organizations and issues that are interesting to you.

Search the web

The web is a great place to find volunteer opportunities. Increasingly, Loyola Career Development Center's e-recruiting system (www.luc.edu/career/erecruiting.shtml) will provide listings of available volunteer opportunities. Check these out as well as searching other local volunteer search engines.

Check out organizations' websites or ask for brochures

Once you have some organizations that are interesting, find out more information by looking at their websites or calling to see if they have brochures. This will get you better acquainted with the services they offer and populations they serve.

Find transportation options

Think about how you will get to the sites you have identified. Can you walk or get there by public transportation? Is driving an option? Will you be able to park? How long will it take you? These are all questions that can help you determine what site works best for you.

Setting up a placement

Initial communication

You can call or email a community organization to set up a placement but just be sure you are polite and clear about what you are asking. Tell them who you are and the information you need as well as asking them if there are available openings. Volunteer jobs are much like other jobs and you are not guaranteed a position. Don't assume that the organization knows anything about your class or your program. Also, staff members at community organizations are very busy so be patient. A possible script is:

Hello, my name is (your name) and I am a student at Loyola University Chicago. I learned about your organization from (where did you find the information) and would like to volunteer with (organization name). I am available to volunteer at (give hours available). Are there volunteer jobs available at those times and what would I need to do to be considered for a position? (Give them information on how to contact you).

Adjust this script to your personality but be direct and polite in all cases. You may have to leave a message with an organization; if this is the case you should use a similar script to leave the appropriate information.

Follow up

If you leave a message for the organization, give them some time to return your phone call. REMEMBER: community organizations are busy places and phone calls may not be returned for a few days. However, you should follow up if you have not heard back after 4-5 days. Be persistent but not pushy when following up. If you do not hear back, you should try a different organization.

Go ahead of time

Visit the site you are interested in before you are planning on volunteering. This will help you find out what the atmosphere is like and see what other people are doing. If staff is available, you may be able to get a tour of the place and an overview of your job.

Getting Comfortable

Go in pairs

It can be intimidating to go to a community organization for the first time (or even the fifth time). Volunteering with a friend will help you feel more comfortable with your role. Also, it gives you someone to talk to when things are challenging or thought-provoking.

Observe first and often

You have a lot to offer community organizations but also a lot to learn from them. When you first go to an organization, take some time to watch what is going on and help out where needed. Even when you feel more comfortable, it can be helpful to step back and see what needs to be done or how other things are going.

Ask questions

While observing is an important part of learning about the organization, you should also ask questions when it seems appropriate. Certainly ask about how you can help but ask questions about the organization and the participants as well. Ask staff people how and why the program got started or why they work there. Ask participants about their lives. You can learn a lot about the organization from asking a few questions.

Be patient

Treat yourself with kindness. You should not expect to know all the answers or what to do first. This is a learning experience. You will learn the most if you patiently listen and observe. You will find your way around so don't try to force it.

Be patient

Treat the organization staff members and participants with respect. They are trying to get things done. Also, they are learning about you at the same time as you are learning about them. Everyone is new to this relationship so relax and be patient.

Be responsible

Show up on time (or a little early) when you say you will. Do what is asked of you if you are able. Ask how you can be of help and pitch in when you feel it is appropriate. You are there to help so be helpful.

Be prepared to sit

Community organizations are active and engaging places. However, they can not always spend time orienting new volunteers as they would like. Be prepared to sit and watch until you know the ropes. There is a lot to be learned from watching and listening.