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Mobile Volunteers -"Tis the Season"

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Here in the northern hemisphere, June is the month that summer starts and a sizeable percentage of the population goes on the move. University students return to their parents' homes or go off to summer jobs or adventures; people who live in already-hot places find people to visit and things to do up north where it's a bit cooler, and "snow birds" who live in the north but winter in the south return to the nest. And everyone else considers taking a vacation to someplace. (For readers in the southern hemisphere, just change the month to reflect your seasons.)

Every volunteer program deals to some degree with seasonal leaves of absence, whether for summer or winter. Your organization may, in fact, run special activities for your clients or public and need more volunteers for several months to run summer camps/schools or other June-to-August programs. If you're located in a resort area, the volume of your work may simply increase – or decrease, if your resort is popular in the opposite season. These are facts of life, so what can we do about it?

Keep Connected

In the past, we simply wished vacationing volunteers a good time and hoped they'd return to us in a few months. That doesn't necessarily have to be your only choice. Some volunteers may be flattered and intrigued by the idea that you'd like them to stay involved, even at a distance. (Other volunteers really, truly want to get away for a break, and that's ok, too!)

Virtual Volunteering

If the person is going to have access to a computer and the Internet while away, consider a virtual assignment. Can the volunteer do anything like this at a distance:

- Research almost anything online for you?
- Be a "keyboard pal" with a homebound client who also has a computer and would welcome the exchanges?

- Edit or proofread documents or Web pages?
- Write anything for you?

For volunteers who aren't on a sightseeing trip but have simply relocated to a cooler (warmer) location for a while, having something useful to do – and staying connected with you – may be very appealing.

Ambassadors

You can enlist all traveling volunteers to be your scouts and even your ambassadors. Even on a casual basis, it might be fun for volunteers to keep an eye out for programs similar to yours and/or involving volunteers in interesting ways. This can be as simple as clipping local newspaper items or picking up brochures. Or it can be more direct, if a volunteer has the gumption to speak to leaders of the discovered project. In fact, you might consider giving all traveling volunteers a few brochures about your agency to leave with others, and your business card to connect you to other volunteer program coordinators. Ask for a full report when the volunteers come back home.

You and the vacationing volunteer can do research in advance and arrange appointments with organizations of greatest interest to you in the cities to be visited. Given our field's friendliness, it's clear that any of us would be delighted to spend some time with a representative of another program, especially if the approach is "we found out about your interesting work and would love to learn more." The volunteer may end up with a fascinating behind-the-scenes tour and, if you prepare creatively for the visit, you may well gain useful solutions to long-standing questions.

Note that this sort of planned visit might be also suggested to any volunteer who travels even briefly or regularly on business. See whether referring to it as "being an ambassador" or "engaging in industrial espionage" is more appealing!

Collaborate with Our Counterparts

Let's not be greedy. Keeping mobile volunteers active for our organization is only one approach. The other is sharing the wealth. Why not consciously help volunteers who will be somewhere else for a few months to connect to a counterpart organization in the area to which they are going? After all, they are trained and ready to serve. Wouldn't a sister agency love to have them for a while?

To do this well requires some advance planning to find a counterpart organization, make contact on behalf of (with) the volunteer, and perhaps develop a letter of introduction and record of service. This idea works both ways, of course. Might you find an assignment for a seasonal volunteer trained somewhere else?

If you happen to be part of a national or international organization – use it! Refer mobile volunteers to your affiliates in the other geographic areas. In fact, suggest that your national Web site develop a system for assisting such exchanges, like a "seeking summer assignment" electronic notice board.

One important thing is to accept the volunteer's credentials! Do not make short-term, seasonal volunteers go through *your* entire training program again. Orientation, yes. Lengthy classroom sessions, no. You can test their skills, buddy them up at first, and other trial runs, but don't waste their time. Let's respect each other's volunteer training efforts.

Finding counterpart volunteer program managers is a great way to use our national professional associations. It's easiest with the setting-specific societies, such as those focused on health-care volunteering, or justice-related service, or anything else, but a generic organization such as the Association for Volunteer Administration or the International Association for Volunteer Effort can also be effective. At a minimum, it should be possible to find someone in the volunteer's destination city to make recommendations for where that volunteer might try to serve.

It's also relevant to note that we can use this same approach if experienced volunteers retire, get transferred, or simply move. We may be sad to lose them, but can we help connect them to volunteer opportunities in their new location? Wouldn't this be the best farewell we could arrange?

Do you encourage vacationing volunteers to stay involved in some way? How?

Do you already utilize seasonal volunteers? How do they find you?

What other ideas does this spark for you?

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Submitted on 8 June 2005 by Jill L. McMahon, Catholic Social Services, Volunteer Coordinator, Hastings, Nebraska USA

I've learned to "go with the flow" and schedule projects around sports camps and summer activities in our local area. This is how we manage our 200 plus student volunteers. The volunteers who "summer in cooler" climates or "winter in warmer" climates are really good about letting us know the time of their return. I mark that date on my calendar and remember to call them a few days after that return date to adjust schedules. The organization I work with is really lucky to have that level dedication of our volunteers.

Submitted on 1 June 2005 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA

Do you encourage vacationing volunteers to stay involved in some way? How?

Although our agency donates handmade blankets year round; summer is a lighter time for requests. We stay in touch with dedicated volunteers by offering free, one day blanket making workshops (in an air conditioned space), by inviting volunteers to various trade shows (around the state); and by communicating via email and newsletter. On the grander side is what our volunteers continue to do to keep in touch with us. They share agency newsletters, brochures and blanket patterns with family and friends over the summer (& holiday season). In the Fall, we experience a higher than normal rate of donations that arrive from all over the country as a direct result of volunteers sharing their first hand experience.

Do you already utilize seasonal volunteers? How do they find you?

Truly, seasonal volunteers arrive year round. College students are a great example. Families vacationing to the Jersey shore another. We advertise on dozens of volunteer-based sites but have expanded to include family-friendly publications, Web sites, area radio stations, local libraries and, just this year, took the summer "reading list" to a volunteer level. We initiated a volunteer opportunity list attached to the summer reading list for schools we work with during the year. The list contained contact information on 40 nonprofits, including our own, and was an easy tool to generate. With a few strong marketing tools, word of mouth can take care of the rest.

What other ideas does this spark for you?

In order for seasonal volunteering to work, agencies must be diligent about training and staffing good communicators. I often hear from volunteers that it was refreshing to get a response quickly. No matter how wonderful the recruitment technique, reliable communication will save any agency from losing a great volunteer. Today's seasonal volunteer can be tomorrow's Board Member! It's crucial to hold off implementing seasonal recruitment programs if you don't have the trained people in place to handle these unique calls.

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