

WHAT CAN YOU DEDUCT AS A BSA VOLUNTEER?

There's no doubt that volunteering your time for Scouting is both rewarding and greatly appreciated. Volunteering also entitles you to some charitable tax deductions from the IRS, to help you cover many of your out-of-pocket expenses. Here's some basic information and, of course, these guidelines apply to all volunteer service to Scouting, church, school, etc. But always double-check these with your own attorney or tax advisor. They change often.

The general rule: volunteers may take a charitable income tax deduction for non-reimbursed, out-of-pocket expenses directly connected with the performance of services on behalf of Scouting. But not all contributions or expenses are deductible. Personal, living or family expenses are not tax deductible.

Travel Expenses. Deductible travel expenses include: air, rail and bus transportation; out-of-pocket car expenses; taxi and shuttle fares between hotel and airport or station; lodging costs; reasonable meal costs. But these expenses are only deductible if: a) they are reasonable under the circumstances, and b) there is "no significant element of personal pleasure, recreation, or vacation" in the travel. Also, you cannot deduct travel, meals, lodging, or other expenses for a spouse or child who accompanies you.

If you serve on staff at a Jamboree or camp, lead some Scouts on a camp out, or take them to Philmont or other Scouting events, most of your expenses will probably qualify for a charitable tax deduction. It's OK to have a great time; you're always allowed to enjoy your service to Scouting without losing your deduction!

If you attend a national, regional, area or council meeting as a board member, officer, or volunteer with a significant responsibility or official purpose for being there, the same is true – most of your expenses will likely be tax deductible. But if your "official" responsibilities at the meeting or event are nominal, or you spend large blocks of time for recreation or sightseeing, the IRS may deny most of your tax deductions for the trip.

The IRS doesn't expect you to work evenings and weekends. If this is when your "free time" occurs, it won't affect the deductibility of your travel expenses. But you can't deduct the cost of theater tickets, greens fees, fishing, baseball games, etc. during those times.

Car Expenses. If you use your car for "Scout business," you can either deduct actual expenses (such as gas, parking, tolls, etc.), or use a standard mileage rate of 14 cents/mile for reimbursement. Driving to and from meetings, transporting youth members to camp or an event, or a dedicated trip to a store for unit supplies are examples of deductible uses. But you can't deduct the cost of a "regular" grocery trip just by buying things for your troop while you're there. You also can't deduct any portion of general repair, maintenance, depreciation, or insurance on your vehicle. Keep very good records for these expenses.

Personal Expenses. Examples of “personal” expenses that are usually deductible as part of your volunteer work: camp fees; activity and participation fees; books, manuals and other teaching materials; awards; publicity (film, film development, printing and posters); “consumables” (such as office supplies, medical supplies, tools, and refreshments for meetings); communications (faxes, postage, mailing supplies and phone charges).

The cost and upkeep of BSA field uniforms will be tax deductible; those uniforms are usually necessary and appropriate only for Scouting purposes. However, you probably can’t deduct the cost or cleaning of a BSA *dress* uniform. Blue blazers and gray slacks are usually considered “general utility” items for personal use, even if they are also the appropriate “uniform” for many BSA meetings and functions. The costs for child care or babysitting while you volunteer are also not tax deductible.

Personal Time and Services/Use of Property. Regardless of how valuable your time is, the IRS will not allow a tax deduction for contributing personal time or services to the council. It’s too hard to document and very costly – a recent survey estimates that Americans donate about 15 billion hours a year to charity. So, for example, doctors who serve at a camp or jamboree, or attorneys who provide free legal services, cannot deduct the value of income lost or the normal hourly value of those services. Only actual, out-of-pocket expenses such as bandages, medications, copying expenses, etc. are deductible.

If you let the council use your property, such as space in a building, a boat, a car, or vacation home, you cannot deduct the rental value of that property. Actual operating expenses (such as fuel, utilities, etc. for that period of time) may be deductible. However, council use of a vacation home is considered “personal use” time for rental properties – this may push the property owner over the personal use limits and prevent taking any rental losses that year.

Reimbursements. If you are reimbursed for any expenses, you do not have to report that amount on your tax return unless the reimbursements exceed your actual expenses. If they are less than your actual expenses, the difference could be claimed as a tax deduction.

Documentation. It’s hard to document *all* costs and expenses, but it’s important to do the best you can. Receipts, cancelled checks, and credit card statements will help substantiate your expenses and deductions. Log books with chronological entries, amounts, purpose of expense, mileage, etc. will usually suffice for more “intangible” expenses. For council or National Council events or meetings you attend, request a letter from them (if you don’t already get one) that states the nature of the event, that you attended it, and describes your purpose there.

Claiming Your Deductions. Charitable deductions must be itemized on your tax return. To take advantage of them, your itemized deductions should exceed the standard deduction that’s available to all taxpayers. In fact, only about 27% of all taxpayers itemize their deductions. This is why some of our adult volunteers – and almost all of our youth volunteers – cannot deduct their expenses. But pending tax legislation if passed (the “CARE Act”) would allow limited charitable deductions even for non-itemizers.

The motivation for most volunteers is not tax deductions; it is the opportunity and rewards of service. The BSA has no resource as valuable as the time and efforts of its volunteers. For more information about tax deductions, talk to your own advisors or check out the IRS website at www.irs.gov – especially Publication 526 titled “Charitable Contributions.”