American Nurses Association

8403 Colesville Road, Suite 500
Silver Spring, MD 20910
+1 (301) 628.5000
ana.org

# American Nurses Association Position Statement
# Ethical Considerations for Local and Global Volunteerism

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**Adopted by:** ANA Board of Directors
**Written by:** ANA Ethics Advisory Board

## Purpose

Nurses often express a desire to serve others as volunteers. They volunteer within their communities and across borders in global settings. While nurses considering participation or serving as a volunteer express altruistic intentions, their actions may result in unintended negative consequences to the host community.

The purpose of this position statement is to delineate ethically responsible volunteer efforts classified as short-term (six months or less) practice experiences in local and global healthcare and public health. This position statement includes volunteer activities by nurses and nursing students sponsored by academic institutions, religious and secular nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and for-profit businesses (Lasker et al., 2018). Additional terms encompassing global volunteering include service learning and healthcare missions (Dalmida et al., 2016).

This position statement does not address nurse volunteer activities at the onset of a complex humanitarian emergency, in long-term assignments through government agencies, in global health policy development, or in fundraising. It also does not address activities such as teaching English to speakers of other languages, building houses, engaging in efforts in war zones, or engaging in strictly faith-based missions. The volunteerism considered in this position statement does not address professional volunteer opportunities with organizations, boards, or other career-advancement activities.

## Statement of ANA Position

The American Nurses Association (ANA) believes that short-term volunteer activities can be an appropriate response for meeting healthcare needs around the world. All nurse

volunteer activities should be in accordance with the (2025) *Code of Ethics for Nurses* and the *International Council of Nurses (ICN) Code of Ethics for Nurses* (2021).

Volunteer efforts should demonstrate social responsibility, be executed with cultural humility, and involve careful planning in collaboration and partnership with the host community across all stages of the volunteer engagement. This leads to efforts that are sustainable to the community and mutually empowering. Volunteer opportunities for nurses exist across boundaries and can include local, national, and international activities.

**The Code of Ethics for Nurses**

The *Code of Ethics for Nurses* (the *Code*) explicitly states, "Nurses practice in many roles and in many settings, whether paid or volunteer. Practice includes all the ways in which nurses influence the health of society" (ANA, 2025, p. XIII). Although principles and concepts related to global volunteerism are woven throughout the *Code*, the following are specific examples.

**Provision 1**

- 1.4 explores decision-making and notes, "Diverse cultures have a range of beliefs that affect decision-making. Nurses respect and integrate patient values and decision-making processes that are rooted in the patient's individual culture" (p. 4).

**Provision 2**

- 2.1 affirms that "[w]ithin the context of nursing practice, the nurse prioritizes recipients of nursing care, placing them over institutions (p. 5).
- 2.3 reinforces professional boundaries, stating, "Nurses develop professional boundaries to protect the patient and to mitigate power imbalances with recipients of care" (p. 7).

**Provision 7**

- 7.2 outlines that "[a] community-based participatory approach is key to designing, implementing, and disseminating scholarly inquiry that supports and further advances the interests of the community, avoids harm to these communities and individuals, and builds trust with communities of interest" (p. 29).

**Provision 10**

- 10.2 differentiates the unique responsibilities of well-resourced countries and states: "Nurses working in these settings (employed or as volunteers) should prepare for such service by developing basic language skills and familiarity with the history, customs, laws, and norms of the community and nation. Nurses in communities or nations outside the United States show respect for patients' way of being in the world, understandings of health and illness, and health and illness practices, without

imposing their own cultural norms. Nurses serve as learners, listeners, and health partners who seek to earn the trust and goodwill of the community" (p. 43).

- 10.3 articulates the nursing vision for global health and specifies, "Nursing advances a vision of a good and healthy global society and sustainable environmental practices (p. 44).
- 10.4 summarizes our global position by stating, "Globally, nurses represent and embrace the full spectrum of human plurality, diversity, cultures, traditions, languages, and more.... Nursing and nurses have a collective obligation to pursue care as a political and social requirement to be shared by all" (p. 45).

**History and Previous Position Statements**

The ANA 2019 position statement titled *Ethical Considerations for Local and Global Volunteerism* was the initial position statement that addressed volunteerism directly. This update shifts the focus to those served through the volunteer efforts of nurses.

**Background and Supporting Material**

Although the entities engaged in local or global volunteerism may differ in structure and function, they include government-supported agencies, international agencies, and NGOs that can be academic, secular/nonsecular, for-profit, or otherwise sponsored. Healthcare organizations that facilitate and support nurse volunteerism serve to advance the health of host communities and may also enhance the personal and professional development of nurse volunteers. Embedding organizations in the fabric of their surrounding communities expands networks, improves collaboration, and facilitates understanding of the characteristics and needs of the community itself (Lal, 2024). Irrespective of the driving force behind the volunteerism, consideration of the ethical responsibilities inherent in this work ought to be considered.

**Privacy and Confidentiality**

Privacy is the right of individuals to disclose or not disclose personal information. Volunteers must safeguard this right and consider the potential for deferential vulnerability in communities that lack resources. Given the inherent power imbalance between healthcare providers and recipients of care, volunteers should understand that this vulnerability may lead to recipients feeling pressured to disclose information they would otherwise choose to keep private. Protecting the right to privacy includes informing recipients of care of their right to nondisclosure.

Confidentiality pertains to the nondisclosure of private information to others who are not providing relevant clinical care. Photos, publications, presentations, stories, social media posts, and other dissemination of stories and images should be used judiciously, intentionally, and only with consent. They should be shared to support the mission of the

volunteer activity, not for self-promotion or personal interest. Details of volunteers' conditions such as those related to sanitation, sleeping accommodations, transportation infrastructure, or physical demands should only be disseminated to support the community or population.

Where volunteer experiences involve data collection or research, nurses must safeguard privacy and the confidentiality of data. Nurse researchers must rigorously adhere to ethical principles and those related to informed consent, recognizing the importance of clear communication in the language and terms that will be understood by members of the community. Additional care must be taken to acknowledge and address any potential or actual power differentials.

**Centering the Needs**

Volunteers must carefully consider their motivation in seeking to provide services and their reasons for choosing to work with their host communities. While volunteering offers benefits to individual volunteers such as opportunities for learning, service, and personal fulfillment, the primary focus should always be on meeting the needs of individual recipients of care and the local community.

The volunteer organization should collaborate with the host organization to identify the purpose of the program and ascertain whether the purpose and proposed implementation align with the needs and values of the community. Although the physical, emotional, and psychological safety of the volunteers is important, protections that are embedded in the process of onboarding, the delivery of care, and a debriefing process should not be the focal point of discussions related to process improvement. Transparency, effective communication, cultural awareness, and trust lay the foundation for an ethical partnership and help ensure that a volunteer organization does not supplant the goals and needs of the host community.

Recognizing that the volunteer experience must be rooted in partnership, research initiatives should be community-based and participatory, with active guidance and collaborative decision-making by representatives of the communities involved. When conducting a research study or obtaining data for a grant, volunteers should also consider whether the study results or data collected will benefit individuals and/or the population. Data collected must clearly relate to the purpose of research and align with the goals of any intervention. Prioritizing the number of patients to meet study or grant requirements should not supplant the quality of time spent in an encounter.

**Cultural Humility**

Volunteers practice *cultural humility*, a core nursing value (ANA, 2025). Cultural humility reflects a process of critical examination of biases, beliefs, and assumptions; an

appreciation that both the nurse and individual receiving care are influenced by their culture and experiences; and a commitment to mitigate power imbalances in the nurse-patient relationship (Salahshurian & Moore, 2024). Cultural humility also includes recognition of existing structural inequalities and their historical legacies. They must remain open to learning from the communities in which they serve. Educational reciprocity promotes the premise that volunteers and host organizations both teach and learn from each other, synergistically. To this end, engaging and partnering with local providers to plan, implement, and evaluate a program is essential, as they are experts about the physical, social, and cultural needs and norms of the community.

Many global volunteer placements are sponsored by faith-based organizations, including some that are evangelical. Faith-based organizations make crucial contributions to providing needed health and healthcare services throughout the world. All volunteers, regardless of their own faith (if any), must provide their services with respect for the values and spiritual beliefs of the members of the host community. While individual volunteers are free to discuss and answer questions about their own beliefs, the focus of their volunteer service as a nurse must remain on providing support for healthcare needs.

**Sustainability**

The United Nations and others identify three main dimensions of sustainability that include economic, sociocultural, and environmental realms. Ruggerio (2021) suggests that any definition of sustainability should consider these dimensions as well as internal demographic dynamics (i.e., intergenerational and intragenerational) that can affect the carrying capacity of a system. Additionally, perspectives on sustainability should address hierarchical structures of organizations, countries, and/or the environment.

The term *sustainable volunteering* reflects meaningful contribution to long-lasting benefits of health and the impact of the project (Maricar, 2024). Short-term, stand-alone volunteer experiences should serve as a bridge to ongoing, sustainable volunteer programs (Penney, 2020). Sustainability can be viewed as decreasing negative impacts such as those related to hunger. Volunteer efforts must focus on more than an immediate need and consider the underlying causes and structures that potentiate the issues. Focusing on positive, sustainable influences has the potential to contribute to sustainability transformation, considering the environmental, economic, and social context through volunteer and organizational collaboration (Dijkstra-Silva et al., 2022). The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflect priorities for a sustainable future and can be used to determine synergy between the volunteer and host organization or country (Hawkins et al., 2025).

Fostering sustainability includes building local infrastructure, collaborating with and training local providers, maintaining ethical review mechanisms, and planning for the ongoing needs of the recipients of care. Supplies should be thoughtfully ordered and

stored, recognizing the need for repair of equipment and replacement of supplies, including medication. Volunteers should not in the near term or long term supplant the local health system; they must be mindful not to foster dependence on the volunteer organization. It is critical to have a mindset of advocating for independence rather than rescuing.

**Recommendations**

ANA recommends that all nurses champion volunteerism, whether by volunteering or by supporting and facilitating those who choose to volunteer (both locally and globally).

ANA recommends that nurse volunteers do the following:

- Work within their scope of nursing practice and comply with immunization requirements and licensing and practice regulations of the host agency and/or country.
- Choose an agency or organization that aligns with the principles outlined in this position statement.
- Reflect on reasons for volunteering.
- Facilitate community engagement and foster the development of healthcare organization–based initiatives that serve surrounding communities.
- Protect privacy and maintain confidentiality.
- Adhere to ethical principles related to informed consent and research.
- Be mindful of the potential for power imbalance and protect against deferential vulnerability.
- Practice cultural humility, an openness to learning, caring, compassion, and integrity.
- Engage with communities and experts to ensure volunteer activities focus on articulated needs, evaluation of root causes, consideration of the sociopolitical and economic environment, community empowerment, and sustainability efforts.
- Provide appropriate oversight of learners in the volunteer environment.
- Foster a mindset of facilitating independence instead of rescuing.
- Consider resource allocation (including human resources) before, during, and after a volunteer opportunity to promote sustainability practices.

**Summary**

Volunteer experiences have the potential to both benefit and harm the host community as well as the volunteer. Humility, trust, and respect must characterize the volunteer's approach to all interactions, and ethical obligations must be honored. All volunteer experiences, local and global, should be carefully planned with adequate volunteer preparation and should lead to sustainable outcomes when possible. Pre-departure planning, on-site experience, and post-departure evaluation should be done in collaboration with the host community. Acting with moral courage and developing moral resilience are essential for successful volunteer experiences. Ongoing assessment of

ethical issues and practicing according to the *Code* during all phases of the volunteer experience are critical to mitigating any potential harms. Volunteering can be a powerful means for nurses to meet their social responsibilities and expand their world views.

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