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# Setting Standards for **VOLUNTEER** Programs



**A**s a community's central clearinghouse for volunteers, the Volunteer Center plays an important role in establishing standards to help organizations create and maintain the most effective volunteer programs possible. Standards are the criteria for excellence in managing volunteer programs, addressing specific areas of volunteer program management.

In Boston, the United Way's Voluntary Action Center adopted the following standards in 1975 in response to numerous requests for volunteer program planning. Today, the VAC conducts standards workshops for interested organizations whose volunteer programs have been in operation for at least one year. They are invited to attend a session in their service area (e.g., health care), where they fill out a VAC evaluation form and submit materials for Standards Committee review. These include volunteer job descriptions, record-keeping forms, organizational policy/support statement, etc. But the standards workshop also affords the opportunity to meet similar groups and focus on common issues and problems as well as consult with VAC staff and learn more about VAC training sessions and consultation services.

From the evaluation, organizations can see if their volunteer programs meet VAC standards requirements; if they do, they benefit from VAC and community recognition of their excellence and are included in the VAC's "Volunteer Opportunities Book."

## **THE BOSTON VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTER'S STANDARDS PROGRAM**

The word *standards* is defined as acknowledged basis for comparison or measuring; criterion; a degree or level of requirement, excellence, or attainment (*American Heritage Dictionary*, New Dell Edition, 1984).

VAC criteria measure the overall agency support of volunteers and volunteer programs, effectiveness of management techniques used in running the volunteer program, and the degree to which the organization maximizes its volunteer's skills and time.

Here are some of the benefits of a standards program:

- It protects the volunteers, who deserve assurance that VAC's referrals are to agencies committed to sound volunteer management practices.
- It clarifies VAC's expectations of agencies and agencies' expectations of their volunteers.

- It positively influences the effectiveness of the volunteer program.
- It can be a planning tool for agencies striving to improve their volunteer program.
- It encourages professionalism and high values among volunteer coordinators through training offered and assistance rendered at VAC by staff and colleagues.
- It improves administrators' and volunteers' image of volunteering by recognizing that there are defined management and professional benchmarks.

### **Administrative Support and Policies**

1. The Volunteer Program shall have the support and approval of its organization's administration.  
—This implies that the leadership of the organization will seriously consider the benefits and costs of the Volunteer Program to the larger institution.  
—There will be a commitment of resources to the volunteer program by the organization. Such commitment is contingent upon a reasonable level of benefits from the Volunteer Program to the organization relative to program costs.
2. The organization shall designate one individual to coordinate volunteers. This person will serve as liaison between the community, the volunteers, and the paid staff of the institution. It is preferred that only one person from the organization serve as the contact point for all outside relationships relevant to the Volunteer Program.
3. All paid staff shall be fully informed about the volunteer program and individual staff responsibilities to volunteers.
4. Serious consideration shall be given by the organization to its policies concerning insurance, reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses, uniforms, working conditions, and other benefits to volunteers.
5. Volunteers shall not displace a paid worker or be placed in a position for which funding is available.

### **Program Administration**

6. Written volunteer job descriptions shall be created and made available to prospective volunteers. These descriptions shall be updated as necessary and shall delineate time commitment, necessary skills and actual duties.
7. Each prospective volunteer shall be interviewed by the person designated by the organization to coordinate volunteers.  
—Placements should match the volunteer's skills, talents,

and interests with the organization's needs and should be made as quickly as possible.

—If such a match cannot be made, the volunteer should be referred to a central volunteer referral office or another suitable agency.

8. Records of individual volunteer service shall be maintained with appropriate safeguards for confidentiality. Such records shall contain at least the following information: type of assignment, work performed, hours served, performance evaluation.
9. There shall be periodic evaluation of the volunteer program.
  - Program goal should reflect the needs of the volunteers as well as of program participants.
  - The objectives should be specific, measurable, and obtainable.

### Volunteer Support Systems

10. Orientation to the organization and its volunteer program and policies shall be given to the volunteer prior to his/her beginning work. The orientation shall include both a conceptual overview and a more detailed operational description of the organization and its programs.
11. Initial and refresher training shall be provided as appropriate. Provisions shall be made for upgrading volunteer responsibilities as desired by the volunteer and appropriate to the organization.
12. Clearly defined lines of supervision shall be communicated so that volunteers will know to whom they are responsible.
  - Direct supervision of individual volunteers shall be provided.
  - Frequent meetings between volunteers and supervisors shall be held on a regular basis to assure continued communication.
  - The supervisor will discuss with each volunteer his/her work, focusing on recognition for positive efforts and strengthening areas of weakness.

13. Recognition of volunteer services, both individually and as a group, shall be given in ways appropriate to the program.



Graphic from Boston VAC's standards program brochure, "Measure Your Success."

## As I See It

**Donna Alvarado, Director, ACTION**



America needs strong local Volunteer Centers now more than ever. Our community centers bring neighbors together and provide opportunities to generate private sector initiatives that result in lasting volunteer programs. As President Reagan has said, "We can never fully measure the positive effects that each kind word or deed has upon this great and wonderful land."

For 15 years, ACTION has sponsored and supported volunteers who serve through community centers where human needs related to the elderly and the poor are addressed. Volunteer Centers set the pace for the future. They show that Americans can meet every challenge facing our communities by developing available volunteer resources.

**Senator Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.), Board member, VOLUNTEER—The National Center**

The heart of America is to be found in the values of our voluntary associations. Our nonprofit organizations are an important force in producing human services and in preserving our culture, by tapping the wealth of human talent known as the volunteer. Although government may guarantee access to opportunity and security in life's essential needs, government is not very good at producing either opportunity or the services that mean security to the individual.



That function, that kind of citizenship, is the source of compassion in our society. It is by participating in the life of the community that we come to understand the needs of others and the values that make America great. I can't over-emphasize the importance of the local Volunteer Centers that act as a central clearinghouse and a training center for those individuals who want to share their energy and abilities.

**Carole P. Hart, President, Association of Junior Leagues, Inc.**



Volunteer Action Centers are an invaluable asset to any community, serving as a focal point for volunteer activity. Among their many important roles in promoting voluntarism, Volunteer Centers act as a clearinghouse for the needs of both volunteers and agencies, and promote the continuing education of volunteer directors.

Because Junior Leagues have long recognized the value of Volunteer Centers, many Leagues have been instrumental in organizing these centers in their communities. Leagues have a long and happy history of partnership and collaboration with Volunteer Centers in activities such as convening community meetings, advocating for corporate release time for volunteers and honoring volunteers.

These are but a few of the ways in which Volunteer Centers and Junior Leagues work together for the betterment of their communities. The Association of Junior Leagues is grateful to VOLUNTEER for this opportunity to publicly salute Volunteer Centers.