

Volunteer groups must use trends

If nonprofit volunteer organizations want to thrive in the future, they must respond to the trends which affect the available pool of volunteers, Kathleen Cavanaugh, Director of the new Volunteers Center of Camden County, told a New Jersey Center for Non-Profit Corporations conference in Princeton last month.

Citing a "Volunteer 2000" Study, recently completed by the American Red Cross, she outlined ten "core principles of successful volunteer involvement."

1. The barriers to volunteering must be dissolved to create a more broadly based volunteer force.

Ethnic and racial minorities, low-income families, the disabled and homebound are largely absent from the volunteer pool, according to the Red Cross study. The study recommends removing the barriers to volunteering facing these groups, including steps such as recruiting volunteers in another language, furnishing transportation or childcare, providing access for handicapped volunteers, and expanding volunteer opportunities beyond normal "9 to 5" working hours.

2. Volunteers are not "free."

Not surprisingly, the study found that the development and administration of volunteers involve many costs to nonprofit organizations, such as costs of administration, support, supplies, recruitment and training. The Red Cross recommends that nonprofits budget for these costs because volunteers do not really provide "free services".

3. Volunteers contribute far more than the accomplishment of specific duties.

Volunteers provide nonprofit organizations with a tremendous return on their investments, according to the study. They extend the organizations' capacities to provide services, enhance their image and credibility, and bring external discipline and perspective to the nonprofit sector. The study suggests that nonprofit organizations should capitalize on their volunteers' presence by using them for problem resolution, the bearing of bad news and the solicitation of contributions

because they are sometimes "better received" than paid staff.

4. "Volunteer" does not mean "amateur."

The study quotes management expert Peter Drucker for the proposition that volunteers are increasingly "selected, trained, supported, and managed as unpaid staff, rather than well-meaning amateurs." Drucker attributes this to the increasing emphasis being placed by nonprofits on volunteer management and accountability. The Red Cross study recommends that nonprofits also increase their emphasis on training, competence and professionalism in order to promote volunteer confidence and buoy the public's support of the nonprofits' programs.

5. The expectations of both the volunteer and the organization must be met.

Nonprofits should recognize the fact that volunteer administration and management is a specialty within the broader field of personnel management, and that the recruitment, training and retention of volunteers takes special skills and knowledge. The Red Cross has developed a "performance management system" for its volunteers, similar to the management system utilized by its paid staff. The organization and the volunteers set and periodically review mutually agreed upon goals and objectives.

6. Volunteers should be developed, not exploited.

The study recommends that nonprofit organizations develop non-exploitive relationships with their volunteers through faithfulness to job descriptions and mutual expectations, adequate training, supplies and support, and inclusion in appropriate meetings and social events. Volunteers should not be pressured into working longer hours than they expected, and should be given development and "resume-building" opportunities whenever possible.

7. Nonprofits should use volunteers as managers.

The study recommends that volunteers should be placed in managerial positions because they offer

broader expertise and geographical representation, as well as potentially refreshing and unique management styles and perspectives. This use of volunteers allows them to influence the various programs they participate in, and gives them a greater sense of empowerment and control. Experts consider this sense of control and empowerment essential to volunteer retention.

8. There is more to volunteer recruitment than numbers.

The Red Cross stresses that volunteer recruiters must be concerned with many factors besides numbers. The study discovered that the most productive recruitment methods are specially targeted to fill specific positions. If an organization uses broad media appeals for recruiting its volunteers, the Red Cross recommends that it provide immediate opportunities for the volunteers who answer the appeal. Suitable volunteers should never be turned away, not even temporarily.

9. Careful legislative initiative can promote volunteerism.

The study states that volunteerism and community service is gaining widespread attention in Congress. As many as 25 "national service" bills have been placed before congressional committees, in addition to President Bush's "Yes" initiative. This has helped foster the idea that American citizens have a moral duty to volunteer. The study urges nonprofits to capitalize on this theme by perpetuating volunteerism as a way of life, not just a short term commitment.

10. Nonprofit organizations can benefit through collaboration.

The increasingly large number of organizations and causes which are serviced by volunteers, as well as the resulting duplication of efforts, scattering of resources and number of choices for potential volunteers, makes collaboration by nonprofits an essential step in preparing for the future, according to the Red Cross. The study recommends that nonprofits initiate volunteer referrals through Volunteer Action Centers, in addition to implementing volunteer loans and exchanges.

— Anne E. Walters