



Volunteering and Civic Engagement Competencies

FOR OLDER ADULTS AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

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Introduction

Welcome to this workshop module!

Volunteering creates opportunities for connection, strengthens communities, and promotes social participation—especially for people who need support, companionship, or social contact. Whether in associations, local communities, social projects, or through direct interaction with others, your contribution makes a difference.

Volunteering takes many forms. It can involve giving your time, listening to others, sharing knowledge, helping to organize events, or supporting people in different life situations. At the same time, volunteering raises important questions: What motivates people to get involved? What conditions are needed for successful volunteer engagement? And how can organizations encourage and support volunteers in the long term?

This workshop module provides you with the knowledge and practical tools needed to better understand, develop, and support volunteer engagement. It focuses on both the perspective of volunteers and that of organizations and initiatives that work with them.

In the first part, you will gain an introduction to the foundations of volunteering. You will learn what characterizes volunteer engagement, which developments and trends are shaping the volunteer sector, and what motivates people to contribute to the well-being of others. You will also explore the conditions that support successful volunteer engagement and the challenges different target groups may face when accessing volunteering opportunities.

The second part focuses on practical exercises. You will reflect on your own experiences, explore different forms of engagement, and learn methods for recruiting, supporting, and recognizing volunteers. In addition, you will develop ideas for intergenerational projects and become familiar with tools that can be applied within your own organization or area of engagement.

In the third part, you will find further literature, studies, and resources for those who wish to explore specific topics in greater depth or gain new inspiration for their practical work.

The goal of this module is not to provide ready-made answers to every question related to volunteering. Rather, it aims to help you better understand the importance of civic engagement, inspire others to become involved, and create conditions in which volunteer engagement can grow and thrive.

Are you not yet involved in volunteering but would like to work with older people? Then we would be delighted to hear from you! We welcome every form of support and will guide you step by step on your volunteering journey—this course is the ideal place to start.

PART 1 – THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1 Background and Relevance

Volunteering is an important part of social life and community development. It creates opportunities for connection, strengthens communities, and enables people to actively contribute and take responsibility. Especially in times of social change, volunteering and civic engagement are becoming increasingly important—both for those who receive support and for those who contribute their time, experience, and skills.

In Austria, almost half of the population aged 15 and over is involved in voluntary activities. People contribute in associations, local communities, social organizations, parishes, or simply by helping others in their everyday lives. Volunteering is as diverse as the people who engage in it: some wish to share their knowledge and experience, others seek a sense of community, want to make a meaningful contribution, or put their personal values into practice.

At the same time, volunteering is changing. While long-term commitments to organizations were once considered the norm, many people today prefer more flexible and time-limited opportunities to get involved. Personal interests, individual life circumstances, and the desire to make a meaningful impact play an increasingly important role.

To promote volunteering in a sustainable way, suitable framework conditions, supportive guidance, and opportunities that reflect the needs of different people are essential. Understanding and actively supporting volunteer engagement is an important contribution to building a supportive, vibrant, and inclusive society..

Study

Austrian Volunteering Report 2022 – Representative national survey on volunteering in Austria. Results: 49.4% of the population aged 15 and over are engaged in voluntary activities (approximately 3.73 million people); volunteers contribute an average of 5 hours per week; 58.0% of formally engaged volunteers are men and 42.0% are women; the largest group of formally engaged volunteers is people aged 40–59 years (38.6%).

1.1 Definition: Volunteering and Civic Engagement

What characterizes volunteering? Regardless of whether we speak of volunteering, voluntary work, or civic engagement, several key characteristics are shared:

- Volunteering is undertaken by personal choice and not because of a legal obligation. People become involved because they want to make a difference, support others, or contribute to their community.
- In addition, volunteering is generally unpaid. While expenses may be reimbursed, the focus is not on financial compensation but on the voluntary contribution of time, knowledge, skills, and personal experience.
- Another important characteristic is its focus on the well-being of other people or the wider community. Volunteering benefits individuals outside one's own household and contributes to social cohesion and community life.
- Volunteering can take place within formal structures, such as associations, organizations, municipalities, or social service institutions, as well as informally, for example through neighbourhood support or helping people within one's local community.
- Alongside the terms "volunteering" and "voluntary work," expressions such as "civic engagement" and "community engagement" are also frequently used. All of these terms describe different forms of voluntary action carried out for the benefit of others and the common good.

1.2 Trends & Developments in Volunteering

Volunteering remains deeply rooted in Austrian society. The number of people involved in voluntary activities has remained relatively stable for many years. At the same time, current developments show that the way people choose to engage is changing.

Increasingly, volunteer engagement is being adapted to individual life circumstances. Professional responsibilities, family commitments, and personal interests influence how much time people can and want to invest. As a result, flexible and short-term forms of volunteering are becoming more important.

The motivations for volunteering have also evolved. While a sense of duty or tradition often played a central role in the past, many people today place greater value on experiencing the direct impact of their engagement. Personal development, a sense of community, and the tangible benefits of contributing are becoming increasingly important motivations.

In addition, there is a noticeable shift between different forms of engagement. Traditional, formally organized activities within associations and organizations are declining slightly, while informal forms of support—such as neighbourhood assistance or spontaneous help within personal networks—are gaining importance.

However, not everyone has the same opportunities to become involved. People with significant family responsibilities often face time constraints that limit their ability to engage. At the same time, many individuals who would be willing to volunteer are never actively approached or invited to participate. This highlights the importance of accessible opportunities and targeted outreach in promoting volunteer engagement.

2 Motivation, Structural Change and Cultural Transformation in Volunteering

People engage in volunteering for many different reasons. Their motivations are as diverse as the volunteers themselves and range from the desire to help others to the need for social connection, personal development, and active participation in society. Understanding what motivates volunteers helps organizations create more meaningful opportunities and encourage long-term engagement.

The Volunteer Survey conducted by the Catholic Church of Styria (2024) shows that the opportunity to contribute one's own skills and knowledge is a particularly important motivation for many people. Social interaction, a sense of belonging, and the desire to make a meaningful contribution to the common good also play a significant role. For some individuals, volunteering is additionally an expression of their personal values or faith.

The most important motivations for volunteering are:

- Contributing personal skills and knowledge (69%)
- Experiencing a sense of community (58%)
- Making a useful contribution to the common good (45%)
- Expressing one's faith and values through action (38%)

At the same time, volunteering has changed considerably over the past decades. While traditional forms of engagement once dominated, new and more flexible forms of volunteering are becoming increasingly common. The following overview highlights key differences between traditional volunteering and what is often referred to as "new" volunteering.

Feature	Traditional Volunteering	“New” Volunteering
Access	Based on tradition; invited, asked, or appointed	Fits current life circumstances; self-initiated
Motivations & Values	Sense of duty; value system based on “it is the right thing to do”; adaptation to existing structures	Enjoyment and personal fulfilment; personal benefit or relevance; experiencing participation
Organization	Hierarchical; strongly regulated; formalized	Transparent structures; self-determination and participation in decision-making; access to information
Duration	Long-term, often lasting many years or a lifetime	Time-limited; project-based
Sense of Purpose	Family traditions and social environment	Solidarity with others; personal interests and self-realization
Digital Orientation	Digital Immigrants	Digital User

These developments do not mean that traditional forms of volunteering are losing their importance. Rather, the opportunities for voluntary engagement are expanding. Today, people increasingly seek flexible conditions, opportunities for participation, and forms of engagement that fit their current life situation. This creates a challenge for organizations to provide different pathways into volunteering and to value and support both established and emerging forms of engagement.

3 Volunteer Management and Volunteer Engagement Promotion

Volunteer engagement does not happen by chance. For people to enjoy volunteering, carry out their roles with motivation, and remain involved over the long term, supportive conditions and appropriate guidance are essential. Volunteer management therefore includes all measures aimed at recruiting volunteers, supporting them in their roles, and recognizing their contributions.

3.1 The Ferris Wheel of Volunteer Engagement

A useful model for understanding this process is the “**Ferris Wheel of Volunteer Engagement Promotion.**” It illustrates that successful volunteer involvement is based on several interconnected elements. If one of these elements is missing, it can affect volunteers’ motivation, satisfaction, and long-term commitment. Only when all elements work together can a stable foundation for successful volunteer engagement be created.

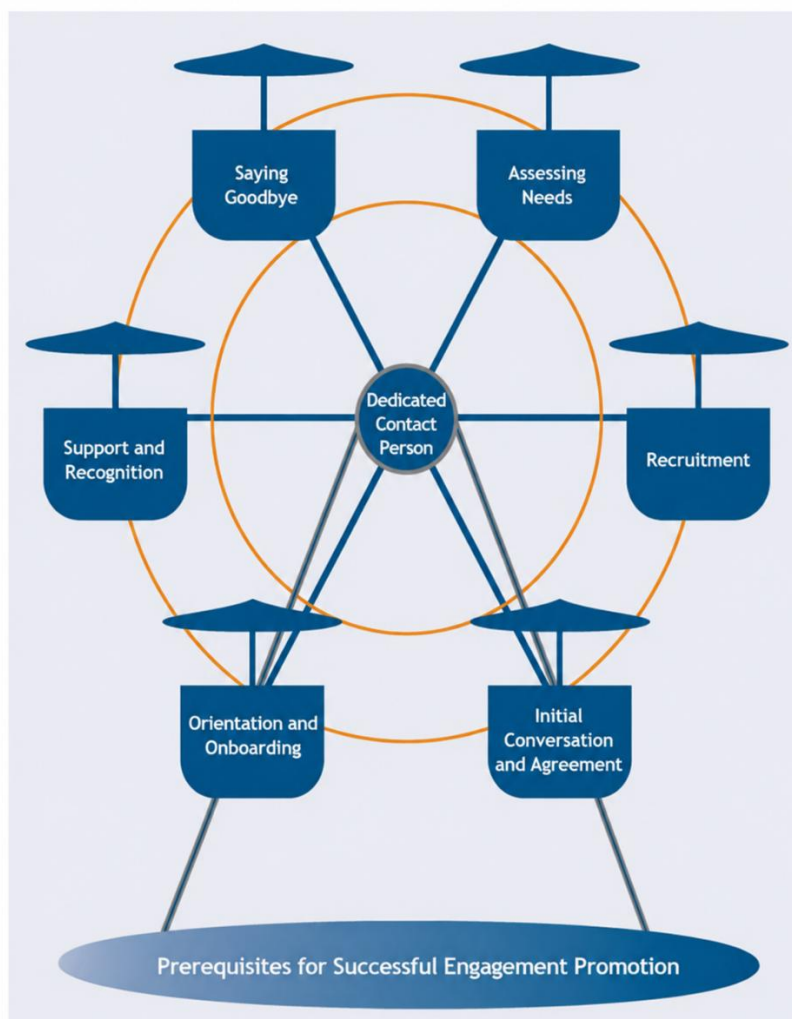


Fig. The Ferris Wheel of Engagement Promotion, © Academy for Volunteering Germany, 2017.

Element	Content	Goal
Initial Conversation & Agreements	Recognition and understanding of volunteers' motivations; awareness of the value of volunteering; positive attitude; clear expectations and framework conditions	Establish a solid foundation for engagement
Needs Assessment	Identifying available volunteering opportunities, existing resources, and volunteers' interests and skills	Develop suitable and meaningful engagement opportunities
Recruitment	Initial conversation and agreements; volunteer agreement; consent forms; criminal record check where required	Match the right volunteer with the right role
Orientation & Onboarding	Personal, practical, organizational, and cultural introduction to the role and organization	Ensure a confident and successful start to volunteering
Recognition & Support	Timely, transparent, individual, and regular appreciation; recognition through words and actions	Maintain motivation and encourage long-term engagement
Completion & Farewell	Meaningful conclusion of the volunteering experience; expressing gratitude; acknowledging contributions	Create a positive ending and encourage future recommendations

These elements demonstrate that successful volunteer engagement is a continuous process rather than a single event. From the first conversation to the conclusion of a volunteer's involvement, each phase contributes to creating a positive and meaningful experience. Organizations that consciously support volunteers throughout this journey are more likely to foster satisfaction, commitment, and long-term engagement.

3.2 Key Areas for Inclusive Volunteer Engagement

People engage in volunteering with different experiences, abilities, interests, and life stories. To ensure that volunteer opportunities are accessible to as many people as possible and can be sustained over time, inclusive framework conditions are essential. The goal is to design volunteering opportunities that take diverse needs into account and enable participation for everyone.

Four key areas should be considered when planning, implementing, and supporting volunteer engagement.

Key Area	Measures
Content	Consider diverse life situations and motivations; emphasize relevance to everyday life and benefits for the community; communicate structures and framework conditions transparently
Methods	Include discussions, reflection activities, and group work; create opportunities for personal experiences and exchange; use humor and a positive atmosphere as part of the learning process
People (Facilitators / Coordinators)	Take individual circumstances and motivations into account; demonstrate a positive and appreciative attitude; maintain a clear and supportive approach to issues such as overload, reluctance, or rejection
Framework Conditions	Adapt schedules to the needs of the target group; limit sessions to a maximum of 2–3 hours; ensure accessible and low-threshold participation opportunities; make learning materials and tools available after the training

These key areas demonstrate that successful volunteer engagement goes far beyond organizational procedures. People are most likely to become involved and remain engaged when they feel welcome, respected, and valued. Inclusive volunteer engagement therefore means creating conditions that recognize diversity as a strength and enable people with different backgrounds and experiences to contribute their skills and knowledge. This leads to volunteering opportunities that are sustainable and beneficial for both volunteers and organizations.

4 Who Participates (and Who Does Not)? Risk Groups and Barriers to Engagement

In principle, volunteering is open to everyone. In practice, however, studies show that opportunities for volunteer engagement are not equally distributed across all population groups. Personal circumstances, social conditions, and societal structures all influence whether and how people are able to become involved.

For organizations and those promoting volunteer engagement, it is therefore important to understand potential barriers to participation. Only then can opportunities be created that take different life situations into account and enable as many people as possible to participate in volunteering.

Differences are particularly visible in the following areas:

- **Gender:** Men are somewhat more strongly represented in formal volunteering, such as in associations and organizations. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to engage in informal activities, such as neighbourhood support or caregiving roles.
- **Age:** The highest rate of participation in formal volunteering is found among people aged 40 to 59. Older adults tend to engage less frequently in formal structures but often bring extensive experience and are considered particularly reliable volunteers.
- **Education and Income:** People with higher levels of education are statistically more likely to volunteer. Education, available resources, and social networks can make access to volunteering easier.
- **Regional Differences:** Rural areas often have a strong culture of community involvement and volunteer associations. At the same time, they may offer fewer types of volunteering opportunities than urban areas.
- **Health Limitations and Care Responsibilities:** People with health challenges or significant family caregiving responsibilities often face additional barriers to regular volunteering. Flexible or informal forms of engagement can provide valuable alternatives.
- **Lack of Personal Invitation:** A significant number of people do not volunteer simply because they have never been asked. Many individuals are willing to contribute but never receive a direct invitation. Personal outreach is therefore one of the most effective tools for promoting volunteer engagement.

These differences should not be used to categorize or label people. Rather, they help identify diverse needs and create appropriate opportunities for participation. Successful volunteer engagement promotion meets people where they are and provides a variety of pathways for involvement based on individual interests, abilities, and life circumstances.

5 Strategic Development of Volunteer Engagement in Organizations

For volunteer engagement to have a lasting impact, more is needed than isolated activities or initiatives—it requires a strategic commitment within the organization. Developing a modern culture of volunteering is an ongoing process that must be supported jointly by leadership, staff members, and volunteers.

5.1 Building Blocks of an Engagement Strategy

Successful volunteer engagement does not happen automatically. To recruit, support, and retain volunteers over the long term, organizations need clear structures, shared goals, and appropriate tools. A strategic approach to volunteer engagement helps organizations consciously develop and sustainably embed volunteer involvement within their work.

The following building blocks provide an important foundation for a future-oriented engagement strategy. They support the systematic development of volunteer involvement and foster a culture of participation and appreciation.

Building Block	Description	Example / Tool
Mission Statement & Organizational Culture	Develop a shared understanding of volunteer engagement and establish appreciation as a core organizational value	Guiding principles, volunteer charter, volunteer policy statement
Multipliers & Stakeholders	Identify and support key individuals who promote and connect volunteer engagement within the organization	Volunteer coordinators, community ambassadors
Volunteer Surveys	Regularly assess volunteers' motivations, satisfaction levels, experiences, and needs	KKST Volunteer Survey 2024
Guidelines & Templates	Provide standardized procedures for recruitment, agreements, recognition, and volunteer farewell processes	Volunteer agreement, certificate of appreciation
Digital Access	Use online platforms to provide information, recruit volunteers, and facilitate networking	Website, social media, volunteer matching platforms
Training & Capacity Building	Offer learning opportunities for volunteers and staff on topics such as support, communication, and conflict resolution	Internal and external training courses

These building blocks are not rigid requirements but practical guidelines. Depending on an organization's size, structure, and field of activity, different priorities may be appropriate. What matters most is that volunteer engagement is not merely administered but actively developed and supported. Organizations that take a strategic approach to volunteer engagement create better conditions for volunteers while also strengthening their own long-term sustainability and capacity for growth.

5.2 Initiating Intergenerational Projects

Intergenerational projects bring together people of different ages and create opportunities for interaction, exchange, and mutual learning. They promote understanding between generations, strengthen social cohesion, and provide opportunities to share experiences, knowledge, and perspectives. All participants benefit from these projects: younger people gain insight into the lives and experiences of older generations, while older adults have the opportunity to contribute their knowledge, skills, and expertise. At the same time, new social connections are formed and a stronger sense of community is created.

Several factors have proven particularly important for the successful implementation of intergenerational projects:

- **Highlight the mutual benefits:** Projects should not be designed for one generation alone but developed together with all participants. Every generation should experience clear benefits from the collaboration.
- **Choose manageable project formats:** Small and realistic projects make participation easier and create positive experiences of success. These early achievements can encourage continued involvement and future joint activities.
- **Build on existing structures:** Established meeting places and networks such as parishes, associations, schools, municipalities, or neighborhood initiatives often provide ideal conditions for intergenerational projects.
- **Ensure trusted facilitation:** Coordinators or contact persons who support communication and foster relationships between generations contribute significantly to the success of a project.
- **Make achievements visible:** Presenting results, sharing stories, and expressing appreciation help maintain motivation among participants and increase the visibility of the project within the wider community.

Intergenerational projects thrive on interaction, openness, and mutual respect. They provide opportunities to learn from one another, reduce stereotypes, and develop new forms of cooperation and community life. At the same time, they make an important contribution to a supportive society in which people of different generations work together, share responsibility, and help shape the future.

PART 2 — PRACTICAL EXERCISES

This section contains a collection of practical exercises related to volunteering and volunteer engagement promotion. The exercises are designed to deepen your understanding of the module content, encourage reflection on personal experiences, and introduce methods that can be applied in volunteering and intergenerational projects.

Exercise Block A: Fundamentals of Volunteering

← Exercise A1: Reflecting on the Meaning of Volunteering? ⌚ 15 Min.	
1	What comes to mind when you hear the term “volunteering”? <i>(Individual reflection, 2 min.)</i>
2	Compare your thoughts in pairs and identify similarities and differences.
3	Discuss together as a group: Which characteristics are essential to volunteering? <i>(e.g., voluntary, unpaid, benefiting others)</i>
4	Discuss: Where is the boundary between volunteering and helping a neighbour?
💡 Tip: There are no “wrong” answers. Different perspectives and experiences enrich the discussion.	
← Exercise A2: Motivation Mapping ⌚ 20 Min.	
1	Each participant writes on cards: <i>Why do I volunteer (or why don't I)?</i>
2	Collect the cards and group them into categories on a flipchart or pinboard.
3	Compare the results with findings from volunteer surveys: Contributing skills and knowledge (69%), Experiencing a sense of community (58%), Contributing to the common good (45%)
4	Discuss: Which motivations can our organization address and support?
💡 Tip: Based on findings from the Volunteer Survey of the Catholic Church of Styria (2024).	
← Exercise A3: Traditional vs. New Volunteering – Role Play ⌚ 20 Min.	
1	Work in pairs. One person represents traditional volunteering , while the other represents new volunteering .
2	Simulate a conversation about a specific volunteer project (e.g., a parish festival, community event, or local initiative).
3	After 5 minutes, switch roles and repeat the conversation.
4	Group discussion: What challenges did you experience? What helped to understand the other perspective?

Exercise Block B: Volunteer Management in Practice

← Exercise B1: Ferris Wheel Analysis ⌚ 20 Min.	
1	Each group receives a worksheet showing the different sections of the Ferris Wheel of Volunteer Engagement (e.g., Foundation, Recruitment, Orientation, Recognition, etc.).
2	Assess your organization on a scale from 1 to 5 for each section.
3	Identify two strengths and two areas for improvement .
4	Discuss within your group: Which area should be prioritized for further development?
5	Present your assessment to the whole group and compare similarities and differences.
💡 Tip: Use the <i>Ferris Wheel of Volunteer Engagement</i> model as a reflection tool to identify strengths and development opportunities within your organization (adapted from Krottil, 2025).	
← Exercise B2: Creating a Volunteer Agreement ⌚ 20 Min.	
1	As a group, discuss: What elements should a good volunteer agreement include?
2	Work in pairs to create a short sample agreement for a specific volunteer role or area of engagement.
3	Discuss the following topics: Consent forms, confidentiality, and criminal record checks – when are they necessary and why?
4	Share your experiences: Have you already worked with volunteer agreements? What worked well, and what challenges did you encounter?
💡 Tip: Sample templates and resources are available at: www.katholische-kirche-steiermark.at/ehrenamt	
← Exercise B3: Developing Forms of Recognition ⌚ 20 Min.	
1	Brainstorm in small groups: What forms of recognition exist in your organization?
2	Evaluate each form of recognition according to the following criteria: Timely, Authentic, Individualized, Regular
3	Develop 1 new recognition idea that is not currently being used in your organization.
4	Present your ideas to the whole group and jointly select the most promising or innovative approaches.
💡 Tip: Recognition means showing volunteers that they are seen, heard, and appreciated for their unique contribution and commitment.	

Exercise Block C: Intergenerational Projects

Exercise C1: Project Ideas Workshop ⌚ 20 Min.

- 1 In small groups, develop a project idea that brings younger and older generations together (e.g., a storytelling café, smartphone support sessions, community gardening, or a skills exchange).
- 2 Discuss the following questions: Who will benefit from the project? What resources are needed? How can volunteers be recruited and involved?
- 3 Create a short **volunteer role description** for your project idea.
- 4 Present your project to the whole group (approximately 3 minutes per group).

💡 **Tip:** Inspiration can be drawn from the “*Volunteer Engagement Coordinators in Pastoral Areas*” model project of the Catholic Church of Styria.

Exercise C2: Conducting Conversations – Simulating a Volunteer Interview ⌚ 20 Min.

- 1 Role-play activity: One person takes the role of a **volunteer coordinator**, while the other plays someone interested in volunteering.
- 2 Conduct an initial conversation: Explore motivations and interests, Present suitable volunteering opportunities, Discuss expectations and availability
- 3 An observer provides structured feedback: What worked well? What could be improved?
- 4 Switch roles and repeat the exercise.

💡 **Tip:** The goal is to find the right volunteering opportunity for the right person at the right time.

Exercise C3: Final Reflection in the Whole Group ⌚ 20 Min.

- 1 Each participant shares one sentence: *What is the most important thing I am taking away from today’s session?*
- 2 Identify one concrete action you would like to implement in your organization or area of engagement.
- 3 Discuss any remaining questions. Collect and address them together as a group.
- 4 Looking ahead: What kind of support would help you take your next step in promoting volunteer engagement?

💡 **Tip:** All training materials, templates, and tools will remain available after the workshop for future reference and practical application..

PART 3 — REFERENCES

6 Literature & References

6.1 Studies and Reports

Bundesministerium für Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz. (2022). *Freiwilligenbericht 2022: Zahlen, Daten und Fakten zu Freiwilligentätigkeit in Österreich*. Wien: BMSGPK.

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6.3 Further Research

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Rosenkranz, D., & Weber, A. (Hrsg.). (2002). *Freiwilligenarbeit: Einführung in das Management von Ehrenamtlichen in der Sozialen Arbeit*. Weinheim und München: Juventa Verlag.

6.4 Online Resources and Guidelines

Catholic Church of Styria

Information and resources on volunteering, volunteer engagement promotion, templates, and practical tools for working with volunteers, including volunteer agreements, certificates of appreciation, and confirmation letters for volunteer service.

[Katholische Kirche Steiermark – Ehrenamt](http://www.katholische-kirche-steiermark.at/ehrenamt)

Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection

Information on Austria's volunteer policy, funding opportunities, the Austrian Volunteering Report, and additional resources related to volunteer engagement.

[Sozialministerium Österreich](http://www.sozialministerium.at)

VOLONTARIAT.AT

Austrian platform for volunteering, volunteer management, and volunteer opportunities in Austria and abroad.

[VOLONTARIAT.AT](http://www.volontariat.at)

This training handout is based on Austrian research findings and educational guidelines. It was developed and compiled within the framework of the Com(p)AGE project to support training in volunteering and civic engagement. | www.katholische-kirche-steiermark.at/ehrenamt