



VOLKSSOLIDARITÄT

Guide for volunteers working
with refugees

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1. Preface

Dear volunteers with Volkssolidarität and those interested in volunteering with us in the future,

This guide offers a basic orientation for volunteers working in one of our projects for and with asylum seekers. It encompasses background information, opinions, and lessons learned from working with refugees, and above all, provides stimuli to volunteers in order for them to be as effective as possible.

We wish to thank our members at state, district, city and regional level for contributing to this publication.

2015 was, to the German government and German society, the year of asylum. Most of the people seeking asylum were from Syria, Iran, Iraq, Eritrea and Afghanistan. They fled from war, persecution, discrimination and terrorism. Among other countries, asylum seekers came to Germany seeking a life in safety. 476,649 asylum cases were filed in Germany in 2015. Then, in the first half of 2016 alone, 396,947 more were filed. Alongside the duty of the state, civil society is also responsible for supporting those who have fled and allowing them to take part in society. This is where Germany's many volunteers come in.

Since the arrival of high numbers of refugees, underlying societal division has surfaced in Germany: On the one hand, those with a desire to welcome refugees and show solidarity, and on the other hand, those stirring up fear – a fear of the supposed consequences of ‘uncontrolled’ mass immigration, and those propagating hatred. In the middle, we see many who feel insecure and scared about their own future. Right wing populism takes advantage of this, with its simple answers to a complex world, and unfortunately, in these times, finds many willing to listen.

The fact remains: Whilst the number of violent acts against refugees (and those perceived as such) rises, there has seldom to date been such a widespread popular commitment to volunteering and acts of solidarity towards people in need. The work of volunteers in shelters, tent-cities and other refugee hubs has contributed enormously towards stabilizing the situation. In this year many learned anew, just how indispensable civic engagement is to society. It brought about solidarity and brought people together. Our organization has also profited from the great quantity of volunteers in the year of asylum.

Volkssolidarität has been supporting refugees since 2015. We provide a variety of services to new arrivals, from shelter, meals, language courses, care for unaccompanied minors, to guidance and accompaniment to appointments with the authorities. Our volunteers and employees are therefore owed our utmost gratitude and support for this important work in the tradition of solidarity on which our organization is founded.



Dr. Wolfram Friedersdorff
Präsident



Annette Helbig
Bundesgeschäftsführerin

2. Why volunteer with refugees?

The committee of inquiry The Future of Civic Engagement (Zukunft des Bürgerschaftlichen Engagements) defined volunteer work in 2002 as such:

- It is conducted on a voluntary basis
- It is not profit oriented
- Its goal is the common good
- It takes place within the public sphere
- It is mostly practiced cooperatively

For most volunteers the support of refugees is a completely new field. According to a recent study by Humboldt University Berlin, 66 percent of those asked have only been active in the support of refugees since the so-called Sommer des Willkommens – the ‘summer of welcome’ of 2015. Their main motives were named as:

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Drive for societal change..... | 97% |
| Standing up to racism..... | 90% |
| New motivation..... | 60% |

2.1. Voices from Volkssolidarität

Why do people decide to volunteer in the area of support for refugees?

Ms. F. from Berlin

As a member of Volkssolidarität, I wish to make a contribution to its development, with long-term residents as well as the newly arrived in mind. As this is a matter of the heart, I do it voluntarily and feel validated by others like me, whose company adds to my own wellbeing.

Ms. S. from Brandenburg

My own family fled after the war in 1945. They experienced terrible things during their escape, things that still haunt them to the present day. My wish is for newcomers to feel welcome here, to finally have peace after all their torment. I want to help to realise this.

Mr. A. from Berlin

I have been volunteering with refugees during the recent crisis because this society will only remain peaceful if we do our best to integrate refugees and give them a positive outlook.

Ms. R. from Mecklenburg-Vorpommern

I am totally devastated by the hatred directed at refugees. I mean these are people who have lost almost everything. Of course there are idiots among them – they are only human after all. But those in urgent need of our help, meaning most of them, must be supported. We Germans will prove we are an open-minded country.

Mr. H. from Thüringen

I want to give something back to society – I was in acute need of help myself before and was glad when I received support to overcome difficult circumstances.

3. Volunteering in practice

If you would like to volunteer, certain criteria must be met. Start by asking yourself what volunteering means to you and why you would like to get involved.

3.1. Preconditions for Volunteering

Awareness of the life situation of refugees

Like in other areas of social volunteering, this work presents huge challenges. You will work with people who have experienced war, terror, poverty, distress and forced evacuation, and carry physical and psychological scars. The gravity of their experiences may weigh down on you, too. This work demands a high measure of sensitivity and empathy. You need to be conscious of this before considering whether you are suited to this kind of volunteering.

Formal preconditions

In order to volunteer you require an 'extended certificate of good conduct' from the police (Erweitertes polizeiliches Führungszeugnis). You should apply for this as soon as possible as it may take several weeks to process. You will only be able to begin your work with us once the management has this document. This will ensure that you have the necessary legal requirements to work with those entrusted to our care. Moreover, the procedure is part of our own quality control. You will need the document to work both in and outside refugee shelters. Ask your project manager if the cost of processing your certificate can be refunded.

It is not always possible to ensure that the expectations of volunteers, refugees, and project managers are equally met, no matter how well things have been arranged. However, to ensure the greatest possible level of satisfaction, it is necessary to define the relevant tasks and responsibilities for everyone involved. To this end, the next step will be a discussion about your volunteering activities, and then, generally, a corresponding volunteer agreement (Ehrenamtsvereinbarung) will be met. It will clearly define the division of tasks and responsibilities between volunteers and employees. This will allow us to plan for your regular commitment.

Relationship between volunteers and employed staff

Volunteers and employees work closely together. Both have important roles, which must be coordinated with each other. The volunteer works alongside employees in both a supporting and complementary capacity. The role of volunteers is hugely important in ensuring certain routines are carried out. Coordination tasks, e.g. the man-

agement of a shelter, or the coordination of volunteers, are usually carried out by employees.

Tasks requiring professionals such as social work or childcare are always carried out by trained and qualified employees. It is part of employees' role to set limits on which activities are delegated to volunteers.

3.2. Tips for best practice

Take care of yourself!

Give yourself a break when you start feeling worn out either mentally or physically. Neither the people with whom you work or the team will benefit from you being worn out. Take the time you need to recover. To accept your limits is not a sign of weakness, but one of strength, because it means you're taking responsibility for yourself and therefore for others.

Advice

It is important to communicate with others. Try to meet regularly with colleagues to talk about what has moved you. Let others in on your experiences and advise each other on how you have reacted in particular situations. Offer critique when necessary, but try to do so delicately and respectfully. If you wish, talk to your coordinator about the possibility of taking part in a supervision or professional counseling.

Constant exchange of information

Stay in touch with your volunteering coordinator. This way it is easier for him or her to support you. Be transparent about your work and inform the team about all the steps you take – they will profit from this too. Give constructive feedback. What did you enjoy? Where do you see room for improvement? Please be conscious, though, that not every suggestion can be realised.

Don't patronize

Exercise self-reflection as often as possible. Refrain from pieces of advice such as "It is unhealthy not to drink water during Ramadan." or "In Germany children go to sleep before eight.", however well-meaning. Remember that you are dealing with fully competent adults.

Privacy

Refrain from inviting third parties (e.g. reporters, friends) to refugee accommodation. Remember that they have a right to a private space.

Donations

Make sure that your donations are actually needed. Ask beforehand what may be useful.

Safe spaces

Create safe spaces for the refugees. This will offer you and the people you are working with the opportunity to create a relationship of trust and confidentiality. One example of this is the room for women in one of Berlin's refugee shelters, which serves as a place of retreat for the women there. Additionally, create spaces that are not for volunteers, but rather only for those who wish to meet and talk in private.

Social integration of refugees

Refugees often face a long wait for legal status, for the possibility to take a language course or to be allowed to work. Engage refugees with societal life while they are waiting. There are many ways to do this, a few examples being 'get-to-know' events, discussion groups, or film nights. You can also invite the refugees to get involved in volunteering themselves. If someone is interested in volunteering, support them by finding out what conditions must be met. The same goes for anyone interested in an internship (Praktikum).

4. What to do if...

... a fight breaks out in a shelter?

Physical and psychological violence are not issues exclusive to refugee shelters. However, the experience of living in a temporary shelter for a prolonged period, often without family members and without knowing when this situation will end, can lead to frustration and violence.

The first people to alert in such a situation are the manager and staff of the shelter. The security staff can also address the situation. In the case of a confrontation, make sure you don't put yourself in danger. Try to calm the situation and keep a distance. In the case of severe breach of house regulations, the aggressor may be expelled and will have to look for a new shelter, which can be challenging. In the case of violent behavior on the part of the security staff you should immediately alert the manager or members of staff. Don't try to explain the situation. Those responsible will take care of it, dictating the consequences for the aggressor/s as they see fit.

... working with traumatized people?

Many of those who have fled suffer from severe trauma. Mostly, this means psychological trauma that is not readily apparent to others. Always be aware that you are not a qualified therapist. The wrong kind of advice can indeed lead to further traumatization. Do not go out of your way to ask people about their flight or the situation in their home country. Consult a trained psychologist first.

The federal chamber of psychotherapists (Bundespsychotherapeutenkammer) has published two guidebooks on the issue: How can I help traumatized refugees? and How can I help my traumatized child? (the latter for parents of traumatized children). They are available in several languages.

... Someone asks you for legal advice or to attend a hearing?

Find out from the manager or volunteer coordinator who is responsible and available for legal advice. Do not give legal advice yourself – be aware that the wrong legal advice can have catastrophic consequences. You can accompany someone to a lawyer if they want you to. You can also get legal advice yourself, e.g. about the process of accompanying someone to a hearing.

... A refugee wishes to take out insurance?

The ERGO insurance group has insurance plans that are adjusted to the financial capacities of refugees. You can get more information from employees of Volkssolidarität.

... A refugee wishes to open a bank account?

In the beginning of 2016 German parliament ruled that from June 2016 onwards, all refugees living in Germany have a right to open a basic bank account (Basiskonto). When opening the account, the person interested should make an appointment with the bank to ensure that a translation is provided if necessary. Check in advance which documents you need to bring along.

... A child needs to register at a Kindergarten?

Every child, regardless of their nationality or residence status, has a right to a place at a kindergarten. For a child refugee, their care in kindergarten often equals their first step towards fully taking part in German society. However, a kindergarten place can't be legally guaranteed.

5. Stereotypes and hoaxes

Volunteers working with refugees sometimes experience verbal or even physical attacks motivated by racism and right-wing extremism. Reporting this to the police is the only way to react in such cases! When someone draws you into a discussion concerning their worries about migration and refugees, reflect if it really is helpful to verbally retaliate. When dealing with racist or extreme right-wing views, most will agree a meaningful discussion is not possible. Usually it will only lead to frustration – consider whether or not you really want to expend your energy on such 'discussions'. Also be aware

that not everyone who talks critically about refugees is necessarily a racist or an extremist.

As the number of refugees increases, so increases disinformation and hoaxes about them. In the Berlin district of Marzahn-Hellersdorf, the case of a young woman named Lisa has stirred debate. She disappeared for two days and subsequently reported to the police that she had been kidnapped and sexually abused by several male refugees. The extreme-right party NPD used this story to feed their racist political campaign against refugees. Later it came to light that the young woman had invented the story altogether.

Other rumors that have circulated include those about about refugees urinating against church walls, mass robberies at supermarkets, and so the list goes on. But how do we find out if these rumors are of substance? It's not always simple to debunk and offer thorough criticism of disinformation and prejudice. The following examples give you some practical advice on how obvious prejudice and rumours can be countered.

5.1. Dissecting stereotypes

“They all have smartphones and wear labels so they can’t be poor.”

It is true that many of the new arrivals have smartphones and indeed belonged to the middle class in their countries of origin. Otherwise the cost of fleeing would have been out of the question. It would help most people asking this question to instead ask themselves, ‘what would I take with me, if I had to suddenly leave my home country?’.

The smartphone is the only means to stay in touch with your family, to navigate during your escape, to translate in a foreign country and much more.

“These people come for economic reasons only.”

There are many hurdles to overcome before being officially recognized as a refugee in Germany. The applicant has to prove that they, “because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted by state or non-state players for reasons of race, nationality, political opinion, fundamental religious conviction or membership to a particular social group (sexual orientation can be such a group as well), are outside their country of origin and nationality, or as stateless individuals are outside of their country of habitual residence.” Economic reasons are not accepted as a basis for asylum in Germany. Currently, 52 percent of all asylum claims are made by people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea – all of which are countries afflicted by war and human rights abuses.

“Refugees receive more benefits than Germans.”

Normal requirement for asylum seekers according to the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act (Asylbewerberleistungsgesetz)

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Single people and Single Parents | € 216 standard benefits + € 143 cash = € 359 |
| Adult partners with shared household | € 194 standard benefits + € 129 cash = € 323 |
| Adults without own household | € 174 standard benefits + € 113 cash = € 287 |
| Young people 15– 18 | € 198 standard benefits + € 85 cash = € 283 |
| Children 7– 14 | € 157 standard benefits + € 92 cash = € 249 |
| Children 0–6 | € 133 standard benefits + € 84 cash = € 217 |

Source: <https://www.proasyl.de/thema/asylbewerberleistungsgesetz/> 14.10.2016

Normal requirement for Hartz IV benefits

| | |
|---|-------|
| Single people and Single Parents | € 409 |
| Adult partners with shared household | € 368 |
| Adults under 25 living with parents / living alone without consent of parents | € 327 |
| Children 0–6 | € 237 |
| Children 6–14 | € 291 |
| Young people 14–18 | € 311 |

Source: <http://www.hartziv.org/regelbedarf.html> 29.11.2017

'The crime rate goes up when refugees move into the area'

Peoples often assume refugees to be criminals. This is without good reason. A recent report published by the Federal Criminal Office (Bundeskriminalamt BKA) on the crime rate amongst refugees showed that refugees commit criminal offences no more often than Germans. In addition, refugees have legal restrictions, e.g. residence obligation, which means they are not allowed to leave a certain radius as defined by the authorities. These are restrictions only asylum seekers face. The number of crimes committed by refugees also declined in the year 2016.

'Refugees take our jobs'

Before being able to take up regular work refugees have to overcome a lot of bureaucratic and legal hurdles. It takes some time before they are allowed to work after arrival. Viewed through a different lens, the influx of refugees is a chance for Germany to counteract its demographic shift. Refugees could, in the future, become the skilled workers that are currently in short supply.

'They are all radical Islamists'

Many of Germany's most recent refugees are Muslims. What they are seeking is protection – from war and persecution for themselves and their families. Refugees have been shown to have similar democratic values and convictions as native Germans. In a 2016 study conducted by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), the research center of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF FZ) and the Socioeconomic Panel (SOEP) at the DIW Berlin, refugees were interviewed on topics such as democracy and gender equality. 96 per cent answered that 'equal rights for men and women' is an essential part of a democracy, and 96 per cent that 'we need a democratic system'. Holger Münch, President of the German Federal Criminal Office (BKA), recently offered a word of warning against presuming refugees to have terrorist intentions, saying it would not have any evidential basis.

5.2 Dealing with hoaxes

- Don't believe everything you read on social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Be aware that certain images and stories are spread with the specific intention of furthering stereotypes and prejudice against refugees.
- Compare diverse sources for any story you may find and check the credibility of the original source.
- Be sceptical if a story is told from a subjective standpoint, such as 'My neighbour heard that...' This is merely a rumour.
- Wait a couple of days. It often takes some time before stories can be refuted or proven correct.
- If it concerns a criminal act, the local police will normally publish a statement on the events. You can contact them for information as well.

A project called 'Hoaxmap', (Karte Über Falschmeldungen), set up by Karolin Schwarz and Lutz Helm, is a good resource for fact checking the rumours surrounding refugees. The website has been listing details on rumours and hoaxes from across the country since 2015.

6. Contacts/Guidance

If you need support beyond the resources on offer at Volkssolidarität or your respective project, you can contact the organisations listed below, according to which State (Bundesland) you are in. They will offer guidance and, if necessary, refer you to other organisations in your area.

Berlin/ Brandenburg

Migration Council Berlin-Brandenburg

Migrationsrat Berlin-Brandenburg e.V.

Homepage: <http://www.migrationsrat.de/>

Refugee Council Berlin

Flüchtlingsrat Berlin

Homepage: <http://www.fluechtlingsrat-berlin.de/>

Refugee Council Brandenburg

Flüchtlingsrat Brandenburg

Homepage: <http://www.fluechtlingsrat-brandenburg.de/>

Mecklenburg-Vorpommern

Migranet-MV, Network of Migrant Organisations in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern

Migranet-MV, Netzwerk der Migrantenorganisationen in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern e.V.

Homepage: <http://www.migranet-mv.de/>

Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Refugee Council

Flüchtlingsrat Mecklenburg-Vorpommern

Homepage: <http://www.fluechtlingsrat-mv.de/downloadslinks/organisationen-in-mv/>

Sachsen

Foreign Citizens Advisory Committee of Dresden

Ausländerbeirat Landeshauptstadt Dresden

Homepage: <http://www.dresden.de/de/rathaus/politik/stadtrat/auslaenderbeirat.php?shortcut=Auslaenderbeirat>

Refugee Council of Sachsen

Sächsischer Flüchtlingsrat

Homepage: <http://www.saechsischer-fluechtlingsrat.de/de/aktuelles/>

Sachsen-Anhalt

Regional Network of Migrant Organisations of Saxony-Anhalt (LAMSA)

Landesnetzwerk der Migrantenselbstorganisationen Sachsen-Anhalt (LAMSA)

Homepage: <http://www.lamsa.de/>

Sachsen-Anhalt Refugee Council

Flüchtlingsrat Sachsen-Anhalt e.V.

Homepage: <http://www.fluechtlingsrat-lsa.de/>

Thüringen

Integration Commissioner of Thüringen

Die Integrationsbeauftragte von Thüringen

Homepage: <http://www.thueringen.de/th10/ab/beratung/>

Refugee Council Thuringia

Flüchtlingsrat Thüringen

Homepage: <http://www.fluechtlingsrat-thr.de/>

If you have further questions, or in case of problems, you can contact the coordinator for your location, region or Bundesland. You can find these contacts on the website of Volkssolidarität: www.volkssolidaritaet.de. You can also contact the coordinator for refugee aid of Volkssolidarität, Anne-Sarah Shiferaw: E-Mail: anne-sarah.shiferaw@volkssolidaritaet.de

Tel.: 030 27897123

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We wish you much success and fulfillment in your volunteering work.



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