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## How to Evaluate a Volunteer Placement Organization (VPO)

If you are thinking about volunteering abroad or away from home, you may be considering using a volunteer placement organization or VPO. These organizations create packaged voluntourism trips that are often short-term (1-3 weeks) and include your accommodations and fun activities along with your volunteer placement. Unfortunately, many of these programs actually create more harm in a community than good. Voluntourism has grown into a \$2 billion per year industry, with more and more VPOs being created due to the money-making potential from young people who are looking for the chance to make a difference.

When researching VPOs or organizations with volunteering opportunities, look for these red flags. Keep in mind these guidelines are a starting point and are not 100% reliable in determining if a VPO is engaging ethically with communities and the environment.

### The VPO's Website

Examine the website for these red flags:

1. No information about being a registered nonprofit organization
2. Volunteering does not require any sort of interview or background check
3. No breakdown or explanation of how your fee is spent
4. Frequent use of the word "ethical," which may mean they have been criticized in the past for unethical practices

5. Language written to appeal to a young, idealistic demographic such as references to “changing the world”
6. Volunteer positions in orphanages or with vulnerable children; *this type of volunteering is harmful to children and is often part of the child trafficking industry*
7. Medical volunteer positions that allow unqualified people to perform medical procedures
  - a. Language that references getting “hands-on experience” to prepare you for medical school or to look good on a med school application; *med schools do not want you to have unqualified prior experience, and, in fact, it will hurt your chances of being accepted*
  - b. Images of volunteers wearing white doctor’s coats, scrubs, or stethoscopes
  - c. Images of volunteering performing medical procedures, giving examinations, or distributing medication
8. No clear partnership with local community leaders and organizations
9. Depictions of the community in an undignified manner, such as referring to community members as “the poor” and showing photos of unhappy, destitute people

## Reviews

Read reviews from past participants. Reviews can be found on the VPO’s own website and on gooverseas.com, trustpilot.com, volunteerforever.com, abroadreviews.com, tripadvisor.com, and individual blogs. Red flags include:

- a. Descriptions of performing medical procedures when not qualified or volunteering in orphanages
- b. The phrase, “I would have never been able to do these things in the US!”
- c. Mention of feeling pressured to perform certain activities or generally being uncomfortable
- d. Mention of a language barrier

## Contact the VPO

If the VPO or organization doesn’t appear to have any major red flag, contact them directly to find out exactly what you will be doing and to ask questions about any concerns you may have such as how the money from your fee will be distributed.

## While Volunteering

If you do decide to participate in a volunteer program, keep a critical eye on your activities and the activities of the organization. Be prepared to say no if asked to do a task outside of your qualifications or comfort area. Reflect on the experience when you return home to determine if there is information that would be worthwhile sharing with future participants.

***An example of good volunteer policies:*** Here is an example of well-written volunteer handbook with CHEER International Greece that discusses what volunteers should and should not be doing as part of their experience:

[https://cheerinternational.files.wordpress.com/2020/02/cheering-volunteer-handbook\\_2020.pdf](https://cheerinternational.files.wordpress.com/2020/02/cheering-volunteer-handbook_2020.pdf)



For more guidance on ethical volunteering, please contact UW Global Health Undergraduate Education Programs.