



Acting on Principle

Goals and Guidelines

for Volunteer Development in the YMCA Movement

- 1. Volunteers are essential to the YMCA.**
- 2. YMCA volunteers contribute more than meets the eye.**
- 3. To attract and keep volunteers, the YMCA abides by a compelling vision of nurturing kids, supporting families, and strengthening communities.**
- 4. Volunteerism is a YMCA program.**
- 5. In the Y, good volunteer development is like good staff development, and just as important.**
- 6. People at all levels of the YMCA are committed to volunteer development.**
- 7. The YMCA embraces people of all kinds and removes barriers to their volunteering.**
- 8. To work with volunteers, the YMCA is willing to bear some costs.**
- 9. The YMCA tracks the value of volunteer service.**
- 10. Volunteers are essential to a democratic society.**

1. Volunteers are essential to the YMCA.

“YMCAs are groups of people gathered together to serve the needs of all.”¹ Unfortunately, this definition was obscured in the 1970s and 1980s, when the YMCA grew more and more to be characterized as a department store of social services. YMCA leaders grew to rely on part-time staff members, rather than volunteers, for help in delivering programs. “The voluntary associational character of the Y—of citizens coming together to creatively define and respond to problems—was replaced by the professionalization of staff roles as service agency providers.”² The YMCA became a place to buy services, rather than an association to belong to.

Volunteers, by their very nature, help root the YMCA to its identity as an association of people motivated by an ethic of service. Indeed, the Y’s founder in 1844 was a volunteer. George Williams saw a community need and created the Y to help fill that need. To revive its associational character, the YMCA must involve all types of volunteers. A YMCA volunteer is defined as anyone who willingly gives time to help the YMCA accomplish its mission without getting paid by the Y.

The types of YMCA volunteers include:

- **Policy volunteers:** The people who serve on Y boards and committees, and those who act as trustees.
- **Program volunteers:** Those who have direct contact with Y members and people in the community. They help the Y deliver programs and services. They may also help with membership.
- **Fundraising volunteers:** Those responsible for the leadership and legwork that goes into successful fundraising campaigns and special events.
- **Managerial volunteers:** Those who act as consultants for the Y, lending a special skill or talent in accounting, architecture, public relations, and so on.
- **Support volunteers:** The people who help out in the office, in the locker room, in the facility, and on the grounds.

All YMCAs work with policy-making volunteers, but not necessarily with program volunteers. When the YMCA involves all types of volunteers, it creates a fundamentally different dynamic: By recruiting health and fitness members to serve as mentors to kids at risk; by involving more parents in the Y’s child care programs; or by encouraging community residents to

use the Y’s resources to tackle an urgent problem; the YMCA transforms people who buy Y services into people who truly belong to the association and help it create and deliver programs that meet community needs.

2. YMCA volunteers contribute more than meets the eye.

“Volunteers do far more than merely accomplish specific duties.”³ They can be partners with the YMCA staff in many other respects.

Experience shows that YMCA volunteers:

- Are the Y’s best word-of-mouth promoters.
- Are particularly well received as fundraisers.
- Are good sources of information on what the community thinks about the YMCA.
- Can free up a staff member’s time so that he or she can take on new challenges or responsibilities, such as starting a new program.
- Can help staff members grow personally and professionally.
- Have connections and resources that the staff may not have.
- Have skills and abilities that the staff may not have.
- Give more money to charities than people who don’t volunteer.
- Bring enthusiasm and passion to the association.
- Provide continuity and memory in times of high employee turnover.
- Personify the idea that the YMCA is an association of people working together to solve problems, meet needs, and enrich lives.
- Are innovators and risk-takers—the true change agents in the YMCA and the community.

3. To attract volunteers, the YMCA abides by a compelling vision of nurturing kids, supporting families, and strengthening communities.

To attract volunteers, the Y must use this vision as a rallying cry. Research shows that people want to volunteer for a cause, not for an organization.⁴ People don’t volunteer because they want to help the Y, they volunteer because they want to make a difference.

Across the country, the Y serves 14 million people a year, promoting the healthy development of children, building positive behavior in teens, giving families the support they need to succeed, and making communities healthier and safer places to live. As one YMCA leader wrote:

In this work we see much to celebrate, but we also see growing cause for alarm. On many fronts, America is losing ground.

Too many of our children reach adulthood unprepared to be productive workers, effective parents, or responsible citizens. Too many of our families are stressed to the breaking point. And too many of our communities are being badly weakened by economic, social, and racial tensions. As a nation, we face a stark choice; reverse these trends or accept a future of diminished productivity, declining opportunity, and rising social unrest.⁵

In response to the needs of communities today, the National Board of YMCAs adopted a vision statement for the 1990s. It is to "be the country's leader in prevention and development programs for children and families, and a leader in community development, bringing community resources to bear on social problems."⁶

This vision is based on the Y's historic mission. In modern and abbreviated terms, the mission is "to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy body, mind, and spirit, for all."⁷

The YMCA will not remain relevant and vital, nor will it attract the best volunteers, unless it abides by its vision and shows volunteers how they can work with the Y to achieve that vision.

4. Volunteerism is a YMCA program.

Volunteering benefits the volunteer as much as the community and the YMCA. It can be one of the YMCA's best leadership programs. Peter Drucker, a leading business management consultant, believes that people can acquire more leadership skills as volunteers than they can as paid employees in a business.⁸ On top of leadership, volunteering can help people grow in many other ways that are consistent with the YMCA mission of building body, mind, and spirit. When the YMCA regards volunteerism as a program, rather than as a source of inexpensive labor, it is driven to offer volunteers a meaningful job that:

- **Responds to an important need in the community.** It should help strengthen kids, families, or the community.

- **Responds to an important need of the YMCA.** The job should be in keeping with the Y's mission and vision.

- **Responds to a need of the volunteer.** A volunteer job should give each volunteer a sense of community and common purpose. It should help the volunteer grow personally, professionally, or both. It may be a chance to make friends. It should always be fun. Like members and program participants, YMCA volunteers should have the opportunity to accomplish one or more of the goals stated in the national YMCA constitution.⁹ In modern and abbreviated terms, these are:

Self-esteem: To build self-confidence and an appreciation of one's own worth.

Values: To develop moral and ethical behavior based on Christian principles.

Family and Community: To become responsible family members and community citizens.

Health: To understand that well-being means a healthy body, mind, and spirit.

Diversity: To recognize that everyone is a child of God worthy of respect.

World: To acquire a sense of world-mindedness and to work for international understanding.

Leadership: To create capacities for leadership.

Environment: To revere nature and the fullness of God's bounty.

With these goals in mind, YMCA leaders will naturally avoid wording such as "using" or "utilizing" volunteers, talking instead about "developing," "involving," or "working with" volunteers. More important, they will create policies and practices that support volunteerism as a program.

5. In the Y, good volunteer development is like good staff development, and just as important.

It's paradoxical but true. Volunteerism is a program wherein volunteers can achieve the same goals the Y has for its members and program participants. However, the way the YMCA develops volunteers should parallel the best practices for developing paid employees. In working with volunteers, a YMCA should:

• **Recruit the right person for the right position,** rather than recruiting at random.¹⁰ Targeted recruitment, interviewing, and careful placement are essential for all types of volunteers. Y leaders say one of the best ways to recruit is to “just ask.” Recruitment messages should spell out the need to be met, how the volunteer can meet the need, and how the volunteer will benefit from it or enjoy it.¹¹

• **Involve the volunteer immediately.** When people indicate an interest in volunteering, it's important to contact them quickly to set up a time for a talk or an interview. Once recruited and placed, volunteers should be given a specific assignment that they can act on immediately. The first assignment may be to participate in training or orientation. Or, it may be a specific task related to the position. Either way, it's important that volunteers get the chance to become involved right away.

• **Supervise volunteers and let them know how they're doing.** The kind of supervision depends on the type of volunteer, the individual volunteer, and the nature of the position. All volunteers deserve clear communication. Many need coaching and counseling.

Program volunteers (the people who help deliver programs) and support volunteers (the people who help in the office and around the facility) should be supervised like any paid employee who performs those assignments. This includes a periodic review to discuss how the job is going. The review is a chance to renegotiate the job description and to set new goals and objectives. It may also be the time to reassign, retire, dismiss, or promote the volunteer.

Managerial volunteers (those who consult in architecture, public relations, and so on) normally report to the executive director or another top paid staff person. Fundraising volunteers (those who work in campaigns and special events) usually report to another volunteer, the campaign chair or a team leader. Because their jobs are usually not long-term assignments, they usually don't receive a formal review.

Policy volunteers have the ultimate authority in governing the YMCA. They set policy and hire and fire the executive director. The board chairperson supervises the executive director. While policy volunteers do not have a supervisor per se, they are accountable to the board as a whole, to the association, and to the community at large. It's the responsibility of the board chair and the committee chairs to communicate with policy volunteers to see that goals are

reached. Staff members must work as partners with policy volunteers. They should provide them with good information and good support so that the volunteers can make effective and efficient decisions.

It's important to be clear about who supervises whom when a policy volunteer wears more than one hat. When a board member serves as a volunteer camp counselor, his or her supervisor is the camp director.

• **Develop position descriptions** that spell out the desired outcome of the position, as well as major responsibilities, qualifications, time commitment, supervision, and benefits. There may be some instances, such as a one-time assignment, where a formal position description is not required. However, it's always important to make sure the volunteer understands his or her responsibilities.

• **Allow each position description to be a fluid one that can be negotiated regularly** by the volunteer and his or her supervisor. The description should match the YMCA's and the department's goals and objectives, as well as the volunteer's skills, interests, goals, and availability. Like paid staff members, volunteers should have “flexibility and discretion in performing their tasks in their own individual style.”¹² All assignments should give volunteers a sense of responsibility and ownership. They must also be realistic.

• **Provide volunteers with a good orientation and a continual flow of information.** The orientation should include basics on the YMCA's history, culture, structure, policies and procedures, and specifics of the position. Volunteers must also be kept informed constantly about what's happening in their department and in the association as a whole.

• **Give volunteers the opportunity for regular training, both inside and outside the Y.** Opportunities might include in-house training sessions, Cluster and Field meetings, Program Schools, Principles and Practices sessions, Key Leaders conferences, and seminars offered at colleges, universities, and by other nonprofits. It's one of the best benefits the Y can offer.

• **Recognize and reward volunteers on an ongoing basis, formally and informally.** “Recognition is an attitude rather than an annual meeting.”¹³ It means listening to volunteers and expressing appreciation for them often. One of the best rewards is a volunteer career path. Volunteers should be offered the chance to move up and around the association, locally, regionally, and nationally. This keeps things

fresh and helps avoid burnout. Recognition events and gifts should be meaningful and useful. Some volunteers may appreciate an umbrella with the Y logo more than a plaque.¹⁴

- **Avoid language that implies that volunteers are amateurs**, such as “professionals and volunteers.” Instead, YMCA leaders should use terms such as “staff members and volunteers.” In cases where there are both paid employees and volunteers performing the same kinds of jobs, Y leaders might consider the terms “the volunteer staff and the paid staff,” or better yet, make no distinction at all and use the term “the staff.” Out of respect for volunteers, a Y director once suggested that the volunteer always be put first when speaking or writing: “volunteers and staff members.”

- **Integrate volunteers into the YMCA’s culture.** Research shows that volunteerism is strongest in organizations that seek to identify and diminish the boundaries and barriers between volunteers and paid staff members.¹⁵ Volunteers should be treated as part of the YMCA family. They should be included in meetings, social events and even fun, informal rituals. For example, on birthdays, one Y celebrates by asking people on the aquatics staff—both paid and volunteer—to swim to the middle of the pool to retrieve a cupcake, candle and all, that’s floating on a kickboard.

- **Respond to information that volunteers share with the YMCA.** “There should be an openness to the possibility for change, an eagerness to improve performance and conscious, organized efforts to learn from and about volunteers’ experiences.”¹⁶ “Just as we communicate ‘inside’ information to volunteers, so we must also listen to ‘outside’ information from them.”¹⁷ The YMCA should seek the opinions and advice of volunteers. They should be involved in any planning process related to their responsibilities.

- **Make sure volunteers are covered by insurance and risk management programs.** Generally speaking, the Y should use the same practices for volunteers as it does for paid staff members in similar positions. For example, police checks should be run on volunteers working with children. Insurance coverage may include liability, directors and officers, and accident and sickness. Ask an agent.

- **Document, update, and disseminate personnel policies and procedures for volunteers.** Again, the Y would be safe generally in using the same practices for volunteers as it does for paid staff members in similar positions. This is true for policies against

discrimination as well as those related to grievances, suspension, and dismissal. However, because this is not always the case, it’s good to check with a lawyer.

6. People at all levels of the YMCA are committed to volunteer development.

Like membership development, volunteer development is everyone’s responsibility. To increase volunteer involvement, a YMCA must:

- **Have a sincere commitment from the policy-making board and the executive director.** Research shows that “two measures of the power of a volunteer program were the degree of leadership of the board and the board’s recognition of itself as a volunteer group.”¹⁸ Similarly the executive director must lead and support any initiative to involve volunteers.

- **Enable employees to fully participate in the planning, decision-making, and management related to volunteer involvement.** Research shows that the best volunteer programs are in organizations in which supervisors treat their employees as “competent professionals who are able to design and manage much of their own work, and to appropriately and effectively incorporate volunteers.”¹⁹

- **Recruit staff members who can work well with people, especially with volunteers.** Good group work and interpersonal skills are essential. A generalist who can organize volunteers will be more successful at expanding a health and fitness program than a specialist who only knows about exercise physiology.

- **Hold everyone accountable for volunteer development.** Working with volunteers should be part of almost every employee’s job (and annual performance objectives), even in a YMCA that has a full-time or part-time director of volunteer development. Staff members should be rewarded for effectively involving volunteers.

- **Support and guide those staff members—both paid and volunteer—who supervise other volunteers.** The Y must offer employees training and resources on working with volunteers. But even the best training in the world will not replace the consistent coaching and supervision that a young program director may need to be successful in working with the volunteers on a program committee or in a parent-child program.

- **Treat the volunteer coordinator or director as an internal consultant.** Where there is a staff posi-

tion related to volunteer development, the position's main responsibility should be to hold the volunteers and volunteer program accountable to the YMCA, and the YMCA accountable to the volunteer program and the volunteers.²⁰ This means helping employees and volunteers understand, respect, and trust each other. A main goal should be to help other staff members work with program and support volunteers. The position should be seen as an integral part of the management team, with a commensurate title, description, and, if it's a paid position, salary.

• **Create a work environment that is energetic, fun, and that promotes morale.** It's one thing to recruit a volunteer, and quite another to retain one. Volunteers won't want to continue to work at a YMCA with internal strife and low morale.

7. The YMCA embraces people of all kinds and removes barriers to their volunteering.

It's evident from statistics that American society is becoming more diverse. The Y cannot increase its volunteer force—indeed, it cannot achieve its vision—unless it restructures volunteer recruitment, retention, and recognition techniques. All of these must be more flexible in accommodating people of both genders and of different ages, incomes, races, religions, cultures, family structures, and abilities.

Research shows that volunteerism is up among women who work outside the home (they volunteer at a greater rate than women who don't), students, active older adults, and church goers. However, largely under represented are such enormous potential resources as minorities, low-income families, people with disabilities, the homebound, those without transportation, and children.²¹

Before such groups can participate fully, certain barriers must be removed. According to the American Red Cross Volunteer 2000 Study,²² these include:

Language differences—The words associated with volunteerism sometimes don't exist or have different connotations in other languages. Also, volunteer recruitment is too rarely conducted in foreign languages.

Cultural differences—Certain aspects of volunteerism—highly structured committees, work outside the local community, intrusion into other people's private lives, to name a few—are alien to some cultures.

Economic hardship—While many people from low-income households gladly...[volunteer] for causes they believe in, they often can't afford such expenses as transportation, child or elder care, training, lunches, or uniforms.

Physical impairment—People with disabilities still have trouble accessing many work areas, and too much communication still never reaches the sight or hearing-impaired.

Time constraints—Too many volunteer opportunities are still limited to normal working hours.

Barriers to togetherness—Too few opportunities exist for couples or entire families to volunteer together.

The Y is well-positioned to offer families the chance to volunteer as a unit. In fact, volunteering could be one of the Y's best family programs. It's inexpensive, it gives a family something new and different to do, it builds family loyalty, and it helps teach kids good values.

Intergenerational programs also bring people together. By matching an older adult with a toddler, child, or even a teen, the two can learn about each other and help each other. Intergenerational activities can be integrated into almost any Y program, from aquatics to camping.

Here are some other examples of how a YMCA could be more inclusive in involving volunteers:

• **Find out whether there is any gender bias in recruiting and placing volunteers.**²³ Are all the board members men? The office workers women? The coaches male? The teen club advisors female? Make changes to ensure that both sexes have equal opportunity at all jobs.

• **Design short-term or episodic volunteer jobs** to include a time-pressed parent or a busy single. While many YMCAs offer the opportunity for long-term volunteer commitments, they should also offer short-term assignments. A short-term job could be anything from cleaning up the gym after a Family Night to writing the Y's annual report to building a new cabin at camp. A YMCA could also designate one Saturday a month as a "Service Day," where volunteers give up a day to paint the child care center,

clean up a local park, or rehab a church or home in a low-income neighborhood.

- **Ask people of different ethnic and racial groups how the YMCA could be more welcoming.** Contact should be made with leaders of people in these groups. Follow through on their suggestions.
- **Examine whether there is any age bias in recruiting and placing volunteers.** Do youth and college students serve on the board? Are older adults excluded unnecessarily from volunteering in youth sports programs? Are volunteering and community service encouraged among children who participate in child care or youth sports?

Make changes to allow people of all ages to volunteer. It especially makes sense to encourage volunteerism among families, children, teens, and young adults. Research shows that active donors and volunteers were more likely at an early age to have participated in a youth group, seen someone in their family helping others, or done some kind of volunteer work when they were young.²⁴

8. To work with volunteers, the YMCA is willing to bear some costs.

As the saying goes, you have to spend money to make money. Volunteers are a rich resource only if the YMCA is willing to invest in them. These are some of the costs that may be associated with volunteers:²⁵

- **Administrative costs**, including staff time: These might include costs of recruitment, placement, supervision, recordkeeping, and insurance.
- **Logistical support**: supplies, work space, a telephone, and clerical support.
- **Training and orientation**: travel and course fees for training that takes place outside of the facility, and staff time for in-house training.
- **Recognition**: correspondence, awards, gifts, and social functions.

The YMCA should look at volunteer development in the same way it looks at financial development. The money spent will more than pay for itself.

9. The YMCA tracks the value of volunteer service.

In the future, accounting standards will require nonprofits like the Y to count the help of certain types of volunteers as contributed income. Although it is not required now, YMCAs should assign a dollar value to the hourly work of all types of volunteers. It should not be recorded on the books, but it should be noted as a footnote. It could also be explained in the narrative text accompanying the annual report and in other written, interpretive pieces. There are many advantages to this kind of recordkeeping for volunteers of all types:

- **Volunteers will not be seen as essential to the association until the Y starts to collect data** on their accomplishments and to consider the financial worth of their activities.²⁶
- **The YMCA will be more willing to invest in volunteers** if it recognizes the contribution of volunteers.
- **Counting the value of volunteer hours demonstrates the Y's ability to mobilize contributed resources.** This improves the Y's image as a charitable community service organization. It can also be useful in interpreting the Y's work to public officials as well as grant-makers and funders. As one of the largest voluntary organizations in the country, the Y has an important story to tell regarding the contribution of its volunteers.
- **Data collection can help the Y learn to improve its volunteer recruitment, retention, and recognition techniques.** It can also be helpful in creating mailing and phone lists so that volunteers can be contacted regularly. In addition to the hours worked and the dollar value of the service performed, here are some examples of the kinds of information the Y may want to record:
 - **The name, address, gender, and other biographical data** on the volunteer, including his or her time availability. To make sure the Y is reaching out to diverse groups, it should ask volunteers to volunteer their age range and ethnicity.
 - **Measures of the volunteer's accomplishments**, such as how many people were served.
 - **When and where the job was done.**
 - **How the volunteer heard about the position.**
 - **Which YMCA programs the volunteer is involved in as a participant.**

- **Financial contributions the volunteer has made to the Y**, including in-kind donations and un-reimbursed volunteer expenses.²⁷

Recordkeeping forms and software, including Y-Ware, can simplify this data collection. “While such record-keeping may seem difficult, once a data-gathering process has been established, the time required to maintain it is not necessarily onerous.”²⁸ Furthermore, volunteers themselves may be able to take on the job.

10. Volunteers are essential to a democratic society.

Many social thinkers, both liberal and conservative, believe that one of the characteristics of a healthy democracy is the existence of a third sector distinct from business and government. This sector is alternately referred to as the nonprofit or not-for-profit sector, the voluntary sector, the independent sector, the philanthropic sector, or the civil society. As one YMCA leader wrote:

Writer Alan Wolfe leads us to a deeper appreciation of the role of voluntary associations like YMCAs in the life of a free country. In *Whose Keeper*, he observes three dominant places Americans make moral decisions.²⁹

The first place is the economy, where market forces are the primary mechanisms for choice. Taken to its logical end, this approach assigns a price to virtually everything scarce, from automobiles to wilderness—even to babies put up for adoption. The economic approach to moral decision-making says that “the stuff goes to the highest bidder.”

The second place is government. We discuss, debate, and ultimately pass laws that regulate the basic goals of society. Over time, we grow to expect that the state will assure more and more rights and entitlement—everything from roads and sewers to jobs and health care.

However, unless we assume responsibility to participate as active citizens and recreate the conditions for such rights, they will not long endure. The rise of political interest groups, the sinking regard for “politics” in America, and decreasing levels of participation by youth do not bode well for democracy in America.

The third place is what Wolfe calls the “civil society.” This is really almost everywhere; that is, numerous locations often close to home where people come together to solve problems. These include community centers, PTAs, churches and synagogues, and nonprofit organizations of all kinds.

The thing held in common by [places that make up] the civil society is a profoundly voluntary nature. People associate freely to reach goals they deem worthy and necessary. The guiding energy comes from the simple truth that where there is a will, there is a way.

It was this impetus of citizens to organize and accomplish their own business that Alexis de Tocqueville found so uniquely American in *Democracy in America*.³⁰ And these “habits of the heart,”³¹ so essential to sustaining free democratic life, are only learned through active participation in community life.

As Americans grow to depend more on market and state mechanisms to resolve moral dilemmas, we must remember that it is only in the civil society—in those countless places in community—that we are helped to develop trust and mutual respect. Without that, the market will rob and the state will dictate. If we are to recapture a non-coercive moral center, we must build it within our civil society.

What does this lesson in sociology have to do with the YMCA? If we think of the Y as simply a large social service agency, alongside so many others, we miss the point. But if we think of the Y as a wonderfully diverse voluntary association of citizens, each seeking to take common action upon matters of personal concern in the context of a civil society, then we have a movement. And there is power in such a movement.³²

This document was endorsed in November 1992 by the National Board of YMCAs. It is a distillation of philosophy and practice in the field of volunteerism. Each principle represents an ideal or goal that the Board would encourage all YMCAs—as well as itself, the national office, the Clusters, and the Field committees—to recognize and aim to achieve.

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