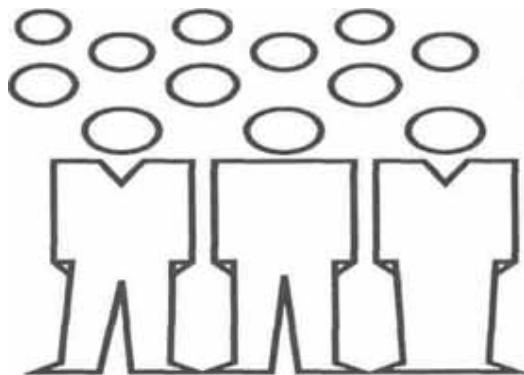




# Volunteer Coordination

## Strategies for Success

by Mark J. Hurley



Since the mid-1980s, many park and forest preserve districts have improved or created their volunteer program. These organizations have discovered that, if run properly, a volunteer program is a cost-effective way to enhance services without increasing spending. The result is that scores of volunteers are finding themselves on the front lines greeting visitors, answering questions and leading programs.

If this is the case with your organization, it's vital that your volunteers are not only congenial and receptive, but also familiar with the organization's goals and mission. If asked, they should be able to convey accurate information to your clientele. In many instances, the first personal contact a visitor may have is with your volunteers. Through proper volunteer coordination you can make such experiences positive for visitors, volunteers and your agency.

Starting a volunteer program can be a rewarding and exciting experience. First and foremost, the volunteer program demands complete attention from its coordinator. Today, too many volunteer coordinators are finding themselves spread too thin, attempting to run a program while accomplishing other important responsibilities. Successful coordinators should be patient individuals and, most importantly, receptive to volunteers' needs. This article will provide you with strategies for successfully recruiting and coordinating volunteers.

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### SIX Strategies for SUCCESSFUL Volunteer Programs

#### I. Determine the Volunteer Needs of Your Staff

Meet with co-workers and discuss their needs. Determine whether or not these needs can be translated into clearly defined, ongoing jobs for volunteers. Next, make sure that your co-workers understand their own tasks, so that they know the roles of the volunteers.

#### II. Create Volunteer Jobs

When creating volunteer jobs, ask yourself the following three questions:

Question #1: *Is the job really needed by the organization as an ongoing position?*

It's important that each volunteer position meets the agency's needs. For example, if an organization has a volunteer who greets the public, he or she must be able to *sell* the organization.

Volunteer positions should last at least a year. This will give a volunteer ample time to experience the position and determine if it's right for them. The full year will give the coordinator time to observe the volunteer at work. If the position is not a permanent one, inform the volunteer of this during the interview process.

Question #2: *Can you define specific job duties and responsibilities?*

Each volunteer position should include not only duties and responsibilities, but also qualifications and time commitments. These criteria enable your volunteers to assess the quality of their work.

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Following an interview with the potential volunteer, provide them with an orientation about the organization and specific job training. Go over the job description with them during the training session.

Question #3: *Does the volunteer job and agency climate give the volunteer a sense of satisfaction and convey a feeling of belonging?*

During a volunteer orientation, emphasize the importance of volunteers to your organization, what other volunteers are doing for the agency, and how their position will benefit the organization.

### **III. Recruit Volunteers**

Now it's time to look for volunteers! There are many recruitment methods. Begin by looking at volunteer job descriptions; this will help you get started. With a co-worker, brainstorm potential sources of volunteers. Match recruitment techniques to fit these different sources. For example, if you are looking for youth volunteers to help take care of captive reptiles, schedule an interactive reptile program with a local school's science club. You'll be surprised with the interest generated.

Another means of recruitment is the volunteer column in a local newspaper. Or you can write a press release outlining the volunteer help needed by the agency. Try hanging posters in libraries, schools and contact volunteer placement organizations in the community. These are proven techniques for recruiting volunteers, but nothing works as well as word-of-mouth recruitment by current volunteers or co-workers.

### **IV. Interview and Place Volunteers**

When planning an interview with a potential volunteer be sure that there is a clear understanding of the time and place. Arrange for a private and convenient place for the interview.

In the interview, begin by introducing yourself and your position within the organization. Clarify the purpose of the interview and your expectations for the volunteer's position. Use *open* questions rather than *closed* questions during the interview. Examples of open questions are "Why are you interested in this position?" or "How does this volunteer position fit in with your present life situation?" Open questioning gets you more complete answers, creates small talk and helps the coordinator to get to know the volunteer.

Through the course of the interview, watch for nonverbal cues (body posture and movement, tone of voice, etc.). *Listen* to what they have to say, giving your complete attention. Create a good dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee. This will ensure a sense of whether the volunteer and the job are a good match.

### **V. Supervise the Volunteers**

Give your volunteers guidance and goals. Now is the time to establish a good working relationship. The volunteer coordinator should be available to answer questions and address their concerns. Many things are foreign to new volunteers, so remember to be patient.

Coordinators should schedule a coaching session with new volunteers after they have been with the organization for six months. This interview is a good opportunity for the volunteer to get questions answered. At this time, determine whether the volunteer position has met both the agency's and volunteer's expectations. If things are going well, the interview will re-enforce the bond between the coordinator and the volunteer. If things aren't working out, use this time to address the problem. If things can't be resolved, offer the volunteer an alternate position within the organization.

If there is a problem with the volunteer, chances are that he or she is not enjoying the volunteer job. The position may becoming more of a "chore" than a rewarding experience. If the coordinator feels that there may be a problem, be upfront with the volunteer. They'll appreciate it!

## VI. Reward Your Volunteers

Rewarding volunteers is an ongoing process. The entire staff should make the volunteer feel welcome. It is very important to be supportive and encouraging and to allow volunteers to grow with the organization.

There are also many tangible things a volunteer coordinator can do to recognize the volunteers' efforts. Scheduling quarterly meetings or picnics along with a guest speaker are usually well received. Encourage department directors, commissioners and other staff members to attend the volunteer dinners.

Once a year, organize a volunteer recognition dinner. Think about presenting each volunteer in attendance with a gift and thank you card. Books make excellent gifts and quantities can be purchased at a discount. Some additional recognition ideas include pins, birthday cards and nominations for volunteer awards. You also can schedule field trips to museums or sporting events. Most importantly, remember to smile and say *thank you* every day!

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Whether an agency is thinking about "hiring" one volunteer or several, the volunteer coordinator must be sure that staff members support the idea. Agencies with working volunteers will find it to be a very rewarding experience if the six strategies for success are used. Remember, volunteers bring humor, varied personalities and many experiences to the organization, making the workplace more interesting for everyone.

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