

ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

1. PLANNING

Planning is the key to success in all administrative responsibilities, and volunteer management is no exception. But planning for volunteers includes several unique actions, including the need to determine:

- exactly why volunteers are wanted;
- exactly what volunteers are expected to do;
- what resources will be necessary to support volunteers, including requirements for space, equipment, furniture and supplies;
- who will provide training and ongoing supervision of volunteers—and what preparation these key people will need;
- how many hours of work it will take to accomplish the task (not how many people).

2. VOLUNTEER JOB DESCRIPTIONS

If an assignment cannot be described in writing, it probably isn't a job. To assure effective utilization of volunteers, it is necessary to define the work to be done with as many specifics as possible. Volunteer job descriptions should, at a minimum, define: a title for the position; the purpose/rationale of the assignment; the scope of the work to be done (giving both the potentials and limits of the job); training and supervision plan; and timeframes necessary.

3. RECRUITMENT/PUBLIC RELATIONS

"Public relations" is what is necessary to make an organization visible to the public. If people do not know what a program is or does, they are hardly likely to volunteer to join it. "Recruitment" is the process of encouraging people to give their time and energy to the organization. The best recruitment is targeted to the audiences most likely to have the skills and interests to match the available volunteer job descriptions.

4. SCREENING AND SELECTION

Many supervision and management problems can be prevented by effective initial interviewing of prospective volunteers. Also, the process of matching a new volunteer with the most appropriate assignment is key to assure ongoing motivation. The screening and selection period is the time to discuss expectations on both sides and to begin to set standards.

5. ORIENTATION

Orientation is the overview of the total organization necessary for every volunteer, regardless of specific assignment. It places the work into context and allows for consistent introduction of policies, procedures, rights and responsibilities.

6. TRAINING

Training is individualized and should vary with the demands of each specific job description and the background each volunteer brings to the organization. There is the need for initial, start-up training, plus the need for ongoing, in-service training. Much "training" is really the giving of good instructions, and often is integrated into the overall supervision plan.

7. SUPERVISION

As with salaried staff, volunteer staff need support from those in a position to see the total picture and who know what work needs to be done. For volunteers, however, a key aspect of supervision is access to someone in charge during the time the volunteer is on duty.

8. RECOGNITION

Recognition is one way to "pay" volunteers for their efforts, but it has many nuances. If there are an annual dinner and certificates, but no daily support, recognition can speak with "forked tongue." While formalized thank you events are important, informal recognition is more important. This includes everything from simple courtesy to including volunteers in staff meetings and decision-making. It is also part of recognition to offer constructive criticism, since such training implies a belief that the volunteer can do even better work.

9. COORDINATION

By definition, volunteers are part-time staff. A volunteer program can have people who work schedules ranging from one afternoon a week to four days a week; mornings and evenings; alternate Sundays; February off to go to Florida; July off to go camping—etc.! Add to this the diversity of the people who volunteer (all ages, backgrounds, physical conditions) and you end up with an amazing logistical challenge. A volunteer program must have a leader and that leader must be able to coordinate all the details of scheduling and assigning.

10. RECORDKEEPING AND REPORTING

If volunteers are important to the work of an organization, then it is important to know what volunteers are doing. Such documentation assists in recruitment, training, recognition, and fundraising (volunteer hours can be applied to in-kind match). For purposes of insurance and to back up the income tax deduction claims of volunteers, recordkeeping is also necessary. Once records are kept, they are of little meaning if they are not reported. Reports of cumulative achievements of volunteers should be shared routinely with volunteers themselves, as well as with administration or funding sources.

11. EVALUATION

It is a sin to waste the time of a volunteer. Therefore it is imperative that volunteer programs regularly evaluate the impact of services performed and whether those services are still necessary. Along with program evaluation, it is helpful to conduct individual performance review with volunteers, so as to maintain motivation and allow for personal growth.

12. VOLUNTEER/SALARIED STAFF RELATIONS

The interrelationship of volunteers and paid staff is the single biggest danger area, unless steps are taken early to encourage teamwork. There are numerous reasons why salaried staff is threatened by volunteers and also why volunteers are sometimes resistant to working with paid staff. This is a human relations issue with no easy answers, but it should be remembered that almost no professional/academic training program prepares salaried staff to work with volunteers. So some staff development on this topic is critical. It is also helpful to encourage paid staff to discuss their own, personal volunteer work outside of the organization, to break down the barriers of "us" and "them."

13. VOLUNTEER INPUT

Too many organizations want help, not input. Volunteers are in a position to observe the organization. They bring their hearts and hands, but also their brains and mouths. One benefit of having volunteers is that they can take more risks in criticizing or speaking out (they can also be effective advocates when they see things going well). But there must be a channel for this input or volunteers will either cause friction or leave. Also, having a clear way for volunteers to voice opinions develops their ownership of the volunteer program.