

PRINCIPLES AND ELEMENTS

of a

SUCCESSFUL

VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTER

Standards of Performance

Developed by

The National Center for Voluntary Action

Based On

Observation of Successful

Voluntary Action Centers

**PRINCIPLE:** The Board of Directors of the Voluntary Action Center must be actively and effectively involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating all VAC activities.

**Element:** Knowledge of VAC operations

- Board members must be provided the requisite information and resources to enable effective decision-making.
- Good communication between the VAC Director and the Board must be established and maintained, contributing to informed and efficient teamwork in VAC management.

**Element:** Broadly-based, committed Board membership

- Because a VAC is an agent for voluntary action for the entire community, the board should be composed of representatives of the varied segments of the community.
- In addition to breadth according to classifications of sex, race and ethnicity, age, and economics, the VAC board should include people with skills and "connections" that will facilitate fulfillment of VAC's role and functions in the community.
- Board members should be committed and available to assist in carrying out VAC operations and/or developing important linkages with colleague agencies and organizations.

**Element:** Well-defined role of the Board

- There should be well-defined written descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of the board as a body and of the staff. Descriptions should include expectations of each.
- Similarly, there should be written descriptions of the roles, responsibilities and expectations of each committee of the board, both "standing" and "ad hoc."
- Each new board member should be given a full orientation about the VAC, the board, and his role with respect to both, resulting in his full understanding and acceptance of the work and responsibility expected of him.
- If VAC is not an independently incorporated entity but a unit of a larger agency or organization, there should be clear, written, and binding descriptions of the role and

responsibility of VAC's board or oversight committee in relation to the board of the "parent" organization. VAC interests should be represented on the board of the parent organization.

Element: Interest and commitment of Board Members maintained

- The Board (as a body, in committee, and individually at times) has responsibility and authority to carry out specific tasks or programs.
- The special interests and skills of each board member should be tapped, ensuring both efficient board performance and maintenance of the members' commitment.
- A sense of responsibility and authority and the utilization of special skills and interests are equally important in retaining committed members of an advisory or oversight committee (applicable to VACs under parent organizations).

PRINCIPLE: A Voluntary Action Center must have financial and other resources sufficient to carry out VAC's envisioned role in the community.

Element: Resource Development Program

- A VAC needs a sound planning program for resource development, identifying future financial needs and potential sources of funding, and building good relationships with those people in the community who can influence community funding decisions, public or private.
- A VAC needs to identify and utilize non-financial community resources involving contributed services (e.g., public relations) and supplies as much as is feasible. Board members can be especially helpful in finding these kinds of contributed support.

Element: Building a "saleable" program and division of labor

- In successful fundraising, a VAC must be able to point to a soundly managed program, a proven "track record," and good community visibility.
- The board should take the primary role in fundraising so that the VAC director is free to carry out the programs

and activities comprising VAC's "track record."

Element: Understanding funding implications

- In considering a possible specific funding arrangement, the VAC board needs to carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of accepting the funding, reaching an informed decision that includes understanding of the impact the decision will have on VAC.
- In deliberating the implications of specific funding arrangements, VAC personnel must consider both the short-term and long-term implications.

PRINCIPLE: A Voluntary Action Center must have staff capability commensurate with the VAC's scope and program requirements.

Element: Adequate staff complement

- Staff should be selected on realistic basis of suitability to VAC needs.
- Staff capabilities should not be strained beyond that which can be accomplished successfully, and current and future program implementation must depend on availability of adequate staff.

Element: Delineating staff role and expectations

- To ensure appropriate selection and retaining of staff, common understanding will be reached through use of job descriptions.
- Job descriptions assist in both delineating roles and responsibilities and, later, in evaluating performance.
- There should be certain, specified requisite experience and qualifications for filling the director's position (i.e., administrative, managerial and delegating skills; thorough community knowledge; skill in program and resource development and in public relations).
- VAC should offer a salary commensurate with the work to be done and comparable to executive positions in allied community agencies.

Element: Involvement of VAC volunteers

- Volunteers can be creatively involved to augment staff and expand VAC's program.
- The same standards and procedures (i.e., job descriptions, reasonable workload, adequate supervision, VAC orientation, and appropriate utilization of talents) must be applied to volunteers as applied to VAC's paid personnel.

PRINCIPLE: The organizational structure of a Voluntary Action Center must facilitate the VAC's ability to plan and carry out independent program action.

Element: Staff and Board delineators

- There must be delineation of separate roles and responsibilities of staff and board (i.e., program implementation vs. fundraising) written in by-laws and policies and procedures statements which must be followed to ensure maximum effective fulfillment of VAC's community obligation.

Element: Ways of relating to a larger "parent" organization

- VACs which are not independent but which are part of a larger organization must have certain freedom and authority to act independently in fulfillment of their role.
- This freedom and authority must be delineated in a written understanding of the organizational structure and should, at least, provide for the following:
  - a) a policy-making body, separate from the "parent" board, with delegated authority to set direction for the VAC;
  - b) a separate VAC budget with authority for VAC to make expenditures;
  - c) a separate identity for VAC within the parent organization, ideally being a separate department of the organization with representation on relevant committees of the organization;
  - d) a full-time VAC director, not responsible for any other duties of the organization;

- e) delineation and common understanding of VAC's role in relation to the parent organization and to the community, with VAC permitted autonomy in working directly with the community.

**PRINCIPLE:** A VAC must continuously strive for community awareness of volunteerism and of VAC, with the public aware of the services provided by VAC as well as of services VAC does not provide.

**Element:** Program for Community Awareness

- From the outset, VAC should promote itself realistically in terms of services it can provide and time-frame for given accomplishments.
- VAC should expose itself, relating goals and objectives, as widely as possible throughout the community, taking care that its program for public awareness does not get too far ahead of its record of accomplishments.

**Element:** Varied tools for public awareness

- A VAC can and should use as many ways as possible to publicize its program (e.g., media, speakers, client endorsements).
- A VAC's public awareness program can utilize both internally and externally generated techniques (e.g., a VAC newsletter vs. local press coverage; board speaker's bureau vs. Toastmasters' support).
- The VAC's activities are broad enough to appeal to many different interest groups (churches, civic clubs, students, the courts), and public information can be tailored to appeal to each of these special interest groups.
- A VAC's office must be accessible to its clients and visible to the community.

**PRINCIPLE:** The success and effectiveness of any given VAC is directly related to the effectiveness of its management procedures.

**Element:** Goal setting, priorities, planning

- Planning and priority determination must follow from stating specific goals and objectives, with a realistic view of what can be done, what should be done, and what length of time is needed to meet these objectives.
- Objectives or programs should not be attempted without a realistic expectation that they can be accomplished according to VAC's capabilities and in an efficient manner.
- Both short-term and long-term activities and implications must be considered in planning.

Element: "Housekeeping"

- The early stages of VAC development must center on developing sound operating procedures (i.e., information systems, record keeping, staff and board role delineations).
- VAC personnel should initiate and maintain productive relationships with relevant individuals, agencies and organizations, beginning at the outset of VAC operations.

Element: Weighing alternatives

- VAC staff and board must jointly weigh alternatives in choosing which objectives to tackle at which time.
- Consideration must be given to alternate ways of achieving a stated objective, taking into account factors like resources at hand, limits of time, effect on other VAC activities (e.g., consulting with various agencies vs. mounting a training program with the community college).

Element: Appropriate staff management

- Staff must be appropriately involved according to their capabilities and limitations.
- Staff must have clear understanding of their specific responsibilities, duties, and assignments (job descriptions, time-tables) and must be given adequate tools and support to perform these tasks (e.g., orientation and training, lines of communication).

Element: Appropriate board management

- Board members must be selected intelligently with a realistic

view to the active participation and contribution expected of each, and each member must demonstrate understanding and agreement of his responsibilities.

- The role and manner of operation of VAC's board should be described in the by-laws, including provision for length of term and manner of selecting, and grounds for removal of, board members.
- The board must have the tools to function well, being fully knowledgeable of VAC goals, objectives, problems and performance.
- The staff director must communicate closely and frequently with the board and must ensure the staff back-up needed by the board.

Element: Relationship to parent organization (if applicable)

- The organizational and operational relationship of VAC to a parent organization must be clearly determined, reserving for VAC as much authority and autonomy in community voluntary action as possible.
- A successful and effective relationship between a VAC and a parent organization rests in large part on good communication between the two, and on mutual understanding of VAC's role in the community.

Element: Internal evaluation system

- An internal evaluation system is an integral part of a successful VAC's planning and operating system, helping VAC to identify its progress and problems, reasons for success or failure, and needed modifications in its program.
- An effective planning and evaluation cycle provides a vital tool in helping an agency improve both its program and its means of carrying it out and relies on the collection and refinement of useful project data.
- VACs should evaluate their efforts, measuring them with appropriate stated criteria (both quantitative and qualitative) and seeking information from all relevant participants, e.g., volunteer, administrator, and client.



PRINCIPLE: The success of a Voluntary Action Center in its community rests on its effective realization of specific VAC functions.

Element: Recruitment and referral of volunteers

- The degree of recruitment and referral of volunteers should depend on staff capabilities to handle the expected response and on the number and kinds of available volunteer job opportunities, and should follow VAC's development of sound procedures for dealing with volunteers (job descriptions, records, interview techniques).
- VACs should be flexible, seeking to involve people from the various segments of the community to address the various problems of the community and tailoring recruitment to meet special interests of the target group or the special characteristics of a problem area.
- Effective matching of volunteers with tasks requires gathering relevant information about the potential volunteer, and keeping up-dated information on job opportunities and community needs.
- An effective VAC keeps full and current information on local volunteer programs and their support services to volunteers (supervision provided, clear job descriptions, positions available, nature of the program), and has an efficient method for regularly updating information and job description.
- Either through a board committee, staff efforts or volunteers, VAC initiates and maintains personal contact with appropriate agency personnel, ensuring good acquaintance of VAC with the agency.
- The volunteer interview is essential in determining a suitable volunteer referral and should be conducted by trained interviewers who have thorough knowledge of volunteer programs (in large metropolitan areas, interviewers can be assigned according to program specialty areas), resulting, where possible, in an immediate referral.
- Follow-up information is necessary to ascertain the success of the referral, to assess the VAC's recruitment/referral process in practical application, to gather data required for planning and funding campaigns, and to help evaluators recommend needed modifications of the process. Follow-up should be conducted regularly and should be both efficient and useful.

Element: Assisting other volunteer efforts

- A successful Voluntary Action Center helps existing volunteer programs strengthen their effective involvement of volunteers and improve their volunteer opportunities through consultation, education and training.
- A VAC should establish standards expected of programs to which it will refer volunteers, requiring provision of certain supports (job descriptions, supervision, orientation and training) to volunteers, and should assist agencies in understanding and meeting those standards.
- A VAC should have a policy of action (e.g., refusal to refer volunteers, offering consultations) to follow with agencies not meeting the standards expected by VAC.
- A VAC should employ a variety of means of assisting volunteer programs including holding training programs, workshops, and community conferences, forming groups such as a Council of Volunteer Coordinators, and forming groups related to specific program areas (health volunteers, youth volunteers, para legal volunteers) or issues.
- The success of an agency's volunteer program requires the support of the agency's executive director, and VAC can help to acquaint these administrators with the requirements (staff, time, and money) and value of a good volunteer program.

Element: Catalyst for community problem-solving

- In time, a VAC assumes an important role in identifying and resolving community problems through such methods as participation on community committees and planning groups, coordination of community problem-solving efforts, and initiation of needed programs. Attainment of this goal can be facilitated by addressing priority community issues from the outset instead of solely focusing on traditional agency involvement.
- VACs coordinate volunteer efforts in a community, helping to avoid duplication of effort and to assist the volunteer community to have a part in community affairs.
- Within the limitations of staff available and VAC priorities, VACs assist in the initiation of new programs addressing unmet community needs.