

Becoming a Reprieve Volunteer in the USA

The Reprieve Volunteer Programme places enthusiastic volunteers in capital defence offices in the USA, where they work either assisting with the representation of impoverished defendants facing execution, or on research and litigation directed towards systemic reform.

Volunteers are placed for a minimum of 3 months at law offices dedicated to capital defence work in the U.S., predominantly in the Deep South. The volunteer placements are completely self-funded, that is, the volunteer must pay for all costs of travel, accommodation and living expenses while in the placement.

The work performed by Reprieve Volunteers has proved vital to the legal offices to which they are attached. Each of the offices supported is a non-profit organisation working in a notoriously under-funded field. Reprieve Volunteers can often be the only way in which these offices are able to meet the demands of their caseloads. The total number of hours worked by Reprieve Volunteers to date equates to over 10 years of full time work provided to these offices at no cost to them.

In addition to the benefit to the host offices and their clients, Volunteer placements are a richly rewarding experience for the volunteers themselves, offering the unique experience of working in a foreign country and providing humanitarian relief to those in need while learning about another legal system.

Types of Work

On arrival at their placement, Reprieve Volunteers are given in-house training and more basic tasks designed to make them familiar with the host office and the requirements of the work. Thereafter, the work of volunteers can be extremely varied depending upon the needs of the office at the particular time. Tasks range from spending days at a time at a photocopier, to ferrying clients' family members to death row to visit their loved one, to providing courtroom assistance in a capital trial. The abilities, skills and willingness of the volunteer combined with the workload of the host office largely dictate which tasks volunteers will perform.

As Reprieve places volunteers at a number of offices, the nature of the work and the work practices will differ. However, some of the common tasks include:

File Management: Some of the most useful work performed by a volunteer is file management. Volunteers will often find themselves either organising or updating a file, including; organisation of a file (paginating, preparing annotated indexes etc.), preparation of team documents (address lists, timelines, case status sheets etc.); preparation of notebooks for use in court (witness statements, pleadings, exhibits); preparation of trial summaries involving lengthy transcripts; and, of course, large quantities of photocopying.

Investigation: The investigation of a case at the guilt or penalty phase of a capital trial or in post-conviction proceedings will include a fact-finding exercise involving either direct interviews of potential witnesses or collection of documents. The bulk of investigative work for volunteers involves work with documents. This takes the form of public record requests to local courthouses and other public offices, such as police departments and prosecutors' offices, as well as news media research. Volunteers may also be involved in the collection of private documents, using release forms or subpoenas.

Volunteers may also be involved in some witness interviews. These will be conducted with prosecution or defence witnesses (including both eyewitnesses and mitigation witnesses), surviving victims or their victim's families, defendants or jurors. In the case of a defendant, a jail or prison visit will be required to conduct the interview; otherwise interviews are usually held at the residence of the interviewee. Detailed memos are expected to be prepared within 48 hours of the completion of interviews.

Research: Drafting motions or appearing in court is the exclusive domain of the practicing U.S. qualified attorneys. However, a volunteer may be requested to research a certain legal issue and draft a memorandum outlining the law on the issue. Other research may include research on issues of psychology or forensics science. Volunteers are also often asked to proof read or perhaps edit a legal document prior to it being filed with the appropriate court. Reprieve Volunteers in the past have also engaged in research and litigation directed at systemic reform, rather than just individual cases.

Workloads

The average working week in these offices for staff is 50-70 hours and will often involve work during weekends. During times of high demand, such as trials, some volunteers have chosen to work 7 days a week, upwards of 16 hours a day.

Reprieve Volunteers placements frequently involve a lot of travelling, mostly in rural areas, spending nights in motels. As such, it is preferred that volunteers have a driving license and be prepared to drive in the U.S.

Person Specification

Reprieve Volunteers must be unshakeably opposed to the death penalty. Maturity and self-sufficiency are critical given the demands of the work and the placement in a foreign country. Scant resources mean that supervision will often be minimal and so the ability to work independently is of paramount importance.

A Reprieve Volunteer is placed into a busy office with staff stretched to their limits in terms of what can be achieved in a day and it is important that the volunteer's presence be a help rather than a hindrance.

Volunteers must respect the host office environment, and be sensitive to the personal impact of death penalty work on the lawyers and investigators who do it every day for years on end. Volunteers should also be aware that they will rarely receive the praise or acknowledgement for their work that they deserve, simply because of the extreme time pressure their supervisors are forced to operate.

Volunteers must have a respect for the social environment in which they are working. The Southern United States is a socially and politically conservative region. A volunteer needs to bear this in mind, and not assume that his/her views are shared by the people he encounters in the course of the work.

It must be stressed that a great deal of the work that a volunteer is expected to do will to be simply to provide administrative assistance to attorneys working on active cases. As a result, if you are not prepared to spend the majority of your time doing filing, photocopying and driving, then volunteering with Reprieve is not for you.

Applicants will be judged against the following criteria:

Essential

- Be over 21 and fluent in written and spoken English;
- Be available to volunteer for at least three months and able to financially support yourself for the duration of the placement;
- Be committed to Reprieve's aims, in particular, assisting in the provision of effective legal representation and humanitarian assistance to those facing the death penalty at the hands of the state;
- Be opposed to the death penalty;

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- Have a commitment to volunteer charitable service for the poor, including a willingness to perform repetitive and unglamorous tasks;
- Have a commitment to performing volunteer service with humility and with respect for both those served and others working in the field;
- Be mature and independent, with a strong sense of personal responsibility;
- Be able to manage living in a foreign country and in the workplace;
- Have an ability to work well with others and fit in well in the placement offices;
- Have excellent interpersonal and communication skills, including clear written and oral expression;
- Be willing and able to work long hours, including weekends and evenings while working under pressure and meeting deadlines;
- Be proficient with word processing software;
- Be familiar with and agree to abide by Reprieve's volunteer placement policy statement.

Non-essential (but desirable)

- Have a driving license and driving experience;
- Have previous volunteer experience;
- Have experience in any of these areas: mental illness, mental retardation, criminal justice, prisons and prison visiting, poverty, race or class;
- Have additional computer skills, e.g. spreadsheets, databases and, on-line research tools;
- Have attended the Reprieve/Amicus Death Penalty Defence Training Programme.

It is a U.S. visa requirement that you are a member of and have a commitment to the organisation you are working with in the U.S. , if you are accepted you are therefore required to become a supporter of Reprieve (£30/year).

When to go to the US

Normally, Reprieve Volunteer placements last for 3 – 6 months, from October to May, and are therefore appropriate for people taking a year out from academic studies. This is when we encourage volunteers to apply, as applications are much more likely to be successful.

Reprieve is able to place only a very limited number of volunteers over the summer period. The reason for this is that during the summer, U.S. host offices tend to fill their volunteer positions with U.S. law students. The application process for this time of year is extremely competitive, and Reprieve receives many more applications than there are available placements.

You should make clear on your application what your proposed dates are so that they may be considered. We strongly recommend that you apply at least three months in advance of your commencement date.

Costs

The volunteer pays all costs associated with the placement, including visa fees, travel costs and living expenses. Reprieve is not able to provide any funding to volunteers. Volunteers who have completed a placement, and wish to do further work in a death penalty jurisdiction for 1-2 years are eligible to apply for Reprieve Fellowships, which are funded. For more information, see the Fellowships Programme on the Reprieve website.

Travel costs associated with being a Reprieve Volunteer can be high. The cost of airfares to the U.S. is variable but in the range of £300-600. It is also a requirement of the program that volunteers take out travel insurance including health insurance that provides cover at the highest level, due to the high cost of private health treatment in the US.

Past Reprieve Volunteers have provided estimates of the cost of spending 3 months in the United States. These estimates of course depend upon location and lifestyle, but a basic cost for three months is estimated to be approximately £2,000 – £3,000. This figure is regarded as covering only the basics. Volunteers have survived on less.

Previous volunteers have been very creative about how they have raised the funds to pay for their volunteer placement, from sponsored athletic feats to taking on an extra job, to moving back in with the parents for six months to save on rent.

Finding accommodation is relatively straightforward and host offices will provide accommodation for the first week or so to allow you an opportunity to find a place and settle in.

Visas

You will need a U.S. visa to participate in the program. Participants in the Reprieve Volunteer Programme are eligible to apply for a business visa as members of an organization providing volunteer, charitable work. This is called a B1 visa.

Obtaining a visa is the sole responsibility of the volunteer. Acceptance into the Volunteer Programme is required before you can attend any visa interview with the U.S. Embassy. If you are accepted as a volunteer, Reprieve will provide the supporting documentation required for the interview.

How to Apply

To apply, you will need to send the following to caroline@reprieve.org.uk:

- This application form completed and saved with the following filename: name.application.doc. (e.g. If your name was John Smith, the application form would need to be saved as johnsmith.application.doc)
- Current curriculum vitae [name.cv.doc]
- A sample of your professional or academic writing [name.sample.doc]
- Recent digital photo (head and shoulders only) saved as a JPEG [name.photo.jpg]
- Scanned copy of photo page of passport [name.passport.pdf or name.passport.jpg]
- Scanned copy of national police check [name.policecheck.pdf or name.policecheck.jpg]

Criminal Records Check

As part of the application process we require you to have a criminal records check. This is essential as you will be unable to visit any prisons without it. The way to proceed is to apply for a Subject Access Request. This is a request that must be made to your local police headquarters.

How do I apply?

There is no standard application process, as it varies from force to force. Therefore, you will need to contact your local police headquarters (which you can find at <http://www.police.uk/forces/forceslist.asp>) and ask for a Subject Access Application, which you are entitled to under Section 7 of the Data Protection Act 1998. You will only need what is known as a PNC (Police National Computer) check.

What do I need to provide?

Again, this will vary from force to force. However, there is a standard fee of £10 that you will need to pay, and in addition to this, you will be required to provide them with some form of identification. To find out what ID is appropriate, please check with your local police force.

How long will it take?

You should receive a reply from the National Identification Service (NIS) within 40 days of them receiving your application.

Can I apply for a volunteer placement before I have my Criminal Records Check?

Yes – you can, although you will not be accepted until we have a valid copy of your criminal records check.

Applications will be judged on match of skills and ability of the applicant to the work to be performed in the U.S. All the information given by each applicant in his or her application form will be considered. Unfortunately, we are not able to offer everyone an interview, and as a result, some applications will be considered unsuccessful without progressing to the interview stage.

If you reach the interview stage, you will then be interviewed in London. This will normally be on a Saturday or Sunday.

If a successful applicant becomes unable to take up the placement for personal reasons, prompt notice of Reprieve is appreciated.

Terms of Reprieve Volunteer Placement

If selected as a Reprieve Volunteer to work in the U.S. , you agree to the following:

- You will comply with the terms of the U.S. visa;
- You will sign and abide by confidentiality agreements presented to you;
- You will follow the directions of the Reprieve Volunteer Co-ordinators and placement supervisors in the course of your work;
- You will immediately notify Reprieve of any changes to your placement dates;
- You will immediately notify Reprieve of any problems with your placement or any part thereof;
- You acknowledge and agree that your relationship with Reprieve shall be solely and exclusively that of a volunteer and not an employee. You may not bind, obligate, represent Reprieve or speak publicly or to the media about your placement without any prior written consent. You acknowledge that you are not eligible for, and shall not participate in, any employee pension, health or fringe benefit plan which is or may be provided by Reprieve;
- You acknowledge that Reprieve assumes no responsibility for any injury, accident, illness loss of personal property, debts or other contingencies which may befall you or your dependents directly or indirectly, during the course of or as a result of her volunteer work for Reprieve. You waive all claims that you may have against Reprieve arising out of your work as a volunteer. In particular you accept and recognise that Reprieve has no control and little advanced knowledge of any risks that you may face, and you accept that you shall be responsible for the assessment of such risks and the appropriate measures to be taken to reduce or remove them;
- You will acquire travel insurance, including health insurance that provides cover at the highest level, before travelling to the U.S. ;
- You will write a report on your placement when you have finished volunteering or after the first six months, whichever comes first.