

General Advice for Volunteers

"Remember, many people, some of the best civil servants in the world, have failed trying to solve Bosnia's recent problems, so don't be disappointed if you can't fix everything."

(Matthew Bolton on February 19, 2003)

This applies to all areas of volunteer service. Be clear with yourself as to why you are volunteering. Talk with your family, friends and colleagues. And be prepared.

Pre-departure on your own

- Do as much research as possible, before you leave, about the country where you will serve (its history, its current political situation, the names of its key leaders, the living standards of its people, cultural aspects, the availability of medicine, the types of food, etc.). If there is a Lonely Planet or Rough Guide for the area, buy it and review it at length (and definitely take it with you!). Also see the latest UNDP Human Development Report and look up the country. The web also provides extensive, useful information.
- Look for blogs by volunteers who have been or are in the area where you will serve. These personal accounts can go a long way in preparing you for your first service experience.
- If you are a woman, you should do some extra research on cultural aspects of a country; male aid workers often forget or don't notice the particular customs regarding women's dress for the street and the office, and your briefing materials may not be explicit enough in this regard. If possible, try to talk with a woman who has been in the country before, or is there now.
- Meet with people who have gone before you. Have conversations with others that have gone on service projects.
- Get about 10 passport-sized photos made. You will need them for visas, country ID cards, agency ID cards, and all sorts of surprise reasons. If you are female and going to a country where most women wear head scarves, consider getting some photos made with you wearing such.
- Make an electronic copy of the key pages of your passport, and have copies of your contract, security clearance, airline tickets/reservations, emergency information, etc. Put this information somewhere on the Internet where you can retrieve it (for instance, you can mail it to your Yahoo, Google Mail, Hotmail, or other web-based e-mail account, and retrieve it if you need to after you arrive). You can also have it on a memory stick or CD you carry with you on your person when you arrive. Of course, you should have printed out copies of these as well which you also carry on your person. Leave a copy at home with a significant other.
- Buy and study a map of the country or the area where you will work.
- Start monitoring the weather before you leave. The web makes that very easy to do.
- Review the Global Partners web site for updates and other pertinent information.

Packing

How much stuff should you take with you? It depends on how long you are going, what your living conditions will be and the availability of items there. Just remember that as you navigate your way through airports and other transport stations, you might have to manage all of your luggage by yourself; that means you don't want to take more than you can carry on your own. Also, consider that in an emergency situation you would need to leave the majority of your possessions so don't take anything so precious that you would be heartbroken to have to leave it behind.

Jewelry is unnecessary as are other valuables. The work you will be doing requires sturdy, comfortable clothing and shoes.

There is a specific packing list for each location that Global Partners supports.

Pre-departure as a group

- Participate in the orientation and education offerings provided by Global Partners staff.
- Get to know your team. You will be living and working together for the entirety of your experience.

Upon arrival

- Stick together. You are in a new situation and as you become more comfortable you may place yourself at more risk. Work with a buddy and remember the guidelines that are specific to your travel area.
- It is not recommended to give money to people that are begging. If you feel the need, work through the interpreter or other on the ground resource. People may ask for donations or money for a ride. The leader of the group can help you in these situations.

Upon your return

- Readjust
- Reverse culture shock
- What to avoid
- Reflect
- Tell your story
- What have you learned?
- Keep on learning
- Stay in touch
- Volunteer online
- Write
- Join with others
- Cook
- A fresh outlook

You have finished - or you are about to finish - your assignment as a volunteer with Global Partners. It has been a unique and probably intense experience.

There are some other important activities that should be undertaken as you return to your normal day-to-day life. They will help you to value your experience, to adjust during your transition, and to prepare for what's next. They're based on advice from returned aid workers:

Readjust

Expect readjustment to your post-aid worker life to take time, certainly more than just a few days or weeks. Time depends upon the amount of time you were away and the depth of the experience. Your values may have changed, and you may view things differently at home. You should also be prepared for people around you back home to have a hard time understanding what you have experienced. Continue your willingness to learn, to listen to others, to think about the point of view of others, and to respect differences in opinion and perspective.

Reverse culture shock

You may find that it's a shock, and even hard to cope, with the change in your environment as you return home. This is very common and is sometimes known as reverse culture shock. Dr Ted Lankester has written well about it in his book "The Traveller's Good Health Guide" available from www.amazon.com.

The tips below are some suggestions on how to avoid pitfalls of the returning volunteer.

Reflect

Make time to reflect about your experience.

1. If you kept a journal or blog, keep writing in it during the transition and after you have returned home. If you didn't keep a journal, it's not too late to start.
2. Go through the material things you have brought back from your assignment, both professionally and personally-related, and write about them.
3. Organize and label the pictures from your experience, while names and feelings are still fresh in your mind. This reflection will help you remember more about your experience later.

Tell your story

You may want to talk about your time away, but find that after a minute or two even your good friends start to look as if you're giving them too much information. It can be difficult to accept that even though you've been heroic or thrilled or traumatized or privileged by a life-changing experience, your friends only want to hear a soundbite now and again rather than the whole thing. This is very common; don't worry about it. Continue to dialogue with the team you traveled with or stay involved in the process from home.

What have you learned?

Inventory your new skills, knowledge, strengths, perceptions and achievements. You will want to add at least some of these new skills and your achievements from your assignment to your CV; this will help better position you for your next career chapter. After this inventory, you may even find that you want to pursue a new career path. *What Color is Your Parachute?* by Richard Nelson Bolles is a great guide to working out what job to do next if you're not sure.

Keep on learning

If you are feeling the effects of reverse culture shock, getting into a new mental challenge could help your past experiences to settle into place. Stay alert to the happenings around you and how you can apply what you have learned about yourself.

Stay in touch

Make and stay in contact with others with whom you volunteered. Friends and colleagues from your host country will also appreciate your connection after you leave them. This can be just to say "hi" occasionally, or, to offer advice about projects you helped with that are continuing - if that is welcomed by your successors. E-mail provides an easy way to do this, and a postcard in the postal mail will also be appreciated.

Volunteer at home

Support activities in the La Crosse area. Volunteer locally. Stay involved with Global Partners.

Write

Write an essay about your experiences, to help you think them through. Submit it to the local paper or Gundersen Lutheran's *Bridges*.

Cook

Cook a meal for friends that represents the location where you served, and display pictures and items you brought back from the country, to share your experience. Aim to make it interesting for them (less detail may be better than more) rather than mainly a chance for you to get things off your chest.

A fresh outlook

Don't expect future volunteer experiences to be the same as the one you have just returned from; look at each new experience as a new opportunity to learn and serve. If you decide to do something different, accept and even enjoy the fact that it is so different from what you did before. For most people it's good to take time to look back and reflect. And to say thank you.