

# EXCELLENCE IN ESC VOLUNTEERING



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# INTRODUCTION



This guide was created as an output of the Key Action 2 (KA2) project implemented in close partnership between United Vision and KERIC. Throughout the project, we collaborated as equal partners — exchanging experience, sharing good practices, and developing the quality of volunteer work together. As KERIC had more experience with volunteer hosting at the time, they also provided mentoring support in some phases of the project, offering valuable guidance that helped improve our processes.

After its first year of experience with hosting volunteers in the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), the United Vision team was full of motivation and enthusiasm. At the same time, they recognized uncertainties and areas for improvement. The KA2 project came at the perfect moment to address these challenges — together.

**The main aim of this guide is to summarize the key lessons and recommendations that helped us make our volunteer work smoother and more effective. It is intended especially for organisations that are just starting with volunteer hosting and are looking for practical advice on how to make the experience as smooth and meaningful as possible — both for the organisation and the volunteers.**

**The main goals of the KA2 project itself were:**

- To improve the quality of work with volunteers — before, during, and after their stay. The project helped youth workers and coordinators from United Vision and KERIC learn how to better support volunteers through preparation, ongoing support during the stay, and post-project follow-up. A strong emphasis was placed on using digital tools and addressing mental health challenges connected to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.
- To offer more and better volunteering opportunities for young people with fewer chances — especially from the Czech and Slovak Republics. The goal was to involve more partner organisations, especially from outside the EU, and to increase the number of volunteers sent abroad by 50%. The project also supported the application for the Humanitarian Aid Quality Label.
- To strengthen cooperation between United Vision and KERIC. Both organisations shared their experience and supported each other. KERIC contributed its strong background in volunteer hosting, while United Vision brought its know-how in promotion and in sending volunteers abroad.

# 1. PRE-ARRIVAL PREPARATION

## WHY:

### Meeting 1: Introduction to the Project

- Introduce yourself and each other
- Coordinator presents: What to expect, volunteer responsibilities, tasks
- Discuss expectations and questions
- Learn some new words in the local language
- Homework: Prepare a short presentation on one of these topics: nature, food, traditions, monuments, or cities

### Meeting 2: Country where I volunteer

- How has it been since last meeting? Any changes?
- Volunteers present their chosen topics
- Discussion and new vocabulary
- Build confidence and connection

### Meeting 3: Final Clarifications

- organization of first weeks
- Reassurance and practical info for arrival
- Time for questions and support

- **Reduces stress and uncertainty** – Volunteers feel more mentally prepared and less anxious.
- **Builds early connections** – Volunteers meet each other and the coordinator before arrival.
- **Creates a sense of familiarity** – The new environment doesn't feel completely unknown.
- **Clarifies expectations** – Volunteers understand the project, their roles, and responsibilities.
- **Introduces culture and language** – Basic facts, first words, and practical tips help break the first barriers.
- **Opens space for questions** – Volunteers can voice concerns and get answers early

## WHEN:

- The first meeting is usually held **3 months before the project starts**. Each meeting lasts about 1 hour.

These pre-arrival meetings play a key role in helping volunteers arrive with a clearer understanding of the place, feel already connected with each other and the coordinator, and have realistic expectations about the project.

This preparation significantly boosts their confidence, comfort, and ability to adapt quickly.

## 2. MENTOR AS AN ANCHOR



A GOOD MENTOR IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTEERING EXPERIENCE.

While coordinators focus on project tasks, the mentor plays a different—but equally crucial—role: they offer personal, emotional, and cultural support.

A mentor is someone the volunteer can trust, talk to freely, and lean on during difficult moments. Especially at the beginning, when everything is new and uncertain, having a reliable person “outside” the formal structure helps the volunteer feel safe, welcomed, and grounded.

### Our tips how to build strong bond between the volunteer and mentor

#### Set informal check-ins

Encourage the mentor to meet with the volunteer regularly — not as a “task” but more like a casual walk, coffee, or chat. Small, consistent moments build closeness.

#### Introduce them early

Arrange a first meeting (online or in person) before or immediately after the volunteer’s arrival. The earlier they meet, the sooner trust can start forming.

#### Spend the first weekend together

One great idea is for the mentor to host the volunteer for a weekend at their home. It allows for natural bonding and a relaxed start to the relationship.

#### Let the mentor pick up the volunteer

If possible, have the mentor welcome the volunteer at the airport or station. That first friendly face makes a huge difference.

#### Support openness from both sides

Help the mentor and volunteer understand that the relationship is mutual — the mentor can support, but also learn and grow from the volunteer.

#### Include the mentor in early orientation

Invite mentors to participate in the volunteer’s first orientation or welcome day, so the volunteer sees them as part of their support system from the beginning.

#### Provide conversation prompts for the first meeting

The hosting organization can prepare simple questions to guide the first mentor-volunteer talk — about expectations, first impressions, or any concerns. This light structure helps break the ice and builds connection early on.

# 3. THE HOST FAMILY CONCEPT



## INSPIRATION AND PURPOSE

We were inspired by KERIC's practice of welcoming volunteers into local host families during their first weekend. Although we have not implemented it yet, we plan to introduce this concept in the upcoming project cycle.

### What Is a Host Family?

A host family is a local household that opens their home to volunteers for a short stay—usually the first week after arrival. This experience offers volunteers:

- A warm, welcoming environment
- A chance to experience local culture firsthand
- Personal connections that help them feel part of the community

### Why Is It Important?

- It helps volunteers feel immediately welcomed and less isolated.
- It fosters cultural exchange and understanding beyond the formal project setting.
- It strengthens volunteers' sense of belonging and motivation.
- It provides practical support and informal guidance during the crucial first days.

## 5. SUCCESS STARTS IN THE FIRST WEEKS



From our experience, we recognized how crucial it is to invest time and energy into the volunteer's first weeks. These early weeks set the foundation for helping volunteers become as independent as possible in their roles.

### WHY DO THE FIRST WEEKS MATTER

The first weeks are essential because they shape how volunteers feel about their role and place in the project. When volunteers are encouraged to be autonomous and actively involved early on, they develop a stronger sense of belonging and importance. This boosts their confidence, motivation, and commitment.

If volunteers don't receive enough support during this time, they may feel uncertain, less connected, and struggle to see their meaningful contribution — which can affect their overall experience and the success of the project.

### OUR TIPS

Provide clear explanations and support in tasks.

Maintain open communication to address concerns and encourage growth.

Use a clear, detailed schedule of all activities so volunteers know what to expect and when.

Maintain regular meetings with volunteers to discuss progress, challenges, and next steps.

Celebrate small successes to build confidence.

Create space for volunteers to take initiative step-by-step.

# 6. SUPPORT CULTURAL DIVERSITY



## OVERCOMING OUR FEARS

Accepting volunteers from non-EU countries can seem daunting, partly due to fears that volunteers might not be well accepted by the local community because of their skin colour, language, religion, or cultural background.

Through cooperation between KERIC and United Vision, we witnessed good practices in action. They showed us that even communities that appear socially conservative can be open and welcoming — if we actively work on creating meaningful connections.

Thanks to our experience, we discovered how powerful it can be to build bridges between different cultures and help both volunteers and local people learn from each other — gradually changing attitudes over time.

Thanks to these insights, we now see diversity not as a risk but as an opportunity for growth, understanding, and community enrichment.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF HOSTING VOLUNTEERS FROM NON-EU COUNTRIES?

- Cultural learning becomes deeper and more authentic — both for the volunteer and for the community.
- It challenges stereotypes — and opens space for reflection, tolerance, and critical thinking.
- Volunteers often show strong motivation and resilience, which inspires others and strengthens team dynamics.
- It teaches us to adapt — as hosts, we become more inclusive, flexible, and aware of our own biases.



# 7. TOOLS AND RESOURCES WE USE



IMPROVE YOUR VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT WITH THESE PRACTICAL TOOLS AND METHODS:

## 1. Pre-arrival Preparation Tools

- Online info sessions (3 meetings before arrival – more in the dedicated section)
- Language learning apps and vocabulary lists
- Contact exchange before arrival + group chats

## 2. Volunteer Support Tools

- Structured welcome week plan
- Clear activity schedule for each week
- Regular reflection meetings with volunteers
- Personal development planning and feedback sessions

## 3. Mentoring Support Tools

- Clear mentor role descriptions
- Mentor-volunteer bonding activities (e.g. first sleepover, airport pickup...)
- Ongoing mentor training and check-ins

## 4. KERIC Methodologies

- E-passport: A digital tool created during a KA2 project to support volunteer preparation
- MIND project outputs: Tools focused on mental health, inclusion, and well-being
- NOMADA results: Tools and practices for working with culturally diverse groups



Most of these tools are freely available on KERIC's website:

[www.keric.sk/sk/na-stiahnutie](http://www.keric.sk/sk/na-stiahnutie)

# CONCLUSION



We believe that these approaches can help volunteers leave not only with good memories but also with lasting skills and experiences such as self-organization, communication, collaboration, and a stronger sense of responsibility.

Thanks to the collaboration between United Vision and KERIC, our understanding of volunteering has gradually evolved. We now understand that it is essential to see volunteering not just as a service or an opportunity to travel while contributing, but as a powerful process of personal development — for the volunteer and for us as the hosting organization. Volunteers are not only helping hands but also valuable contributors who bring fresh energy and insight into our communities.

## PARTNERS INFORMATION



KERIC was founded in 2003. We are a non-profit non-governmental organisation working with children and youth aged 7-30 as well as adults in the region of north Slovakia – Kysuce. Our mission is to connect our region Kysuce with the whole world and to help people from our region become more open and tolerant towards other cultures or people different in any way (religion, sexual orientation, cultural or family background, etc.). This is done through non-formal educational activities with an international dimension, youth exchanges, trainings, workshops and hosting and sending volunteers from / to other countries.

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United Vision was founded in 2011, United Vision is dedicated to empowering youth through volunteering opportunities both in the Czech Republic and internationally. The organization emphasizes environmental and language education, aiming to enhance community involvement and promote sustainable practices.

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