QUICK GUIDE!

VOLUNTEERING IN THE HOMELESSNESS SECTOR

INTRODUCTION
Homelessness services have historically attracted volunteers from huge cross section of the population. Volunteers have helped to build excellent services that have supported many people in times of distress find hope and strength. Individuals with skills, expertise and compassion make a real difference to individual’s lives across the sector every day. It is important that organisations enable volunteers to help homeless and vulnerable people in a safe and effective way.

RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS
People volunteer for different reasons; to gain new skills and experience, to put existing skills to use, to make new friends and to ‘give something back’ to the community. Volunteering with homeless people will often mean working with people who are socially excluded and have a range of support needs. You need to ensure you attract people with the right skills and aptitude for the work involved. You can do this by using your local volunteer centres or national organisations such as Volunteering England and Do-It:

- Find contact details for local volunteer centres: www.volunteering.org.uk/finder
- Do-it, the online database of volunteer opportunities www.do-it.org.uk
- Timebank - online portal for would be volunteers to pledge time. www.timebank.org.uk

Developing policies
Organisations that recruit volunteers need have the right policies in place to protect themselves and volunteers. Volunteering England have developed a range of useful policies around recruitment, equal opportunities and good practice in supporting volunteers and the work you do: http://www.volunteering.org.uk/resources/goodpracticebank/Core+Themes/recruitment/index.htm Policies you will need to develop include; a volunteer policy and volunteer agreement, role descriptions and an induction pack. Other policies such as health and safety and equal opportunities may need to be adapted to include volunteers or referenced within the volunteer policy.
Training and support for volunteers
Volunteers need to be trained in the relevant roles so they are competent to complete the task in hand. If volunteers are doing similar a role to staff they should have access to the same training. Training may include; awareness on homelessness, substance misuse and mental health. Volunteers will also need to be trained in general health and safety, especially around the building and the rules and regulations within your service. Often volunteers want set instructions on how to do things, which can be possible with tasks such as preparing and serving food and organising transport. However when working with people training should be about approach as well as an understanding and knowledge of homelessness and related issues. Suitable guidance and support rather than outlined tasks should be provided. If volunteers are going to be expected to do any one-to-one work or offer advice and support they need to be fully CRB checked. For more advice and information about training please visit our website. http://www.homeless.org.uk/training

Befriending and mentoring schemes
Befriending and mentoring schemes are different to volunteer opportunities and attract and demand different skills and aptitudes. They can be very effective when working with people who are currently being resettled into the private rented sector and other move-on schemes. Again suitable training and support is required to make sure the scheme runs safely and volunteers are supported in their roles.

Managing and retaining volunteers
Successful volunteer retention comes through developing appropriate opportunities that allow volunteers to get what they want and need from the experience whilst meeting the needs of the service. Successful retention might not necessarily mean keeping people for years and years; it may mean that volunteer’s help for short sustained periods and then move on to different more challenging environments. However a familiar face that you can trust can also be the key for engagement for some rough sleepers, so keeping volunteers who have that skills and enthusiasm for this role is important. This means allowing volunteers access to organisational development such as team meetings and planning, so they feel included and valued in their work. Supervision and support mechanisms need to be in place, so concerns and ideas can be heard. You also need to ensure volunteers are never out of pocket and that they are also rewarded for their achievements, for more information on expenses please visit Volunteering England: http://www.volunteering.org.uk/resources/goodpracticebank/Core+Themes/expenses/Expenses+and+state+benefits.htm. Other ways to show that you value your volunteers may include thank you events, progression opportunities, awards and training.

Volunteers who were ex-service users
People who have an experience of homelessness may be able to offer insight and empathy in a way that engages hard to reach people in new ways. This skill and expertise should be utilised within services to improve delivery. Often people who have come through services want to ‘give something back’ to a sector that has helped them and it can often be therapeutic and an aid to recovery. There can be concerns around confidentiality and making sure people are ready before they take on various roles. The GROW scheme which was developed to help people with an experience of homeless gain employment within the field offers insight into the implementation of a successful scheme. http://www.thamesreach.org.uk/what-we-do/user-employment/

A barrier to volunteering may include an offending history, volunteering England have put some helpful guidance together: http://www.volunteering.org.uk/resources/goodpracticebank/Core+Themes/

The Homeless Link website also offers advice for individuals wanting to volunteer in the sector http://www.homeless.org.uk/volunteer