

Building a Strong Advisory Group

Nancy Macduff

Sam is asked to serve on an Advisory Board for a local hospital volunteer program. The call came from a member of the Advisory Board and two months later he receives an agenda in the mail for his first meeting. The staff person assigned to the board is not at the meeting and the chairperson leads the group through a meeting with little content and no action. Sam leaves the meeting wondering why he agreed to do this and what his role should be.

While Sam's experience may be dramatic, it is representative of the messages sent to volunteers on the importance of their contributions to the work of advisory groups. Many advisory groups are mandated by elected officials or federal, state, provincial, or local regulation. Professional staff working with volunteer advisory groups have the opportunity to maximize the work of the volunteers.

Advisory Board or Committee recruitment and retention is influenced by two factors: information about the role and responsibility of the group and the staff's relationship with the volunteers. Staff who are attentive to these two factors can see a marked improvement in their ability to attract qualified candidates and retain qualified members.

Recruitment begins by insuring that volunteers know what is expected of them, explanations of roles and responsibilities. It includes such things as duties, time commitment, term of service, responsibility, authority, and staff support available. Retention is influenced by the partnership relationship that exists with staff. This includes a commitment to

teamwork, clear lines of responsibility, and good communication between staff, volunteers, and the leadership in the larger organization.

The most important first step is to identify for the volunteer ways an Advisory Board carries out its mission. The following are the types of information that should be provided to a prospective volunteer.

1. Identify the purpose of the organization. Define the mission that the organization is trying to accomplish.
2. How is the purpose carried out? What does the organization do to meet its obligation to clients? Do not assume volunteers know!
3. Describe the work of the organization and all its facets. This is a good place for tours or slides to illustrate the work.
4. What are the accomplishments of the past? New advisory group members need to know how many people are served, what is the success rate, how many volunteers are recruited and retained annually, and awards won by programs.
5. How is money raised, budgeted, and spent by the organization? How might the volunteers be involved in any of these activities? Will the advisory group be advising the leadership on budget priorities?
6. Provide a brief history of the organization to new members. This can be short and provided in written format or attractive audiovisuals.
7. What is the organizational structure and leadership? This is a good place

Nancy Macduff is President of Macduff/Bunt Associates, a training and publishing company. Adjunct Professor of Adult Education at Washington State University, she specializes in the study of adult learning and volunteerism. She has published three books and numerous articles on both topics.

for charts and diagrams with names and relationships.

It is often assumed that volunteers recruited to an advisory group understand the meaning of the word "advisory" and that their role is different from a Board of Directors. These are dangerous assumptions. Volunteers serving on advisory groups need to have their rules and responsibilities clearly spelled out and these should be reviewed periodically.

Most advisory groups focus their attention on known problems and existing concerns. It is easy to move from assigned tasks to other problems in the organization. In preparing volunteers to serve on an advisory group it is essential that they understand the limits of their areas of exploration.

Members of advisory groups need to use their background and experience to look for important facts, conditions, or changes that can influence the programs or services of the organization. Trends in the future should be brought to the attention of the staff by members of the committee. Members are encouraged to bring all relevant information to the attention of the group.

Advisory groups are skilled at determining factors which influence the conditions or changes affecting an agency or organization. It is important to give volunteers the opportunity to reflect on a variety of issues within an organization that can affect success or failure. Their observations can often save both time and money.

Findings of advisory groups should be compiled into written statements followed by information which points up new opportunities or major problems that need attention. These reports should be given to appropriate staff or governing bodies. Sometimes it is important to ask members of the volunteer advisory group to present oral reports to accompany written ones.

All these activities of volunteer advisory group members should be spelled out clearly. A job description for members and simple guidelines describing the overall duties and responsibilities of the group should be shared with new volunteers during the recruiting process. These

job descriptions and guidelines also need to be reviewed by the entire advisory group on a regular basis.

The staff support rule falls into two areas. First is the support of "housekeeping" functions that are essential for record keeping and continuity. The other area is the less tangible role of providing support for people who are donating their time and deserve timely reporting and recognition for their work.

The supporting role includes the development and maintenance of the general structure of the group. The staff should provide assistance to the leadership in identifying, selecting, and appointing members. Orientation of new members and in-service training for current members is best accomplished with staff and current volunteers sharing the duties.

Staff members find meeting space, do mailings, compile and distribute meeting minutes, gather appropriate information for the group to consider, maintain open lines of communication, and publicize the accomplishments of the volunteers.

Staffing of a volunteer advisory committee is not merely providing clerical support. Staff members provide assistance and leadership in the development of operational policies and procedures. They do not usurp the role of volunteers, but work cooperatively. They encourage and motivate members by including them in all facets of the work of the advisory group.

The key word to their role is "facilitator." During meetings, for example, they assume an enabling role and leave the leadership to the volunteers. They work to keep lines of communication open between members, staff, and governing bodies.

The volunteers need to rely on certain types of behavior from staff. The following are the types of expectations volunteers have for the staff that work with them.

STAFF SHOULD:

1. be objective and open to suggestions from the volunteers.
2. use the time and talents of volunteers wisely.

3. exhibit openness in their individual and organizational relationships.
4. adequately prepare for all meetings with volunteers.
5. share leadership with volunteers.
6. advise the volunteers as to the appropriate role/responsibility they have to the organization.

Attention to details in managing a volunteer advisory group is important. Ignore the details of training or communication and the retention rate goes down and it is more difficult to recruit new members. The most effective volunteer advisory groups receive support from their staff that is prompt, accurate, and sustained. That support communicates the value of the volunteers to the organization and assures that the job they do is "real" and not just window dressing.