

Sociální práce / Sociálna práca

Czech and Slovak Social Work

Peer-reviewed scientific journal for fields of social work

ERIS Journal – Summer Issue - Social Work with Neighborhoods: Building Neighborhood Resilience

English edition of Sociální práce/Sociálna práca/Czech and Slovak Social work

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The Journal is published 6 times per year (4 times in Czech and Slovak, 2 times in English).

ISSN 1213-6204 (Print), ISSN 1805-885X (Online)

Registration Number of the Ministry of Culture: MK ČR E 13795

This issue was published on August 31, 2026.

Issue Editors:

Mikulcova, Katerina, Masaryk University, Czech Republic

Gulczyńska, Anita, University of Lodz, Poland

Published by:

Czech Association of Educators in Social Work, Joštova 10, 602 00 Brno, IČO: 49465619

European Research Institute for Social Work (ERIS), University of Ostrava, Českobratrská 16, 702 00 Ostrava, Czech Republic

Slovak Association of educators in social work, Ružová 13, 974 11 Banská Bystrica, Slovensko, IČO: 37846591

Layout: Radovan Goj (www.goj.cz)

Print: Printo, spol. s r. o. (www.printo.cz)

Journal Website: www.socialniprace.cz

Editorial	2
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Articles

Tetiana Liakh, Alina Dulia, Maryna Lekholetova, Tetiana Spirina, Olena Karpenko, Olha Shved, Anna Balsanko Volunteering in De-Occupied Territorial Communities of Ukraine: Integrating the Trauma-Informed Approach into the Practice of Non- Governmental Organisations	4
Katarzyna Miśkiewicz “Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods” in the Experiences of Family Probation Officers in Poland	18
Anastasia Karpunina Evaluating 360° Training in Social Work: The RIVRT Case	30
Radka Janebová, Kateřina Mikulcová Irrational Neoliberalism in the Catastrophic Scenarios of the Future of Community Planning Participants in the City of Ostrava	48
Imnayangla Jamir, M. Hilaria Soundari, Anantha Raj A. Arokiasamy, Douglas Law Sie Nguong, Khine Zar Zar Thet Small Business of Tribal Women Street Vendors: A Search for Sustainability	63
Jayaseelan S, Arul Prasad S Skill Training and Resilience Building among Rural Dalit Women: A Qualitative Case Study	85

Research Notes

School–Family–Community Partnership for Building Community Resilience Through Safe Supportive Environments	98
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Volunteering in De-Occupied Territorial Communities of Ukraine: Integrating the Trauma-Informed Approach into the Practice of Non- Governmental Organisations

Accepted for publication on June 7th, 2026

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the professional culture of social workers; research on the project activities of non-governmental organisations aimed at providing social support to internally displaced persons in communities.

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Abstract

OBJECTIVES: This article examines the integration of the trauma-informed approach into the system of training and support for volunteers working in de-occupied territorial communities of Ukraine. **THEORETICAL BASE:** The empirical foundation derives from the results of focus group discussions with 48 volunteers from de-occupied communities in Mykolaiv Oblast (Oblast stands for the province in Ukrainian) and Kherson Oblast, which were engaged in: household assistance, support for social infrastructure, and provision of psychosocial assistance to vulnerable groups. **METHODS:** A qualitative focus group interview method was employed; semi-structured guide was applied, covering seven thematic blocks: motivation for volunteering, experience of interaction with beneficiaries, emotional challenges, training needs, attitudes toward TIA, ethical dilemmas, and expectations for preparation. **OUTCOMES:** The qualitative analysis identified five key thematic categories: (1) volunteers' requests for knowledge and skills in crisis communication, psychological first aid, and burnout prevention; (2) emotional burden associated with beneficiaries', volunteers' own traumatic experiences; (3) interpersonal barriers; (4) need for supervision, facilitation of emotional release; (5) demand for hybrid training models adapted to de-occupied settings. **SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS:** Proposes a model of volunteer support (short TIA trainings, debriefing, supervision sessions, mentoring, gamified learning, and role-playing simulations); practical planning tool for social workers, NGO coordinators, and local government representatives. The findings underscore the necessity of systematically integrating TIA into volunteer programmes.

Keywords

trauma-informed approach (TIA), volunteering, de-occupied territorial communities, psychosocial support, volunteer training, social work, non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

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INTRODUCTION

Volunteering in the de-occupied territorial communities of Ukraine has acquired new significance following the onset of the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation in 2022. Volunteers of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become critical agents of humanitarian assistance, emotional support, and the restoration of social cohesion in communities that have experienced occupation, loss, violence, and destruction. At the same time, the emotional and moral burden on volunteers has significantly increased, particularly as they work with individuals who have undergone profound traumatising.

In contexts where volunteer assistance often precedes professional interventions (medical, social, psychological), the integration of a trauma-informed approach into volunteer training programmes becomes particularly relevant. TIA is not a method of treatment but an organisational framework for interaction that takes into account the impact of trauma on an individual's behaviour, emotions, and needs, while fostering safe, stabilizing relationships.

This article focuses on identifying the practical needs, barriers, and expectations of volunteers working in de-occupied territorial communities of Mykolaiv and Kherson Oblasts regarding the integration of TIA into their work. The analysis is based on the findings of a focus group study conducted in May–June 2025.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past decade, academic interest in the implementation of trauma-informed approaches in volunteer programmes has grown, particularly in the context of humanitarian crises, armed conflicts, and disasters. Hermosilla et al. (2022) demonstrated the effectiveness of Psychological First Aid (PFA) as a key component of TIA. Short-term trainings focused on safe engagement, stabilisation, and active listening have proven effective in preparing volunteers to work in challenging environments. In a case study on work with refugee children in Greece, McKenna (2021) emphasised the importance of psychoeducation, role-playing exercises, and regular debriefing in developing volunteers' emotional resilience.

Similarly, Jones et al. (2020) analysed the impact of the Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) model, widely applied in the UK Armed Forces. The authors highlight that institutional support and a structured system of informal responses to critical incidents reduce stress levels, normalize emotional reactions, and foster self-help processes. Willems et al. (2020), in a systematic review, concluded that crisis volunteering is closely linked to a high risk of burnout; however, these can be mitigated through supervision, peer support, and self-care training.

Powell and Gates (2025) note that trauma work is a fundamental component of social work practice. The demand for trauma-informed approaches in healthcare, social work and mental health services, schools, and child protection is increasing, driven by a growing recognition of the prevalence of childhood trauma and its long-term consequences for children, young people, and their families. The authors point out that, in essence, social workers understand the importance of being informed about trauma, but they may not always know how to apply this knowledge in everyday practice.

Trauma-informed approaches are methods of practice that recognize the impact of trauma on individuals and families, and acknowledge potential pathways to healing. Social work practitioners and organisations are at different stages of implementing trauma-informed approaches. Although trauma-informed practice may take different forms across organisations, four elements are central to any trauma-informed approach: awareness of the impact of trauma (understanding how trauma affects people and how individuals' behaviour should be interpreted within the context of past traumatic experiences); recognition of the signs and symptoms of trauma (professionals know how to identify the various long-term effects of trauma); response to trauma through the



integration of trauma-related knowledge into policies, procedures, and practice; and resistance to re-traumatisation (modifying or adapting practices that may unnecessarily trigger painful memories and emotions).

The successful provision of trauma-informed support requires an interagency approach. The use of trauma-informed practice in social work benefits both professionals and recipients of social services. The main advantages for practitioners include improved professional experience (greater confidence in identifying trauma and providing appropriate support, as well as organisational support in applying trauma-informed principles to their work); enhanced quality of practice and job satisfaction; increased empathy and stronger trust-based relationships among colleagues; and the development of knowledge and professional practice.

The benefits for individuals receiving assistance and support based on a trauma-informed approach include improved well-being and engagement with services, stronger family relationships, and a reduced risk of re-traumatisation (Bright, Taylor-Collins, 2023).

Ukrainian scholars have also significantly contributed to understanding volunteerism in post-traumatic contexts. Petrochko and Liakh (2024) substantiated the potential of volunteering as a resource for restoring social cohesion, building trust, and rethinking personal agency in de-occupied communities. They emphasised the need for TIA integration at all stages of volunteer preparation and support, especially considering the volunteers' own war-related trauma – an approach consistent with international practices that acknowledge the emotional vulnerability of helpers (McKenna, 2021).

The experience of non-governmental organisations demonstrates the importance of applying a trauma-informed approach in the professional activities of specialists and in the creation of their working environment. This approach recognises that organisations and teams involved in social and mental health services require a comprehensive understanding of service users' life circumstances in order to provide effective support on their path to recovery. It aims to promote awareness of the widespread impact of trauma and the pathways to healing; to recognize the signs and symptoms of psychological trauma among service users, their families, and staff; to integrate knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and, at the same time, to actively prevent re-traumatisation.

It should be emphasised that this approach should be implemented not only in relation to service users but also with regard to professionals themselves. The key principles of the trauma-informed approach include safety, trust and transparency, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, humility, and responsiveness (Buzhynska et al., n.d.).

Liakh, Liutyi, and Zhukov (2024) analysed student volunteer experiences, noting that engagement in social activities fosters responsibility, solidarity, and leadership capacity. They identified a link between volunteering and the development of civic maturity and stressed the importance of facilitation, reflection, and ethically sensitive training – aligning with McKenna's (2021) findings on the role of role-play preparation for work with vulnerable groups.

Liakh, Lekholetova, Kotelevets, Spirina, and Shved (2021) examined the transformation of volunteer practices in border communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors emphasise the necessity of flexible volunteering models that incorporate digital platforms, mobile applications, and online support. The article highlights that volunteers operating in conditions of social and epidemiological instability require specialized psychological support, which should form the foundation of training programmes. The study by Liakh, Lekholetova, and Skipalska (2021) discusses the need for social and psychological assistance and support among populations subjected to prolonged crises or those who have experienced traumatic events. Notably, they point out that to provide quality services within territorial communities, there is a lack of social initiatives aimed at preventing negative phenomena, as well as a shortage of qualified professionals, with the demand for social support increasing daily.

The significance of preparing psychosocial support specialists for war-affected and traumatised individuals, groups, and communities through social work educational programmes—including



addressing systemic gaps and reformatting governmental and volunteer organisations—is discussed by Semigina and Stoliaryk (2024). They highlight Ukraine's higher education institutions' extraordinary adaptability during wartime: technological flexibility (investment in digital infrastructure and digital literacy for educators, students, and specialists for swift crisis response), support for community and global networks (developing community support centres based in higher education institutions and utilising global partnerships to enhance resources and impact during crises), interdisciplinary collaboration (developing flexible interdisciplinary programmes for addressing complex problems in emergencies), balancing agility and sustainable development (finding a balance between rapid response and maintaining academic standards for long-term educational effectiveness), international cooperation (building strong international networks for resource and knowledge exchange, and mutual support during crises), and mental health support (prioritizing mental health infrastructure to support professionals, students, volunteers, and organisations in times of crisis).

Further focus is given to studies revealing the specifics of providing social support to vulnerable populations during social crises of wartime, including issues faced by Ukrainian women in need of psychosocial aid due to sexual violence by Russian occupants, as well as the role of social workers, volunteers, and civil society organisations in delivering such support (Shved et al., 2024). Additional research discusses the role of community organisations in delivering multidimensional social support to internally displaced persons amid full-scale war in Ukraine, emphasising the importance of their involvement in volunteer activities within new communities to foster social integration, interpersonal connections, recovery of psychological resilience, and self-realisation among displaced individuals (Spirina, Kotelevets, Dulia, 2025). The limitations of current practices and their impact on professionals and volunteers working with former combatants – particularly those with severe disabilities, and their role in facilitating successful reintegration are examined by Stoliaryk & Semigina (2024). The influence of digitalisation on social services, especially through expanding digital infrastructure in communities affected by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and implementing digital tools and solutions for access to public services, is discussed in studies by Gunko et al. (2025). The rise of e-volunteering as a tool for community support in frontline and de-occupied zones is highlighted, with a focus on combining mobile messaging, flexible planning, and intuitive online resources for volunteer preparation and coordination—particularly critical in communities with damaged infrastructure (Kotelevets, Martyniuk, 2023).

These Ukrainian studies not only deepen the understanding of volunteerism in crisis conditions but also pave the way for developing a hybrid training model that combines trauma-informed principles, flexibility, technological integration, and intersectoral approaches. They confirm the international trend towards transitioning from sporadic engagement to structured, supported, and evaluated volunteer activities conducive to post-traumatic recovery.

METHODOLOGY

Research aim: To examine how NGO volunteers working in de-occupied territorial communities perceive and assess the need for integrating the trauma-informed approach (TIA) into their training, as well as to identify the barriers, requests, and ethical challenges they highlight. Participants were involved in the following areas of volunteer activity: household assistance (such as home repairs and logistics), support for social infrastructure, and psychosocial support for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and vulnerable populations.

A qualitative focus group interview method was applied, guided by a phenomenological approach, which allows for in-depth exploration of volunteers' lived experiences, emotions, and perceptions in a specific social context.

The study involved 48 volunteers collaborating with NGOs in the following de-occupied territorial communities: Mykolaiv Oblast (Bashtanka, Novyi Buh, Kazanka); Kherson Oblast



— Velyka Oleksandrivka ATC (Velyka Oleksandrivka, Mala Oleksandrivka, Novodmytrivka, Starosillia, Tyfonivka, Bruskinske, Davydiv Brid, Bila Krynytsia, Novopavlivka, Vytyske, Chervona Liudmylivka, Mykhailiv, Mykhailiv-2, Vesele) and Kalynivka ATC (Kalynivske) (Table 1). A total of six focus group interviews were conducted, each involving between seven and nine volunteers. The number of focus groups was determined according to the principle of data saturation, that is, the point at which new discussions no longer generated fundamentally new themes or meaningful categories. Conducting six focus groups made it possible to capture the diverse volunteer experiences of respondents from the de-occupied communities of Mykolaiv and Kherson regions, ensure sufficient variation in perspectives, and maintain the opportunity for in-depth group discussions. Volunteers who had cooperated with local non-governmental organisations, humanitarian response centres, or community initiative groups and had at least three months of experience working in their communities after de-occupation were invited to participate in the focus groups.

Table 1: Characteristics of the focus group participants (n=48)

Parameter	Characteristics and distribution
Region	Mykolaiv Oblast: Bashtanka, Novyi Buh, Kazanka Kherson Oblast: Velyka Oleksandrivka ATC (Velyka Oleksandrivka, Mala Oleksandrivka, Novodmytrivka, Starosillia, Tyfonivka, Bruskinske, Davydiv Brid, Bila Krynytsia, Novopavlivka, Vytyske, Chervona Liudmylivka, Mykhailiv, Mykhailiv-2, Vesele), Kalynivka ATC (Kalynivske)
Age groups	18–25 years – 10 participants 26–35 years – 12 participants 36–50 years – 15 participants 51–65 years – 11 participants
Gender	Women – 31 participants Men – 17 participants
Previous volunteer experience	One-off actions – 9 participants Short-term volunteering (up to 6 months) – 13 participants Long-term volunteering (over 6 months) – 21 participants Seasonal volunteering – 5 participants
Areas of volunteer engagement	Household assistance (housing restoration, logistics) – 38 participants Support for social infrastructure – 26 participants Psychosocial support for IDPs and vulnerable groups – 19 participants

The focus group discussions were conducted between May and June 2025 and lasted from 80 to 120 minutes. They were held within the territories of de-occupied communities. Local NGO premises and educational centres were selected as venues for the meetings. In some cases, due to security concerns and logistical difficulties, individual participants joined the focus groups in a hybrid format via online communication.

Instruments: A semi-structured interview guide was used, covering seven thematic blocks: motivation for volunteering, experience of interacting with beneficiaries, emotional challenges, training needs, attitudes towards TIA, ethical dilemmas, and expectations regarding training (Table 2). The phenomenological orientation of the study focused not on testing predefined hypotheses but on reconstructing volunteers' subjective experiences, their emotional perceptions of working in de-occupied communities, their interpretations of crisis situations, and the ways in which they made sense of their role in supporting affected populations. The analytical process was based on the thematic grouping of recurring patterns of meaning, emotional responses, and practical concerns that consistently emerged in the participants' accounts.



Table 2: Categories for qualitative analysis of NGO volunteer focus groups in de-occupied territorial communities

Category	Analytical definition	Representative participant quotes
Motivation for volunteering	Reasons for engaging in volunteering during wartime, including value-based, ethical, and personal factors. Considers the context of self-realisation, solidarity, and post-traumatic growth.	"I couldn't stand aside", "It's my duty", "I went through it myself", "I couldn't say no", "I had to act"
Experience with beneficiaries	Accounts of working with individuals who have experienced loss, occupation, and violence. Captures the level of sensitivity to traumatised persons and the ethical boundaries of such interactions.	"It's hard to hear their stories, but I must", "They just talk — and cry", "It's frightening when you don't know how to help"
Psychological and emotional challenges	Signs of emotional exhaustion, secondary traumatisation, and burnout. Reveals hidden mental health risks and the need for systemic support.	"Sometimes I just cry after a shift", "I can't bear to look them in the eyes", "I'm burning out but ashamed to admit it", "Emotionally shattered"
Training and support needs	Requests for professional training, information, and support. Highlights knowledge gaps and the need for institutional support from NGOs.	"I lack the tools", "I'd like to learn more", "I don't know enough about psychology", "Someone should explain this to us"
Attitude toward TIA	Awareness, perception, and willingness to apply TIA principles. Assesses the potential for implementing this humane standard in NGO practice.	"I don't know how to react correctly", "I'm afraid to cause harm", "Maybe this is what it means — to be careful", "It should be mandatory"
Ethical dilemmas	Doubts, value conflicts, and moral challenges arising in the field. Important for designing ethics modules in training.	"It's hard to refuse", "I'm not sure I did the right thing", "What do you say when a child asks about a deceased parent?"
Expectations for training programmes	Desired formats and content for educational modules. Reflects the volunteers' drive to enhance their effectiveness.	"I want practical advice", "It's important to have a psychologist nearby", "Give examples of what to say", "I want to speak without fear of harming"

Ethics: All participants gave oral informed consent to participate. Anonymity, safety, and voluntary participation were ensured. The research was conducted without audio recording; notes were taken manually by the moderator. The decision not to use audio recording was based on ethical and security considerations, as well as the sensitive nature of discussions in communities that had experienced occupation and military hostilities. Some participants expressed concerns about the recording of their personal stories and experiences; therefore, the research team opted for a manual note-taking format with detailed documentation of key statements, respondents' emotional reactions, and major thematic emphases.

The quotations presented in this article are either verbatim excerpts from participants' statements recorded by the moderator during the focus group discussions or reconstructions that closely reflect the original wording and were documented immediately after the discussions to preserve their substantive accuracy.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the research team compared moderators' notes and jointly agreed upon the thematic categories. Initial coding was conducted manually, followed by discussions of recurring themes, contradictory statements, and emotionally charged excerpts. This process helped minimize the risk of subjective bias in the interpretation of the data.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the focus group interviews revealed how NGO volunteers working in de-occupied territorial communities perceive and evaluate the need for TIA integration into their preparation, as well as the barriers, needs, and ethical challenges they encounter.

The quotations presented in the findings reflect the most typical and emotionally representative statements made by focus group participants, as documented through manual note-taking and subsequent analytical reconstruction of the discussion content.

The findings highlighted recurring challenges affecting the quality and sustainability of their work. Participants were engaged in meeting basic household needs (debris removal, delivery of humanitarian aid, initial housing repairs), restoring social infrastructure (playgrounds, coworking spaces, educational facilities), and providing psychosocial support to IDPs and vulnerable community members.

Work in conditions of post-occupation traumatising, distrust, losses, and absence of systemic services places special demands on volunteer training – primarily in the areas of trauma-informed awareness, ethical sensitivity, self-reflection, and resilience. Respondents' answers to the first category of questions provided an understanding of their motivation for volunteering. Motivation among volunteers is deeply rooted in personal experience, moral values, and lived trauma:

"I could not just watch it on TV", "During the occupation it was necessary to help other people (the elderly, children), so my family stayed, and we became useful to our community", "If not me, then who?", "This is my way of regaining control".

"When I became the head of the community and saw the destruction of its territory, it encouraged me to help people rebuild their homes to return to everyday life", "I want to help my community develop, improve living conditions, help people not to feel the war".

"I am alive – so I must help", "All projects done for people will bring benefit, and it will be easier for them to endure this difficult time".

Such motivations are both strong and potentially vulnerable, as they carry the risk of emotional exhaustion when confronted with helplessness. Social work professionals should incorporate into training programmes modules on analysing personal motivation, setting boundaries in providing help, and preventing the "rescuer syndrome".

The second category of questions concerned the experience of interaction with victims. Analysis of the responses showed that volunteers encountered, and continue to encounter, extremely traumatic stories without having professional training:

"There are so many heartbreaking stories. For example, a woman lives in the village of Davydiv Brid. During the occupation her husband fell ill, and they could not evacuate him. As a result, the house was destroyed, the husband died, the child is sick, they have no place to live, and nothing to live on. These are the kinds of issues we raise and try to help with".

"When a new reality appears. War is precisely that new reality we found ourselves in. There were many situations we had never faced before. Since there was no prior experience, we relied on intuition. Looking back now, I think we made the best possible decisions for that time".

"I thought I was just distributing water. But she told me how she sat in the basement and that she lost three children".

"You stand near the ruins, and a grandmother says: 'That's where my grandson was lying.' I didn't know what to do".

In response to one of the questions in this category, "What is the most difficult aspect of communicating with people who have suffered?", respondents replied:

"It is difficult to go through crisis situations together with victims. It is difficult to help people accept the situation that has arisen".



“Convincing people of something. Especially when it concerns safety. For example, when humanitarian aid arrived and we had to distribute it, we asked people to turn off their phones, because gatherings of people drew shelling. It was difficult to convince them due to their stubbornness or expectation of messages. But when you cite real examples, when there is a real threat to their lives, then they are willing to listen”.

Such situations require not only empathy but also structured response algorithms. Methodologically, this can be ensured through training volunteers in skills such as basic stabilisation contact (visual, vocal, breathing); “anchor phrases” (“*You are safe*”. “*I am with you*”. “*Let’s breathe together*”.); identifying “unsafe topics” and referring to professionals. Formats: situation simulations, scenario-based exercises, role plays.

The next block of questions concerned the identification of volunteers’ psycho-emotional difficulties. In frontline contact work, volunteers absorb others’ pain, often without resources to process their own emotions. They said:

“At night I cannot sleep—I keep replaying her words again and again”, “After a shift, I remain silent for two days”, “At the end of the week, I feel exhausted. There were periods during volunteering when we could not rest. Especially when there was no shelling, and volunteers had the opportunity to deliver humanitarian aid, then we distributed it even on weekends. But we did not complain, because this was help for people”, “I feel ashamed to say that it has been hard for me”, “My mother says: you are changing – you’ve become quiet and irritable”, “I keep reflecting on people’s stories, empathizing. If I helped someone, then I feel better”, “Emotional exhaustion happens. We communicate with different people, each with their own character and emotions, which they essentially transfer onto us. Personally, I come home and stay silent for some time, remain in silence, and in this way, I recover”.

To restore resources, professionals should systematically implement: emotional relief groups (format: regular reflective meetings with a facilitator); supervision (individual or group, with an emphasis on safe discussion of difficulties); methods of body-based self-regulation (breathing practices, grounding, visualizations). Format: integrated training modules, mobile psycho-educational teams, video guides. Analysis of respondents’ answers to questions in this category regarding training and support needs showed that volunteers lack not general information, but concrete actions, formulas, and examples. In their answers, they highlighted acute moments when they often do not know how to react or act, such as: “*What should I say to a child who asks if their home will be rebuilt?*”, “*Is it acceptable to touch someone when they are crying?*”, “*How to not cross boundaries?*”.

In response to the question, “Have you undergone special training before volunteering? Do you cope on your own as a volunteer?”, most volunteers said they had not undergone special training. Usually, it was self-education, occasional trainings, or peer exchange:

“I did not undergo special training, but I worked in a volunteer organisation, in a humanitarian headquarters”, “We did not attend training, but volunteers and charitable foundations invited us to various events where we exchanged experiences. We learn in practice”, “I did not undergo training. It would be great to study the topic of working with internally displaced persons. I would like to know more about how to communicate with them so as not to retraumatise them and to help them cope with crisis states”.

Therefore, volunteers often feel a lack of knowledge and skills regarding understanding how to start a conversation without retraumatizing or alienating a person; knowledge about working with veterans, demobilized soldiers, or combatants; communication skills with people who have experienced trauma; the need for institutional support from NGOs. This provides grounds to argue for the expediency of conducting systematic training for volunteers, particularly those working in de-occupied territorial communities.



Proposals for programmes include the following: modules on “The Language of Help” (what to say / what not to say); instructional fieldwork guides; concise video lessons (2–5 minutes) distributed via messengers or YouTube; mobile NGO teams for in-person instruction of volunteers on-site. When respondents were asked about their attitude toward the trauma-informed approach, it turned out that participants were hearing this term for the first time but reacted positively to its essence: *“We need this – because we act blindly”, “It would be good to have some kind of ‘volunteer three-step rule”, “After this, I realized that I can support without breaking someone down”.*

The trauma-informed approach should become a cross-cutting principle of all educational and organisational processes in volunteer programmes. Forms of integrating the trauma-informed approach: creation of short TIP guidebook brochures for volunteers; adaptation of the principles “safety – stability – choice – collaboration – empowerment” to humanitarian aid situations; visual posters in aid distribution points or volunteer headquarters; cards with supportive phrases.

Analysis of answers to questions about ethical dilemmas in volunteering showed that this is one of the most delicate topics. Respondents said:

“She asks: ‘Did he die as a hero?’ And I don’t know the truth”, “We don’t have time to verify—and yet we want to give support”, “Sometimes you say: everything will be fine. But you are not sure yourself...”, “There was a situation when a woman experienced sexual violence during the occupation. She did not turn to any organisations for help. It was difficult to accept this situation and to accept the impossibility of helping her, because it was confidential information”, “Faith in the next day, in victory, in the Armed Forces of Ukraine helps make difficult decisions; faith in people who have survived crisis situations and today actively show their civic stance”.

Thus, analysis of the answers to the questions in this category is important for the development of ethical training modules. Recommended methods: ethical case studies with discussion in small groups; situational analyses (“What can I say as a volunteer?”); formation of an “ethical algorithm of action”: first stabilize, then listen, then guide. Formats: training blocks, interactive games such as “ethical compass”. When answering the questions regarding expectations from training programmes, all participants sought realistic, short, flexible formats: *“Half an hour – maximum. But to the point”, “Give me something I can open on my phone between trips”, “I want to know that I will not cause harm”.*

Among the topics volunteers would like to see in training programmes were: *“How to engage proactive people, working with psycho-emotional burnout, working with veterans and servicemen”, “Project management”.*

Thus, meaningful expectations of volunteers regarding educational and training modules were identified. In particular, there is a need for short-term practice-oriented trainings; online modules accessible at any time; checklists and cards for psychological first aid; mentoring support for volunteer groups.

Given the results of the study, social work professionals responsible for training volunteers in de-occupied territorial communities should reorient educational programmes from a theoretical-declarative approach to scenario-based, contextual, and applied learning that reflects the real challenges of volunteer activity. It is important to implement not only basic instruction but also full trauma-informed support that takes into account the emotional vulnerability of the volunteers themselves. Programmes should include components of self-preservation, facilitation of psychological resilience, development of ethical sensitivity, and critical thinking skills under conditions of uncertainty. In addition, volunteers should be regarded not as secondary executors but as full-fledged subjects of social influence, who have the right to support, recognition, and development within the framework of the cross-sectoral system of social work.

Summarizing the results of the focus group study, a final table was formed, which systematizes the main challenges identified among volunteers of non-governmental organisations working in the de-occupied territorial communities of Mykolaiv and Kherson regions (Table 3). The table not



only structures the key aspects of volunteers' experience but also contains analytical conclusions that can serve as a roadmap for social work professionals engaged in the training, mentoring, and support of volunteer teams in critical conditions.

Table 3: Key findings from the focus group study of NGO volunteers working in de-occupied territorial communities and recommendations for NGO social workers responsible for organizing volunteer activities.

Key aspect	Specific features in de-occupied territorial communities	Recommendations for NGO social workers	Rationale
Volunteer motivation	Motivation often stems from personal experiences of loss, occupation, and an intrinsic need to help; volunteering becomes a form of psychological healing	Use of biographical interviewing and psychoeducation aimed at enhancing self-awareness of personal motivation	Biographical interviewing allows volunteers to reflect on their own experiences, traumatic events, resources, and sources of resilience. This approach fosters an empathetic environment while identifying intrinsic motivational factors that sustain engagement. Psychoeducation should focus on self-awareness, setting healthy boundaries, and reflecting on personal values and reasons for engaging in humanitarian work.
Interaction with beneficiaries	Contact with individuals who have experienced torture, bereavement, or destruction of homes; often first contact without professional support	Development of humane first-contact protocols, training in stabilisation techniques, and provision of trauma-response tools	Establishing clear first-contact protocols with beneficiaries – especially those affected by traumatic events, is a core element of the trauma-informed approach. Volunteers should have basic stabilisation skills: grounding, emotional support, and non-intrusive observation. Quick-reference visual materials, response algorithms, supportive key phrases, and QR codes linking to online resources should be provided.
Emotional challenges	High levels of secondary traumatisation, self-blame, and concealment of burnout symptoms; absence of an emotional self-care culture	Regular supervision sessions, emotional decompression activities, and digital self-monitoring tools	Structured supervision (individual and group) should be implemented to discuss difficult situations, moral dilemmas, and secondary trauma. Emotional decompression may include art-based methods, body-oriented practices, and journaling. Digital tools, such as apps for monitoring psychological state, daily check-ins, or visual emotional resource scales, can further support self-awareness.
Training needs	Demand for practical tools: phrases, actions, response scenarios; desire to “do no harm” but lack of confidence in actions	Development of context-specific scenarios, adapted phrases, and mobile training modules reinforced through repetition and reflection	Training should include scenario-based modules tailored to the realities of de-occupied communities. Context-adapted supportive phrases should be provided. Training should be mobile (accessible online or in small local groups), with content repetition, reflective questioning, and discussion of ethical dilemmas.
Attitudes toward TIA	Positive reception; desire for clear, simple behavioural and communication principles	Integration of TIA into all training and support programmes through simple principles, real-life examples, and dynamic assessment	TIA should be a cross-cutting principle rather than a stand-alone module. Present it through accessible principles (safety, transparency, collaboration, support) and relatable examples. Awareness and readiness can be monitored dynamically through mini-surveys, case analyses, and scenario discussions.



Ethical dilemmas	Facing moral dilemmas in the field; need for ethical guidance and decision-making support	Use of case methods, role-play, and ethical algorithms emphasising discussion of moral challenges	Case-based and simulation exercises can model common situations in post-occupation communities –from difficult conversations with vulnerable groups to value-based conflicts. Ethical action algorithms should be created, alongside safe spaces for discussing inner conflicts, fears, guilt, or helplessness.
Expectations for training programmes	Expectation of short, mobile, practice-oriented programmes; need for guides, checklists, and mentoring	Modular self-learning materials: concise formats, visual content, mentorship, mobile accessibility	Learning products should be short (30–60 minutes), concise, and mobile-friendly. Checklists, video guides, and infographics should be developed for field use. Mentorship by experienced volunteers or professionals is essential. Dissemination should be via mobile platforms, messengers, and QR codes on printed materials.

Special attention was paid to: motivational factors of volunteering, which often have a personally traumatic nature; interaction with affected populations experiencing acute or chronic psychological trauma; emotional challenges and risks of burnout, which are often not recognized by the volunteers themselves; the need for accessible and practical training with an emphasis on safety, empathy, boundaries, and ethics; attitudes toward the trauma-informed approach as a potential framework for humane response; ethical dilemmas arising in field conditions without external support; volunteers' expectations regarding the formats and content of training programmes.

Each block includes corresponding recommendations for professionals, which can be adapted both in the Ukrainian context and in international assistance programmes.

The table can be used as a:

- tool for preliminary assessment of volunteer needs
- framework for designing training modules and programmes
- reference for planning psychosocial support for volunteer initiatives
- an analytical framework for future interregional and transnational research on volunteering in crisis zones

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summarising the results of the focus group study of NGO volunteers working in de-occupied territorial communities, we see that they not only shed light on the specifics of volunteer activity in these communities but also form the foundation for building a more resilient, informed, and ethically grounded system of support for the civil society sector in conditions of war and post-war recovery.

According to the presented analytical table, planning work with volunteers by social workers, NGO coordinators, and local self-government bodies in de-occupied territorial communities should focus on the following key aspects: volunteer motivation, interaction with victims, overcoming emotional challenges, volunteer training, integration of the trauma-informed approach, and creation of ethical algorithms of response.

Implementation of these tasks is possible through:

- application of biographical interviewing and psychoeducation focused on awareness of one's own motivation (formation of an empathetic environment and identification of internal motivational factors influencing resilience and involvement in volunteering)
- development of protocols for humane first contact, training in stabilisation techniques, and provision of tools for trauma response (mastery of basic stabilisation skills)
- supervision sessions, emotional relief, and digital self-monitoring tools (discussion of complex situations, moral dilemmas, and secondary traumatisations)



- development of scenarios, adapted phrases, and mobile training blocks reinforced through repetition and reflection (with a list of adapted expressions and supportive phrases, taking into account cultural and psycho-emotional context)
- integration of the trauma-informed approach into all educational and support programmes through simple principles, examples, and dynamic evaluation
- application of case methods, role plays, and ethical algorithms with an emphasis on discussing moral challenges (creation of ethical response algorithms and safe spaces for discussion of internal contradictions, fears, feelings of guilt or helplessness)
- modular self-learning materials (short practical learning products, mentoring)

Thus, NGO volunteers working in de-occupied territorial communities experience a significant level of emotional burden, lack of support, and insufficient knowledge for effective and ethically safe assistance. The trauma-informed approach is perceived as desirable and important even among those who had not previously encountered its terminology – its principles correspond to the deep values of humanity, caution, and safety in working with victims.

Integration of the trauma-informed approach into volunteer training is not only a response to their needs but also an important step in the professionalization of the volunteer movement. Such training should include practical components (exercises, simulations, basic stabilisation techniques) as well as provide continuous support: mentoring, supervision, support groups.

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