

Creating a Statewide Virtual Network

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As we work to build credibility, and strengthen our voice as professional managers of volunteers, there is increasing interest in creating statewide professional associations that share resources and encourage professional growth and development.

Have you ever attended training in your city, and found that it just didn't meet your needs? Wouldn't it be great if you knew of another session that is more focused to your specific needs that you could attend at member discount? Wouldn't you like to collaborate with other colleagues who are working under the same governing laws, to strengthen volunteer administration in your state? But how do you do that without driving all over the state, and adding to an ever increasing list of tasks "to do"?

The Ohio Network of Volunteer Administrations (ONVA) was an idea proposed by two leaders in our field, Mary Merrill, President of Merrill Associates and R. Dale Safrit, Ed.D., currently Associate Professor & Extension Specialist, Department of 4-H Youth Development, North Carolina State University. Noticing strong areas of representation in volunteer administration in the larger cities, yet under-representation in rural areas, their idea was to nurture professionals by creating an online forum to exchange ideas and collaborate on training throughout the state of Ohio. To do this, however, they needed help.

They created an outline of their idea and approached two existing statewide entities in volunteerism asking for support, and to expand the contacts of these organizations with their virtual plan. They were turned down. In a unique move, Merrill and Safrit approached chairpersons of local volunteer administrator networks from around the state and asked for a meeting in Columbus to pitch the idea. Six representatives from Tole-

do, Cleveland, Ravenna, Columbus, Cincinnati, and Dayton representing close to 700 members listened excitedly to the new vision of support and resources for the state. They also listened with apprehension. While it would be wonderful to create a contemporary, statewide, all-member, virtual organization comprised of the existing networks, there was apprehension about the work to be done. There was a need to build on the strengths of the metropolitan areas and their networks, while developing strategies for assisting more rural areas in creating their own local networks.

The representatives took the information back to their networks and asked for feedback. Of the six networks represented at that first meeting all responded positively. Representatives from these networks formed a Steering Committee, and developed bylaws and a mission statement for ONVA. ONVA's founding mission was to advocate and promote a culture that values and promotes volunteerism by developing the skills, knowledge, and aspirations of its professionals. It was to be an organization of professional networks with services provided through a Web site. Membership was gained through joining the local networks. It would act as a conduit for its professionals by collecting the voices of the membership and sharing them with the international Association of Volunteer Administration, from which it sought membership as an affiliate, as well as with the state legislature on relevant volunteerism issues.

Once incorporation was completed, the committee began work on benefits, expansion of representation, marketing and a financial plan. Face-to-face meetings were kept to a minimum, as a major purpose for forming ONVA was to promote the use of technology to better connect members within Ohio.

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Online chat sessions were a focused forum to deliberate, and they also offered an easy way to keep notes. Conference calls reduced the need for face-to-face meetings, and a listserv was established on YahooGroups to facilitate communication and storage of paperwork. Using Yahoo in this manner allowed the Steering Committee to see the benefits of the virtual arena, as well as the drawbacks, and they used this in creating a vision of what the ONVA Web site would look like.

The goal to have a self-sustaining virtual member organization meant a dues schedule was needed based on the number of members per organization. In exchange for these fees, member networks would have their own Web site linked off the main ONVA site, as well as the ability to see the training schedules offered by other member networks, network newsletters, bulletin boards, professional resources, legislative contacts, listings of networks and resources around the state, resources on how to start a network, and trainer recommendations. A benefit of membership in ONVA was the ability to attend any network's training at a member discount.

Once the schedule was finalized, and charter memberships established, an administrator was sought. The Ohio Association of Non-profit Organizations (OANO) was approached for Web site and office management skills due to their strong ties to non-profit executives, established legislative contacts and network within the state. After much work with and stated support from the executive director of OANO, the relationship was not sustained. The Steering Committee dwindled to five members after two-years of work, and now faced the challenge of continuing on in its work, or focusing again on their local concerns. From the beginning, the members of the Steering Committee recognized that individual work requirements limited their ability to devote ongoing time to run a statewide organization. Though face-to-face time was kept to a minimum through online meetings, there was an increasing need for someone to provide continuity and follow up. After much soul searching, the committee decided to contract with a part time webmaster and office administrator.

Before recruiting new networks as members, a basic working template of membership benefits was created. Nonprofitspace.org, which hosts other statewide networks of volunteer administrations, worked to create ONVA's vision—the Web site. As the Steering Committee continued to work on incorporation and tackled the daunting task of applying for 501(c)(3) status through the IRS, membership in the Steering Committee dropped as job setbacks and other life factors occurred. Yet membership in ONVA increased.

ONVA encountered a major obstacle when it was denied 501(c)(3) status by the IRS. Because the mission was focused heavily upon the education and development of professional volunteer managers, the IRS considered the organization a membership association similar to a trade association. Tax status as a trade association was viewed as a major setback because it would seriously limit the ability of ONVA to apply for and receive grant funding. While appealing this IRS ruling, ONVA was approached by VOLUNTEER OHIO (VO) to consider a formal merger of the two organizations.

VO was formed in 1981 to increase the quality and quantity of volunteer services in the state of Ohio. VO had played a major role in promoting volunteerism in the 1980s and early 1990s and had founded Ohio's statewide conference on volunteerism. In 1992 VO brought together a diverse group of statewide service and volunteer organizations (Governor's Community Service Council, Campus Compact, Ohio Department of Education, Ohio Cooperative Extension, etc.) to develop a new collaborative statewide conference named Forging New Links. VO hired a conference planner to manage the conference and served as fiscal agent until 1998. VO languished in the late 1990s as other statewide organizations, such as the Governor's Community Service Council and the Statewide Association of Volunteer Centers grew and prospered.

In July of 2003 ONVA and VO formally merged. The new mission for VONVA is to serve as a catalyst to unify and strengthen volunteer efforts providing statewide leadership

in the areas of professional development, legislative advocacy and collaborative endeavors. The merger gives VONVA access to 501(c)(3) status, revitalizes VO's historical state network and places VONVA in position to assist with and be a major part of the annual statewide conference, thus giving managers of volunteers a great voice in conference planning. VO has annually sponsored a statewide awards program to honor excellence in volunteer administrator leadership. VONVA hopes to continue this tradition.

VONVA now boasts four active paying member networks: Portage County Volunteer Administrator Network (VAN), Columbus VAN, Cincinnati Association of Volunteer Administrators (CAVA), and DOVIA Akron. VONVA, and its member organizations are an affiliate AVA, and are helping to share skills and information with each other through the Web site: www.vonva.org. The Web site is still viewed as the major benefit of membership, as it continues to develop as a statewide hub for information and resources.

While there is much growth to occur, there has been much progress made and much for which to be proud. The Steering Committee of VONVA worked for years to establish a site, specifically geared towards volunteer administrators within Ohio, and that dream continues to evolve. The steadfast leadership and unwavering determination of a few people to promote volunteer administration has been key to overcoming the many obstacles encountered. A launch pad now exists from which professionals can begin their quest for knowledge, and collegiality with peers regionally and internationally.

POSTSCRIPT

Since this article was first written, VONVA has encountered dwindling interest and involvement from local member networks. As the leadership at the local level changes from year to year, it is difficult to sustain an ongoing

link between the local groups and the statewide planning leaders. New local presidents have often not understood or embraced the VONVA vision. Increasingly there are questions of "What's in this for me?", as though the concept of "giving to receive" has completely escaped the managers of volunteer resources realm of understanding.

Though VONVA leadership has tried to share the importance of a collective presence and voice for the profession, VONVA finds itself being challenged for relevancy at the local level. Just as local networks often do not see the connection to AVA, they also do not see the immediate benefit of connection at the state level. Perhaps the leaders of VONVA have not done enough to build support and sustain engagement at the local level? Perhaps the immense pressures of life and work make it too hard for any all-volunteer group to prosper and flourish in contemporary society? Perhaps membership organizations, benefiting and actively sustained by members, are no longer seen as a viable tool for connection and movement? Perhaps there is no longer an interest in collective action (as suggested by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone*), and a growing interest in self-interest?

The founders of VONVA had hoped to call upon the tools of our modern age—technology—to build new horizontal links between professions in Ohio. A dedicated group of visionaries built a good foundation, but now find themselves pondering an old saying: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." The future of VONVA is in the hands of its members, as leaders alone cannot sustain a membership organization.