



OPERATOR GUIDE

# How to Manage Hostel Volunteers

Fair shifts, clear standards and a clean legal footing for work-exchange staff, volunteers and interns.

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Volunteers and work-exchange staff keep many hostels open. They also generate most of the fairness disputes, most of the "who was supposed to do that" mornings, and in some countries a real legal exposure. This guide covers the legal footing, the deal, the shifts, the standard and the record, so a mixed team of paid staff and volunteers runs as one team.

## First, the legal footing

The word "volunteer" means different things in different countries, and in some it does not mean what hostel owners hope. In the United States, the Department of Labor is direct: under the Fair Labor Standards Act, individuals may not volunteer their services to for-profit private sector employers.<sup>1</sup> The volunteer exemption exists for public agencies and for religious, charitable, civic and humanitarian non-profits, and the Department's Fact Sheet 14A explains those conditions.<sup>2</sup> A privately owned hostel in the US is a for-profit employer, so a person doing shifts in exchange for a bed is, in the eyes of the law, very likely an employee entitled to at least minimum wage and to the protections that come with it.

Outside the US the picture varies. Some countries have a recognised work-exchange or au pair style arrangement with limits on hours; others treat any work for accommodation as employment; others require a specific visa. Work-exchange platforms typically put the legal responsibility on the host, not the platform.

**The rule of thumb:** before you rely on unpaid or accommodation-for-work shifts, ask a local employment adviser one question: "If this person were injured on shift, how would the law describe them?" The answer tells you what paperwork, insurance and pay you need. This guide is not legal advice.

## Set the deal in writing before day one

Most volunteer problems are contract problems in disguise. Write a one-page agreement, in plain language, that both of you sign, covering:

- **Hours.** A weekly number and a maximum per day. "About 20 hours" becomes 35 by week three without a number.
- **The exchange.** Exactly what they get: which bed, which meals, laundry, tours, a stipend if any.
- **Duration and notice.** Start date, end date, and how much notice each side gives to end early.
- **Role and standard.** Which shifts, which checklists, who they report to.
- **House rules.** Guests in the staff room, alcohol on shift, the same rules paid staff follow.
- **Insurance and emergencies.** What happens if they are hurt, and their emergency contact.

Keep a copy where you can find it in six months. If your tool stores agreements with a signature and a timestamp, use it; SkorCover, the Skorops policy add-on, does this for employment policies.

## Shifts: fair, predictable and visible

The fastest way to lose a good volunteer is the sense that they get the shifts nobody else wants and nobody can prove otherwise. Three habits fix it:

1. **Publish the rota two weeks ahead** with volunteers and paid staff on the same schedule. Separate rotas breed separate teams.
2. **Rotate the undesirable shifts** (Sunday close, Friday night, deep-clean day) through everyone with the role, and let the record show it.
3. **Timestamp completions.** When every task is tied to a person and a time, "I always do the closes" is a fact you can check in ten seconds, in either direction.

## Standards: one checklist for everyone

Volunteers should run the same checklists as paid staff, with the same photo proof and the same points. Two reasons. First, guests do not know or care who is a volunteer; the standard has to be the standard. Second, a separate "volunteer version" of the job signals that their work matters less, and they behave accordingly.

What changes is the onboarding speed. A volunteer staying four weeks needs to be productive by day three, so use the compressed first-week plan from the companion guide "How to Onboard Hostel Staff Fast": shadow one shift, run one shift with a buddy, run one alone with the checklist as the safety net.

Write task instructions so they survive language and turnover. One owner, one time, one line on what finished looks like, and a photo where words fail. A team from six countries will read the photo of the correctly set breakfast table faster than any paragraph.

## Scoring volunteers: recognition, not ranking

Points and leaderboards work well in mixed teams if you use them for recognition rather than pressure. Show individual scores to the person and the manager; show the team score and personal-best streaks to everyone; be careful with public ranking, especially where a volunteer's motivation is the experience rather than the job. The companion guide "How to Gamify Staff Without Demotivating Them" covers the research and the rules.

Use the data for the goodbye as much as the shift. A volunteer leaving with "you ran 22 shifts, every one with full photo proof, and your Thursday handover caught the water heater fault" has a reference they can use and a reason to recommend you.

## The manager's weekly ten minutes

- **Hours check.** Compare scheduled hours against the agreement for every volunteer. Over the limit two weeks running is a breach you caused.
- **Distribution check.** Who did the closes, the deep cleans and the Sunday shifts this week. If it is the same names, fix next week's rota.
- **Standard check.** Spot-check five photos across volunteers and staff. Drift shows up here first.
- **One conversation.** Pick one volunteer and ask what is unclear in the checklist. Fix it for the next arrival.

## A volunteer's first day, hour by hour

| WHEN           | WHAT HAPPENS                                                                                    | WHY IT MATTERS                                                          |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Arrival        | Sign the one-page agreement together; walk through hours, the exchange and the end date.        | Every later dispute traces back to a number that was not written down.  |
| First hour     | Login, locker, key code, Wi-Fi, emergency contact and the fire exit walk.                       | Practical friction on day one reads as "they did not expect me."        |
| First shift    | Shadow the buddy with the checklist open. Match what they see to the list. Tick nothing.        | The standard is learned from the list, not from one colleague's habits. |
| End of shift   | Buddy reviews the photos on the checklist and points out one thing done well and one to change. | Specific feedback on day one sets the tone for the whole stay.          |
| Before leaving | Show them tomorrow's rota and which shift they run with the buddy watching.                     | Predictability is the first thing volunteers say they value.            |

## What to keep on file

Whatever your country's rules turn out to be, three records protect both sides: the signed agreement with the hours, the shift record with timestamps, and any incident notes. If a question ever comes from a labour inspector, an insurer or the volunteer themselves, these three answer it. If you use Skorops, the shift record is automatic; the agreement can live in SkorCover with an e-signature and a timestamp.

## Common mistakes

- **Treating "volunteer" as a legal category you chose.** The law chooses. Check your country and state before you rely on it.
- **Vague hours.** Every dispute starts here. Write the number.

- **Two teams, two standards.** Separate rotas, separate checklists, separate staff areas. You will get separate loyalties.
- **No record.** Without timestamps, fairness is a matter of opinion, and the loudest opinion wins.
- **No goodbye.** Volunteers are your best recruiters. Send them off with specifics and a reference.

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## Sources

1. US Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, elaws Fair Labor Standards Act Advisor, "Volunteers." [webapps.dol.gov/elaws/whd/flsa/docs/volunteers.asp](https://webapps.dol.gov/elaws/whd/flsa/docs/volunteers.asp)
2. US Department of Labor, Fact Sheet #14A, "Non-Profit Organizations and the Fair Labor Standards Act." [dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/14a-flsa-non-profits](https://dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/14a-flsa-non-profits)

Sources verified September 24, 2026. This guide is operational advice from operators, not legal advice. Employment, volunteer and visa rules differ by country and state; confirm yours with a local adviser before relying on unpaid or exchange-based shifts.

## Put volunteers and staff on the same scoreboard

Skorops tracks work-exchange and volunteer shifts on the same checklists as paid staff, with timestamps that show tasks were shared fairly.

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