

## **Volunteering and State Benefits**

There is a lot of confusion over whether volunteering affects an individual's benefits. This is not helped by the fact that many benefits advisers are poorly informed about volunteering and often give people the wrong advice. In actual fact the rules are quite simple, and it's well worth knowing them so that you can advise volunteers if they have any queries.

### **Definition of voluntary work**

All benefits rulings agree that voluntary work is work for a not-for-profit organisation, or work for someone who is not a member of your family, where only reasonable expenses are paid.

#### **- Job Seeker's Allowance**

People on JSA can do as much voluntary work as they want as long as they remain available for and are actively seeking work. This will mean that they will have to show that they are looking for work and applying for jobs where appropriate. As an organisation you will have to give your volunteers some flexibility, as they will need to visit the Job Centre for meetings and to sign on, and will need to attend interviews when they come up. If an individual is volunteering, then they are entitled to 48 hours' notice if they are asked to attend an interview, and a week's notice before starting work. These are concessions to the 24 hour notice normally allowed.

#### **- Income Support**

Volunteering should not affect someone's Income Support as long as they are not receiving any money other than reimbursement of expenses.

#### **- Incapacity Benefit**

There is a lot of confusion over Incapacity Benefit because there used to be a rule that individuals in receipt of the benefit could only volunteer for 16 hours a week. This rule no longer applies, although many people are still being told that it does. If you are in receipt of Incapacity Benefit then you can volunteer for as long as you want. People often worry that starting to volunteer will automatically trigger an investigation into their need to claim Incapacity Benefit, but in fact this very rarely happens. Occasionally there is also some confusion about volunteering and 'permitted work' (similar to the old 'therapeutic earnings'). The permitted work rule applies only to paid work and should not affect volunteers. Claimants should be entitled to volunteer without it being recognised as permitted work.

#### **- Disability Living Allowance**

DLA is an allowance paid in acknowledgement of the fact that life for someone with a disability may be more expensive – for instance, someone with mobility problems may be reliant on taxis. Volunteering will not affect whether an individual receives this benefit or not.

### **Expenses & Benefits**

Apart from DLA, the above benefits are open only to people who are not in paid employment. Any kind of paid work would jeopardise an individual's right to claim benefits, and they may find that their payments are docked or suspended. However, expenses do not constitute a payment, so volunteers can receive reimbursement of reasonable out-of-pocket expenses (any expenses that they have incurred because they are volunteering) without their benefits being affected.

During summer 2006 there was some controversy over volunteers in receipt of state benefits and whether they were allowed to have their meal expenses reimbursed. On 9 October 2006 the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) announced that they will allow all volunteers to be

reimbursed for their meal expenses. Guidance has been sent to benefit staff to highlight this fact. However, information does sometimes take time to trickle down, so Volunteering England's Information Team would be interested to hear if any volunteers experience problems with claiming meal expenses as a legitimate expense.

It is important to remember that only actual expenses should be reimbursed. If a volunteer pays £4.50 on travel every day, it might seem easier to round the sum up to £5, but this is not a reimbursement of an actual expense and would constitute a payment. It is a good idea to collect receipts and keep records of what expenses you have paid, so that if there is any kind of query it can clearly be shown that you are reimbursing money rather than making a payment.

There have been some problems in the past where volunteers on benefits have been given advance payments (for instance for something that would cost a lot, such as childcare or a weekly travelcard). The Social Security Amendment (Volunteers) Regulations 2001 clarified income support, JSA, and Incapacity Benefit rules to make it clear that volunteers can receive advance payment for expenses to be incurred in the future. It is still a good idea to keep receipts and records, and the volunteer would have to repay to the organisation any money that was not spent.

Occasionally a volunteer may have problems convincing their benefits adviser that they are volunteering and not working. If this is the case, the volunteer manager should be prepared to talk to the benefits adviser on behalf of the volunteer, and provide information about what the organisation does and the volunteer's role within the organisation. If the volunteer still has problems then it may be worthwhile using an expenses record form, as this will enable the volunteer manager to record exactly what money the volunteer is getting and to show that it is a reimbursement rather than a payment. The volunteer manager could also send a letter to the benefits office. Samples of an expenses record form and letters to the JobCentre Plus are available from Volunteering England's Information Service.

### **Informing Benefits Advisers**

It is good practice to inform volunteers that it is compulsory for volunteers to notify benefits advisers, although the organisation cannot force the issue if the volunteer decides not to disclose this information. Because of negative attitudes and lack of information on the part of advisers, many people feel more comfortable keeping their volunteering secret. As an organisation you have no duty to inform the benefits office of who is volunteering for you, so leave it up to the individual volunteer to decide. Do bear in mind that if someone has not informed the benefits office that they are volunteering, they may be wary of their name or photograph appearing in any publicity, so do always check first before 'outing' someone as a volunteer.

### **Expenses & Equal Opportunities**

Most people in receipt of benefits are on very low incomes and could not afford to volunteer if their expenses were not paid. When you decide how you will pay expenses, make sure that you are not creating unnecessary barriers. Many organisations prefer to reimburse expenses weekly or monthly rather than daily and some always reimburse by cheque. This can create problems for someone on a low income who cannot afford to wait for money to be reimbursed. If possible, always try to reimburse expenses on the same day in cash. Do not assume that a small amount of money for you is a small amount of money for everyone else. In particular, asylum seekers in receipt of vouchers have very little access to cash, so may find it difficult to pay for travel or go out and buy a sandwich. If you are not sure which methods of reimbursement suit people, just ask them. In some cases it may be more efficient to develop different systems for different people.

### **Further information**

- Press release on Department of Work and Pensions' website  
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk>

- [Financial help if you work or are looking for work - Jobcentre Plus leaflet WK1](#) (PDF)
- [Volunteering while unemployed helps others and can help you - Jobcentre Plus leaflet JSAL7](#) (PDF)

**Last reviewed: October 2006**

For more information, please contact

Volunteering England Information Service

[Information@volunteeringengland.org](mailto:Information@volunteeringengland.org)

Freephone/textphone: 0800 028 3304 (10.30am -12.30pm and 2-4pm Monday to Friday)

[www.volunteering.org.uk/](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/)

Volunteering England

Regent's Wharf

8 All Saints Street

London N1 9RL

- [Access all of Volunteering England's Information Sheets](#)

- For more information on managing volunteers, please visit

[The Good Practice Bank](#)

#### **Related links:**

- [VE's full range of Information Sheets](#)
- [Expenses and State Benefits section of the Good Practice Bank](#)
  
- [PDF version of this Information Sheet](#)
- [Word version of this Information Sheet](#)