



VOLUNTEER LAWYERS PROJECT

VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

UPDATED 2023-2024

LETTER FROM THE PRO BONO TEAM

Dear New Volunteer,

Welcome to the Volunteer Lawyers Project!

As a volunteer you become a member of a dedicated team that provides high quality pro bono legal services to the low-income population in Boston. Through the generous gift of your time, talent and personal interests, you supplement the work of staff members by offering many special services that are so important to our clients, their families and the VLP staff.

Though your material gains are few, the greatest reward is the special feeling that comes to those who give of themselves to the betterment of others. Volunteering is a great way to learn new skills, serve your community and meet new people.

Please take the time to read this handbook. It has been prepared to acquaint you with the Volunteer Lawyers Project and its volunteer program. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the Pro Bono Manager, Emelia Andres, or the Pro Bono Assistant, Amari Bruno.

We welcome you as a member of our organization and thank you for choosing the Volunteer Lawyers Project to volunteer and share your time.

If at any time you have questions or concerns about the volunteer program or any policies included in this Handbook or elsewhere (including the Anti-Harassment and Non-Discrimination policies), please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Emelia Andres, Pro Bono Manager

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(857) 320-6446

Amari Bruno, Pro Bono Assistant

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(857) 320-6457

VOLUNTEER LAWYERS PROJECT VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

1. This Handbook is not a contract

This Handbook is not, and should not be considered, an agreement or contract of continued employment or benefits. It creates no legal obligations on the part of VLP to its volunteers. The policies, practices, rules and benefits set forth herein are subject to change at any time, with the exception of the at-will employment relationship between VLP and you. VLP reserves the right to interpret, administer, change, modify, or eliminate anything stated in this Handbook, in its sole and absolute discretion, with or without notice.

This Handbook supersedes all prior handbooks or manuals distributed to VLP's volunteers. Revised Handbooks may be issued from time to time. Final decisions as to the interpretation and application of policies and procedures rest entirely with VLP.

2. Compliance with applicable law

In the event that any provision of this Handbook conflicts with any applicable state or federal law, VLP will follow and comply with the applicable law.

3. About Volunteer Lawyers Project

a) **Mission:** The mission of the Volunteer Lawyers Project is to increase access to justice by delivering high quality pro bono civil legal services to eligible clients in the Greater Boston area.

b) **Values:**

- To preserve and protect meaningful access to justice for our clients.
- To prioritize our programs based upon the needs of the populations we serve and the capacities of our staff.
- To promote diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunity in the delivery of legal services.
- To strive to have a staff that is reflective of the community we serve.
- To foster constructive collaboration with others who serve our clients, staff and board.

c) **Office Hours**

Monday – Friday 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

4. Volunteer Status

All of VLP's volunteer positions are not entitled to compensation and/or benefits. While we encourage volunteers to apply for future employment, volunteer positions do not in any way guarantee future employment.

5. Volunteer Requirements

a. Minimum Age: 18 years, or appropriate work authorization must be obtained

b. Residency: All volunteers must reside in the United States.

c. Orientation and Training: Volunteers must attend a mandatory orientation. Orientation topics include a general overview of the organization, client confidentiality and other organization policies and information. After orientation, volunteers must complete the New Volunteer Follow Up form.

6. Volunteer Guidelines

As members of Volunteer Lawyers Project, volunteers must abide by the same processing and regulations as the paid staff and follow similar organization regulations. All onsite volunteers must adhere to the following:

a) Volunteers must hold client information confidential.

b) Sign in when you arrive and sign out when you leave: a sign in sheet is available in the reception area. Case time must also be recorded in Legal Server. Please notify the Pro Bono Manager regarding a change of schedule, absence or anticipated lateness.

c) Dress professionally. Volunteers must dress appropriately for their assigned areas and tasks. Please see Appendix A for VLP's full Dress Code Policy.

d) Volunteers must not:

- accept or ask for money or gifts from clients
- solicit legal staff for professional advice
- attempt to sell items to clients, staff or a client's family members

e) Volunteers are responsible for reporting any incident involving injury (however minor). Unit attorneys or other responsible staff should complete an Incident Report to record information. A copy should be submitted to the Pro Bono Manager.

7. Position Descriptions

Volunteer Lawyer Project defines each volunteer assignment, competencies, requirements, and responsibilities in a Volunteer Position Description. Volunteers should never attempt a task outside of the position description. If asked to do so, the volunteer must decline the duty. Position descriptions are reviewed for revision yearly.

8. Performance Expectations

- Volunteers are assigned to a unit of their interest
- Volunteers are responsible for following the instructions given them for completing tasks and for seeking clarification of any instruction not understood.
- Volunteers are responsible for arranging any breaks taken during the service period with the supervising attorney.

9. Resignation

Volunteers wishing to resign from their assignment should reach out to the supervising attorney of the respective unit and communicate their resignation.

10. Disciplinary Action & Termination of Services

If, at any time, a volunteer's performance or conduct needs improvement, it may become necessary for him/her to have a discussion with an immediate supervising attorney.

Depending on the situation, specific improvements may be agreed upon; additional training may be necessary; reassignment, or time off pending reassignment, may be appropriate; or if the problem can't be resolved satisfactorily for all involved, the volunteer may be terminated.

VLP reserves the right to terminate your service as a volunteer if the action is in the best interest of both parties. Infraction of organization policies cannot be allowed and a warning to this effect will be issued as necessary. Repeat or severe infractions will result in dismissal. Any breach of client confidentiality, harassment, theft and any other standing policy will be grounds for immediate and permanent dismissal from the program.

11. Confidentiality & Ethical Conduct Policy

Volunteers are expected to observe the highest standards of ethics, honesty, and integrity. Employees are expected to avoid conflicts of interest, as defined in Rule 1.7 of the Massachusetts Rules of Professional Conduct, refrain from disclosing VLP's confidential information, and comply with all applicable laws. Failure to follow the letter and spirit of VLP's policy may result in disciplinary action up to and including dismissal.

The protection of VLP's confidential information, property, and assets is vital to the interests and success of the organization. No VLP-related confidential information or property, including, without limitation, documents, files, records, computer files, equipment, office supplies, or similar materials may be removed from VLP's premises except in the ordinary course of performing duties on behalf of VLP and with the permission of the Executive Director. Volunteers may not communicate to any person VLP's confidential business or financial information or documents, except in the course of their duties or by authorization of VLP, nor may they at any time use such information for their personal advantage.

Terminated volunteers must return all VLP-related information and property in the employee's possession, including, without limitation, documents, files records, manuals, information stored on a personal computer or other system, supplies, keys, photo IDs, cell phones, laptops, passwords, and other equipment or office supplies. VLP also has the right to request return of all VLP-related information and property at any time.

All client and case matters are confidential. The confidentiality and integrity of client information and the attorney/client relationship shall be maintained. Volunteers are required to abide by the applicable professional and legal requirements governing confidentiality and the attorney/client relationship.

Volunteers should never attempt to give legal advice of any kind, unless they have obtained necessary certifications. Volunteers cannot solicit clients, staff, or other volunteers for personal gain.

Failure to comply with VLP's confidentiality policy, or the professional requirements governing confidential information and the attorney/client relationship, may subject you to discipline up to and including immediate dismissal.

All volunteers are asked to complete WISP (Written Information Security Program) training during their initial orientation. The full WISP policy will be provided during the orientation.

Volunteers must also observe the restrictions imposed by the federal Legal Services Corporation Act, related regulations and appropriation riders, as well as the provisions of the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation Act, and all conditions governing the use of VLP funds. When in doubt about whether a particular matter violates these laws, volunteers should consult the Executive Director or the person acting in that capacity.

12. Employment of Volunteers

Volunteers who are interested in employment at Volunteer Lawyers Project, please visit <https://vlpnet.org/about-us/careers/> for Employment Opportunities contact the Director of Finance and Operations at (857) 320-6440.

Volunteer Lawyers Project is an equal opportunity employer. VLP provides equal employment opportunities by prohibiting discrimination against any applicant, employee, or contractor on the basis of the following legally protected characteristics: race, color, religion, sex, national origin, ancestry, age, physical or mental disability, sexual orientation, genetic information, gender identity and expression, pregnancy (including childbirth, lactation and other pregnancy-related medical conditions), national origin, veteran status, and military status or any other category protected by law. VLP seeks to attract employees whose diversity reflects the clients we serve. All of VLP's employment decisions and personnel actions, including, without limitation, recruiting, hiring, placement, promotion, compensation, benefits, transfer, termination, layoffs, and training, are administered in accordance with this policy.

In accordance with federal Legal Services Corporation Act regulations, 45 C.F.R. § 1608, VLP will also not use any political test or qualification in making any decision, taking any action, or performing any function.

13. VLP Employee Volunteers

Volunteers who are employees of the Volunteer Lawyers Project must adhere to the Fair Labor Standards Act. The following restrictions apply:

- An employee cannot volunteer his/her services to an employer to perform the same type of service performed as an employee.

- The tasks performed by the volunteer may not be similar to those performed by an employee.

14. Anti-Harassment Policy

VLP's policy is to promote a workplace that is free from harassment based on the following legally protected characteristics: race, color, religion, national or ethnic origin, age, ancestry, sex, pregnancy (including childbirth, lactation, and related medical conditions), gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, mental or physical disability, genetic information (including characteristics and testing), or membership in any other category protected by applicable local, state, or federal law. VLP will not tolerate harassment of employees, volunteers, clients, visitors, or service providers in the workplace, or in other settings in which employees may find themselves in connection with their employment. Further, any retaliation against an individual who has complained about sexual harassment or other forms of harassment, or retaliation against individuals for cooperating with an investigation of a harassment complaint, is similarly unlawful and will not be tolerated.

To achieve our goal of providing a workplace free from harassment and discrimination, VLP has established procedures for reporting and addressing potential violations of VLP's policies against discrimination and harassment (See "Registering Concerns," below). Volunteers are responsible for reporting conduct that violates VLP's policies.

Although this policy sets forth VLP's goals of promoting a workplace free of harassment and discrimination, the policy is not intended to limit our authority to discipline or take remedial action for workplace conduct which VLP deems unacceptable, regardless of whether that conduct meets the legal definition of discrimination or harassment.

Sexual Harassment — Sexual harassment is defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal and physical conduct of a sexual nature. This includes many forms of offensive behavior and includes gender-based harassment of a person of the same sex as the harasser. Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when:

1. submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment; or
2. submission to or rejection of such conduct by any individual is used as the basis of employment decisions affecting such individual; or
3. such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working environment.

A non-exhaustive list of examples includes:

- Unwelcome sexual advances - whether they include touching or not;
- Sexual epithets, slurs, jokes, written or oral references to sexual conduct, gossip regarding one's sex life; comments about an individual's body, comments about

A non-exhaustive list of examples includes:

- Unwelcome sexual advances - whether they include touching or not;
- Sexual epithets, slurs, jokes, written or oral references to sexual conduct, gossip regarding one's sex life; comments about an individual's body, comments about or inquiries into an individual's sexual activity, experiences, deficiencies or prowess;
- Displaying sexually suggestive objects, pictures, cartoons or posters;
- Unwelcome leering, whistling, brushing against the body, sexual gestures, suggestive or insulting comments;
- Inquiries into one's sexual experiences;
- Discussion of one's sexual activities;
- Offering employment benefits in exchange for sexual favors;
- Making or threatening reprisals after a negative response to sexual advances;
- Physical conduct that includes touching, assaulting, or impeding or blocking movements;
- Use of any of VLP's electronic communication systems, whether through e-mail, internet access, or other electronic means, to transmit or receive sexual material or engage in sexual harassment; and
- Use of one's own electronic communication equipment to communicate sexual material to another VLP employee.

Other Forms of Discriminatory Harassment — It is also against VLP's policy to engage in verbal or physical conduct that denigrates or shows hostility or aversion toward an individual because of race, color, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, mental or physical disability, religion, national origin, ancestry, genetic information, or any other protected category (or that of the individual's relatives, friends, or associates) that:

- Has the purpose or effect of creating an intimidating, hostile or humiliating work environment;
 - Has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance; or
 - Otherwise adversely affects an individual's employment opportunities.
- Depending on the circumstances, the following may constitute discriminatory harassment:
- Epithets, slurs, negative stereotyping, jokes or threatening, intimidating, or hostile acts that relate to race, color, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, national origin, gender identity, or disability; or
 - Written or graphic material that denigrates or shows hostility toward an individual group because of race, color, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, national origin, gender identity, or disability that is circulated in the workplace, or placed anywhere in VLP's premises.

This list is non-exhaustive. Other conduct may also be prohibited if it falls within the definition of discriminatory harassment set forth above.

As noted, conduct of the nature described above may be deemed a violation of VLP's policies, whether or not it meets the legal definition of discrimination or harassment. Determinations of whether particular language or conduct is subject to disciplinary action under this policy are made on a case-by-case basis.

15. Registering Concerns

a. Enforcement Procedures for Harassment and Discrimination

- **Who to notify.** Volunteers who believe they have been the subject of discrimination or harassment, or who believe they have witnessed discrimination or harassment, are responsible for reporting the conduct immediately to VLP's Executive Director. Individuals who believe that VLP's Executive Director has engaged in conduct prohibited by VLP's policies against discrimination and harassment are responsible for immediately notifying the Chair of the Human Resources Committee of the Board of Directors, or the Chair of the Board of Directors, or the Vice Chair of the Board of Directors.
- **Investigation and Resolution.** When a report is received, VLP will promptly investigate the report in a fair and expeditious manner. The investigation will be conducted in such a way as to maintain confidentiality to the extent practicable in the circumstances. Volunteers should be aware, however, that information must be shared in order for an effective investigation to be conducted. When VLP completes its investigation, VLP will, to the extent appropriate, inform the person who reported the conduct and the person alleged to have engaged in the conduct of the outcome of the investigation. If it is determined that VLP's policy has been violated, VLP will act promptly to eliminate the offending conduct, and disciplinary action may be taken.
 - **Disciplinary Action.** Any volunteer who is found to have engaged in discrimination, harassment, or any other conduct that violates VLP's policies will be subject to appropriate disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal.
 - **No Retaliation.** No person shall be penalized or subjected to retaliation for: reporting harassment or discrimination, whether made internally or with a government agency; objecting to such conduct; filing, testifying, assisting or participating in any manner in any investigation, proceeding or hearing conducted by an administrative agency or court; or participating in an internal investigation of harassment or discrimination. Prohibited retaliation includes, but is not limited to: dismissal, suspension, failure to hire or consider for hire, failure to give equal consideration in making employment decisions, failure to make employment recommendations impartially, adversely affecting working conditions, or otherwise denying any benefit.

- Volunteers who believe they have been the subject of, or have witnessed retaliation, are responsible for reporting the conduct immediately to VLP's Executive Director. Individuals who believe that VLP's Executive Director has engaged in retaliatory conduct are responsible for immediately notifying the Chair of the Human Resources Committee of the Board of Directors, or the Chair of the Board of Directors, or the Vice Chair of the Board of Directors.
- Federal and State Remedies. VLP strongly encourages volunteers to bring concerns of discrimination, harassment, and retaliation to the attention of the VLP officials listed above. Volunteers may also file a formal complaint with any of the government agencies responsible for enforcement of employment discrimination laws, which are listed below. Participation in VLP's reporting process will not prohibit any volunteer from filing a complaint with these agencies.
 - The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), John F. Kennedy Federal Building, 475 Government Center, Boston, MA 02203, (617) 565-3200
 - The Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, One Ashburton Place, Room 601, Boston, MA 02108, (617) 994-6000

16. Incident Reporting

Any injury sustained by a volunteer must be reported to the unit's supervising attorney and to the Director of People and Culture or the Executive Director, regardless of the perceived seriousness of the injury. An incident report will be completed with as much detail about the injury.

17. Drug-free and alcohol-free workplace

It is VLP's policy to maintain a drug-free work environment for all its volunteers, staff, visitors, clients and other individuals in our workplace. During regularly scheduled volunteer hours, while on VLP's property, or while conducting business offsite, volunteers are strictly prohibited from using, possessing, selling, distributing, manufacturing, or being under the influence of illegal drugs or alcohol. The legal use of prescribed drugs, when taken according to a physician's prescription, is permitted, provided that such use does not impair your ability to perform the essential functions of your volunteer duties effectively and safely, without endangering yourself or others.

VLP prohibits the abuse, misuse, or possession of alcohol while working, present on VLP's premises, or representing VLP at any time and in any way. VLP also prohibits the use of alcohol, or the possession of opened containers of alcohol, by employees operating any vehicle while on VLP business. Notwithstanding the foregoing, VLP may occasionally sponsor or participate in functions (such as holiday parties, trivia nights, and charity events) at which alcohol is served. VLP expects that employees, whether or not they choose to consume alcoholic beverages, will behave responsibly and professionally, recognizing that they are representing VLP both inside and outside of the workplace.

All volunteers are asked to adhere to this policy. Volunteers found in violation will be subject to immediate disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal.

18. Political Activities

All volunteers are subject to the regulations set forth at 45 C.F.R. § 1608. These regulations, among other things, prohibit volunteers from supporting or promoting political activities or interests while acting on behalf of VLP, or with any of VLP resources. Failure to do follow these regulations could subject a volunteer to disciplinary action up to, and including, dismissal.

19. Media Inquiries

Any VLP-related inquiries received from the media must be immediately referred to the Executive Director or the person acting in that capacity. Volunteers are prohibited from communicating with the media on behalf of VLP without prior authority.

20. Electronic Communications

Volunteers who utilize any of VLP's email, Internet, computer, word processing, or related equipment or systems, expressly consents, by virtue of such use to the terms of this VLP's policy, including VLP's monitoring or accessing of same, including e-mail, Internet or other message content, at its sole discretion.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of unacceptable uses (though VLP recognizes that, on rare occasions, exceptions may be necessary for an attorney to properly represent a client) of VLP's electronic systems:

- Accessing, downloading, promulgating or distributing messages, images or other materials which are sexually explicit, profane, vulgar, obscene, lewd, or pornographic;
- Accessing, downloading, promulgating or distributing message, images or other materials which are discriminatory, insulting, offensive, create an intimidating or hostile environment, threaten or advocate violence, including but not limited to racial or ethnic slurs, racial or ethnic comments, and off-color jokes regarding a protected class, or anything similar that may be harassing, offensive or disrespectful;
- Gambling, playing computer or other games, making purchases not related to VLP business or for participation in any so called "chat" site, "chat room", or external bulletin board or message posting location;
- Sending mass emails or chain letters or engaging in other "spam" activities, or soliciting money for religious or political causes;
- Providing access to confidential information.

21. Social Media

- Electronic communications with co-workers, clients, and the general public may have a legal impact on VLP, even if the communications occur off-premises. Inappropriate communications, where or whenever they occur, may be grounds for discipline, up to and

including dismissal. For purposes of this policy, “social media” means any facility for online publication and commentary, including but without limitation: blogs, wikis, social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Twitter, Flickr, Pinterest, and YouTube. Good judgment must be exercised when utilizing these tools.

22. Theft

Volunteers must not steal from VLP. Personal use of VLP property requires prior authorization. This includes, but is not limited to, taking cash, diverting checks from VLP to their personal accounts or use, taking office supplies or equipment, or significant personal use of office supplies and equipment. Stealing from VLP, its clients, or anyone with whom VLP does business will be grounds for immediate dismissal, and volunteers may be prosecuted to the full extent of the law

23. Holidays

VLP observes the following holidays:

- New Year’s Day (January 1)
- Martin Luther King’s Birthday (third Monday in January)
- Presidents Day (third Monday in February)
- Patriot’s Day (Third Monday in April)
- Memorial Day (Fourth Monday in May)
- Juneteenth (June 19th)
- Independence Day (July 4)
- Labor Day (First Monday in September)
- Indigenous Peoples Day (Second Monday in October)
- Veterans Day (November 11)
- Thanksgiving Day (Fourth Thursday in November)
- Day after Thanksgiving (Fourth Friday in November)
- Christmas Day (December 25)

All VLP offices are closed on these days, and volunteers should not report to work.

24. Emergency Closings

Severe weather or other emergencies may disrupt the normal business of VLP. The Executive Director, in his or her sole discretion, may choose to close the office. In the event of a closure, the Executive Director will strive to notify staff by 8:00 a.m. Volunteers scheduled to work on a day where the office is closed for severe weather should not report to work.

If VLP is open for operations, volunteers are expected to report for their scheduled hours. Volunteers are encouraged to discuss with their supervisors if they should report to service in the event of inclement weather, or if they are concerned about their safety.

Appendix A Dress Code Policy

Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP) volunteers contribute to the culture and reputation in the way they present themselves. In order to better serve our clients and ensure that they are receiving high quality pro bono legal services, VLP has developed the following dress code policy.

Basic guidelines for appropriate attire

Basic elements for appropriate and professional business attire include clothing that is in neat and clean condition. Basic guidelines for appropriate workplace dress do not include the following inappropriate attire: shorts, jeans/denim of any color, tight pants or shirts, graphic t-shirts, tank tops, flip-flops, bare feet, halter tops, low-cut blouses or sweaters.

VLP will apply a reasonable and professional workplace standard to individuals on a case-by-case basis. Management may make exceptions for special occasions or in the case of inclement weather. A volunteer unsure of what is appropriate should check with his or her supervisor. If it is determined that a volunteer's dress or appearance is not appropriate as outlined in this policy, he or she may be asked to leave the work area and make the necessary changes to comply with the policy.

Court appearance or Staffing a Clinic

Business professional attire is required when in court or at a clinic, and includes the following general guidelines:

- Suits with tie, skirt or pants suits, or dresses with jacket

The following dress is not allowed when in court or at a clinic:

- Inappropriate attire noted under basic guidelines above
- No open-toed shoes
- No sleeveless clothing
- No sweatshirts

Please note that what you wear on your commute is not governed by this policy, but volunteers are expected to be dressed appropriately when in the office, court, or at clinics. In the event of inclement weather, or if they are concerned about their safety.

VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK RECEIPT AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Please complete this form below and return it to the Bilingual Pro Bono Assistant for inclusion in your volunteer file.

Please check boxes below, indicating you have read and agree with each statement:

I have received a copy of this Volunteer Handbook. I understand that it is my responsibility to read the policies and procedures outlined in the Handbook. I understand that I am a volunteer at will and my service can be terminated at any time with or without advance notice, for any reason or for no reason at all. I understand that the Handbook and any later revisions do not constitute a contract of employment or guarantee of benefits. I further understand that the policies contained in the Handbook may be added to, deleted, or changed by VLP at any time in its sole discretion.

I have also read and I understand VLP's Anti-Harassment Policy.

I have also read and I understand VLP's Confidentiality and Ethical Conduct Policy.

Volunteer's Name in Print

Signature of Volunteer

Date Signed by Volunteer

FIND US ON SOCIAL MEDIA



@VLPBOSTON



@VLPNET



@VLPBOSTON



**VOLUNTEER
LAWYERS
PROJECT**

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