

## ABSTRACT

*In order for a volunteer program to be an integral component of an organization, it requires the strong endorsement of the administration. This article describes how one organization acquired that endorsement through a process of collaboration and compromise. A Statement of Commitment was produced and ratified. The statement identifies the organization's commitment to its volunteer community and staff's role and responsibility toward volunteers. The process is one that can be replicated in other organizations.*

# Building Commitment for the Volunteer Program: A Replicable Model

Terry Valeriote

## INTRODUCTION

There are many initiatives being taken throughout the United States and Canada to further excellence in volunteer management. The discipline is growing in importance, increased responsibility, and professionalism. At the Alberta Children's Hospital in Calgary, Alberta, a Statement of Commitment has been adopted which it is hoped will serve as one more contribution toward the development of excellence in volunteerism.

## BACKGROUND

Volunteers have been part of the Alberta Children's Hospital since its founding in 1922, but it was not until the early 1980s that a full-time volunteer resources department was formed. Its main focus was on the recruitment, training, placement, evaluation, and recognition of volunteers.

Experience revealed that a good volunteer program needed capable volunteers and efficient management support of them on a daily basis. Equally important, the volunteer program needed the support of the staff with whom the volunteers were regularly interacting.

A major initiative of the department focused on the staff/volunteer relationship, keeping staff up-to-date on the needs of volunteers, and showing them

how they could more effectively relate to the volunteer community.

It was always understood that a truly successful volunteer program required a strong, unified organizational commitment and that this commitment needed to be made visible. Susan Ellis, (1986) in her book, *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success*, stated: "After years of training and consulting with so many leaders of volunteers, I have become convinced that many of their concerns stem directly from a lack of substantive support from their agencies' top administrators." In concrete terms, she explains how the CEO and the board of directors should be directly and actively involved in promoting and making the volunteer program visible.

At our hospital, the administration had always been very supportive of the volunteer program, but more needed to be done. Why? Because there were inconsistencies. Not everyone had the same commitment to volunteers. While some staff felt that volunteers played an invaluable role in the hospital, others were quite indifferent. It was often said that volunteers were appreciated for what they did, but the lack of follow-up, such as a simple thank-you or even small tokens of appreciation, were sometimes lacking or given as afterthoughts. At times, volunteers

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were taken for granted and asked to perform menial tasks with no effort taken to know their names or their backgrounds. The volunteer program also was seen as an appendage to the mainstream activities at the hospital, not an integral component in assisting the hospital fulfill its mission. Volunteer resources staff and volunteers were sometimes not given the opportunity to provide input into decision-making in the hospital that could affect them. It was even a struggle to have the volunteer voice presented at new staff orientation sessions.

### A TURNING POINT

In 1997, the Volunteer Centre of Calgary hosted a workshop entitled "Training Busy Staff to Succeed With Volunteers." The facilitator, Betty Stallings from the United States, said that a successful volunteer program needed formal commitment and support from the top of the organization. Without genuine support from the administration, the volunteer program lacked credibility. The premise of the workshop provided the impetus to pursue stronger organizational support for the volunteer program at the Alberta Children's Hospital.

### THE PROCESS

The process of gaining meaningful support for the volunteer program throughout the organization involved both collaboration and compromise. Many staff members were enthusiastic about the initiative. In fact, one said that given the valuable contribution volunteers had been making over the years, it was time the organization made this formal commitment to them. The process is outlined here.

#### *Development of the Draft Statement*

The concept was first discussed as part of the annual planning day of the volunteer resources department. A draft of a Policy of Commitment was presented and discussed at the meeting. The manager and staff of the department were very sup-

portive of the concept. Over the next few months, the initial draft was refined by the volunteer resources department staff.

#### *Sharing the Draft with Hospital Opinion Leaders*

It was felt that the administration would not accept the concept unless there was support from all hospital staff. Consequently, it was decided to share the draft with several key people in the organization whose opinions were well respected. These individuals were selected from all areas of the hospital: inpatient, ambulatory, and human resources.

#### *Revision of the Draft*

The feedback received was thoughtfully presented and constructive. Two major changes were made. The term "supervision" was removed and replaced by the term "direct." Under the union contract, nurses who might be working with volunteers do not play a supervisory role.

Secondly, a clause specifying that staff directing volunteers would have this task formally included in their job descriptions was removed. With the many changes occurring in the regionalization of acute care facilities in Calgary, and with staff cutbacks, it was felt that the organization was not ready to implement this procedure. Rather than stall the process, or have the entire draft rejected, the clause was removed.

#### *Presentation of the Draft to Administration*

The two administrators of the hospital were invited to a luncheon meeting in the hospital hosted by the volunteer resources department. The purpose of the meeting was to update them about the volunteer program in general, the department's annual plan, and the draft Policy of Commitment. The agenda for the meeting was sent out beforehand along with the draft. After some discussion and clarification, the administrators agreed to sign it. There was only one change. Because of the administrative procedures that would have been necessary to have

something accepted as policy, the document was renamed a Statement of Commitment (see Appendix). The draft was subsequently presented to the two regional senior operating officers responsible for the hospital and its volunteer program and they too agreed to sign the document.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT

The statement serves to promote:

- A formal institutional/ community philosophy toward volunteers rather than the volunteer resources department's or an individual's personal philosophy.
- A clear, consistent, comprehensive and cohesive standard in the organization's approach to volunteers that should be nurtured and maintained.
- The acknowledgement that volunteers are integral to fulfilling the mission of the hospital.
- A strengthening of the staff/volunteer relationship.

From the perspective of the volunteer administrator, the Statement of Commitment assists in facilitating his job. If there is difficulty regarding the staff's approach or attitude toward volunteers, the statement gives the volunteer administrator a strong organizational position on which to stand. No longer is there a struggle to have the volunteer voice presented at new staff orientations. Volunteer resources staff are now included in these orientations and each new staff person receives both an explanation and a personal copy of the statement.

## INTRODUCTION OF THE STATEMENT

The Statement of Commitment was presented by the administrators of the hospital to the volunteer community of the Alberta Children's Hospital at the annual volunteer recognition evening in 1998. The statement on a bronze plaque was placed in the main foyer of the hospital for all visitors, guests, and staff to see. It was also displayed in the volunteer

lounge.

A memo, along with the Statement of Commitment, was sent by the administrators of the hospital to all paid staff clearly stating the hospital's commitment to its volunteers. In part, it said:

*It must be emphasized that the volunteers participating in over 28 areas of the hospital are not primarily volunteers of Volunteer Resources. They are the volunteers of the respective areas in which they are volunteering. As staff, we have a responsibility to our volunteers and we hope that this has been clearly identified in the "Statement of Commitment."*

Several departments have requested individual copies of the statement to frame and have placed them in their working areas.

## OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

The Chief Operating Officer for all of the acute care hospitals in Calgary received a copy of the statement and sent this memo to the administrators of the Alberta Children's Hospital:

*I wish to commend and congratulate you on the development of the statement of commitment to volunteers who work at the Alberta Children's Hospital. This fits in with the CRHA [Calgary Regional Health Authority] vision statement about working with communities for the development of excellence in health. The volunteers are members of our community and certainly give a very big commitment of hours to support us in the care of children and their families.*

*I like this Statement of Commitment and would certainly encourage all other sites to develop a similar statement. The volunteers provide a tremendous support and service to all of us in providing quality acute care services in our facilities. Thank you*

*for working with the volunteers at ACH and for getting staff to support the commitment to working with volunteers.*

All acute care sites in Calgary are now developing similar Statements of Commitment.

## CONCLUSION

Everything takes time and it's never too late to try something new. When a concept is right, it pays to have a plan and be persistently patient. Being aggressive or just simply dropping an idea that is not accepted are not productive choices. At the Alberta Children's Hospital patience paid off in increased commitment to the volunteer program throughout our organization and throughout the region.

The Statement of Commitment is the culmination of much that had gone on before and is also a new beginning. Much remains to be done to implement its goals throughout the entire organization, but the statement now provides a strong foundation to strengthen a valued volunteer program, forge meaningful volunteer/staff relationships and enhance the partnership between the organization and its volunteer community toward advancing its mission.

It is hoped that other volunteer resource departments who wish to further excellence in volunteerism by "taking it to the top" will benefit from the experience at the Alberta Children's Hospital.

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## REFERENCES

Ellis, S.J., *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success*. (Revised 1996). Philadelphia: Energize Associates.

## APPENDIX

### STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT TO THE VOLUNTEER

*The Alberta Children's Hospital recognizes the contribution of volunteers in assisting staff fulfill the mission of the hospital.*

*Towards the continued pursuit of excellence in volunteerism and in support of volunteers as valued members of the ACH team, the hospital's administration makes the following commitment to the volunteer community at ACH.*

- 1. The hospital will support a Volunteer Resources Department providing appropriate staffing to manage the volunteer program.*
- 2. Hospital staff, both professional and support, who are directing volunteers will be oriented to the needs of volunteers. In specific terms, all new staff, as part of their orientation, will receive instruction from Volunteer Resources. All staff working with volunteers will receive ongoing education from Volunteer Resources as required.*
- 3. Hospital staff will play a role in the orientation, directing, evaluation and recognition of volunteers working in their areas.*
- 4. Staff will facilitate a positive environment for volunteers working in their areas. This will involve welcoming them, assisting them, mentoring them when necessary and thanking them regularly for their contribution.*
- 5. Staff working with volunteers will be recognized for this contribution.*

Signed in March 1998 by the Administrative Leaders of the Alberta Children's Hospital and the Regional Senior Operating Officers responsible for the hospital and its volunteer program.