

Volunteers Chairing Events

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BACKGROUND OF SPECIAL EVENTS AND ROLE OF THE VOLUNTEER CHAIRPERSON

The information contained in this article is drawn from several different special event (Event) functions. These functions range in scope. However, the role of the Volunteer Chairperson (Chair), remains primarily the same. When selecting a Chair, necessary skills include, but are not limited to, the following: flexibility, patience, planning, organizing, negotiating, coaching, listening and leadership. The Chair must also have the necessary amount of free time. Depending on the scope of the Event, the Chair might be required to spend anywhere from a few hours to hundreds of hours coordinating the event.

The Chair has the responsibility to coordinate the deployment of all volunteer-staffed activities for the Event. As part of this role, the Chair must be involved in the Event planning committees, scheduling paid/volunteer staff combined tasks, volunteer solicitations, training/orientation and Event management. Some of these roles may be assumed by the Coordinator of Volunteers (Coordinator). It is critical that the Coordinator and Chair work together to ensure that all the requirements of the Volunteers and the Event can be accomplished to produce a success. A success can be defined as an Event that ran smoothly, was well attended, accomplished its goals and allowed the volunteers to have fun.

The Chair should be included in as many Event planning sessions as possible. Involvement in these meetings can help in the planning and organizing phases and provide details regarding the expectations of the volunteer assignments as they develop in support of the Event strategies.

The Chair's attendance also can benefit the planning committee by providing insights into volunteer needs. Other information that can be gained as the plans are discussed might include the number of volunteers required for each position. Some events may contain new, expanded or experimental programs that require estimations which cannot be determined from past occurrences. Feedback from the volunteers who work these positions is critical for future event planning.

Some events may require that volunteer and paid staff work side-by-side on events. Because the paid staff serve alongside volunteers, the paid staff should be managed by the Chair. Along this same vein, volunteers for an event may not necessarily belong to one organization. Care should be taken in collecting volunteer data to ensure that the assisting volunteer groups receive recognition for participation.

As part of the planning process, the Chair should be involved with all external solicitations for volunteers. All applications for volunteer assignments should be directed back to the Chair for organization and management of all the positions. Involvement of local community groups in the Event can contribute greatly to the Event's success.

The Chair should be an active leader at the training or orientation. This is a great opportunity for the Chair to become known and be seen by the corps of volunteers prior to the Event.

Event Management activities for the Chair include: coordinating volunteer assignments, notifying volunteers of assignments, set-up of the training materials and location, negotiations over assignment change requests, cancellations and replacements, last minute requirements from the coordinators, and event follow-up.

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DESIGNING THE APPLICATION FORM

This form is critical in communicating event assignment opportunities to the prospective volunteers. Performance requirements for all available positions should be clearly defined. If known, the number of openings for that assignment should be identified. The application should be sent out with instructions that set specific criteria for the volunteers, so that they can determine if they have the skills and the desire to work a particular assignment. Appendix A is a sample application form format. Before the form can be designed, the chair must first determine the positions available, identify what data must be collected about the volunteers and determine if incentives will be used.

DETERMINE POSITIONS AVAILABLE

As mentioned under the role of the Chair, the information required to complete this task can best be determined by participating in the Event Planning Sessions. The Chair (or volunteer coordinator) and the program coordinators should review the plans for each Event, identify how the volunteers can be involved and design the assignments. These assignments should be designed to provide the volunteer with the opportunity to enjoy the task and to use every individual's diverse talents effectively. The same care should be taken in designing these temporary Event assignments as would be done for full-time jobs. It also helps if the Chair and Coordinator have a good understanding of the composition of the available volunteers' backgrounds, skills and abilities. For example, if the volunteers of the organization are a predominantly older group of people, then the positions offered should be designed such that mobility level and length of shift are considered. The Job Assignment Section includes some samples of various types of assignments offered to volunteers.

COLLECTING KEY DATA ON VOLUNTEERS

The type of data collected on the form includes the Applicant's Full Name, Address, Home and Business telephone numbers and date and time availability.

Optional information could include: T-shirt size, assignment preference order, physical limitations, special needs, past event experience, special skills or a willingness to take on leadership roles. The optional information is recommended since it can be used to determine if the volunteer is the correct match for a particular position. For example, if a person has a physical limitation for standing, then he or she would have a hard time working a crowd management position, standing for four or more hours. This same person however, might well be suited to an exhibit docent or registration clerk position, where he or she could be seated for the entire shift.

RESPONSE/APPLICATION COMPLETION INCENTIVES

The application form should provide incentives to the volunteers for completing and returning the application in a timely manner. Past experience has shown that, without incentives, volunteers tend to wait until they are directly solicited (via telephone calls) or just show up the day of the event. The additional work this puts on the event Chair can be overwhelming. The Chair's ability to coordinate is significantly improved when minimal telephone calls or last minute changes occur. Depending on the event, various incentives can be offered. Some examples are:

- preference for those available for the entire event (if a one day event);
- preference for those available for the most shifts (if more than one day);
- preference for first position selection based upon order of receipt of application;
- preference for those willing to take on leadership roles.

Combinations of these incentives could also be used. The idea is to provide the respondent with a reason to complete the form and return it immediately. Responses received by mail mean less time will be needed to recruit the number of volunteers required to work the Event.

To further exemplify this point, compare the impact of the incentives for the same event prior to and after including the incentives in the application form: applica-

tion responses for the same event, held in 1990 and again in 1991, increased from a 50% application response rate to 90% rate when incentives were added to the form.

TRACKING APPLICATION RESPONSES

How the Data Can Be Managed

Depending on the Event size, various methods can be used to manage the applicants' responses. These range from careful filing and sorting of application forms to using a computer package or data base. Smaller events of less than 100 people can be easily managed through filing and sorting the returned forms. Events that range from 100 to 200 people should be managed using standard off-the-shelf personal computer packages. Events with more than 200 people should be managed using either a personnel computer or larger data base system. A data base containing all the information from the application form can provide the most flexibility and ease in managing resources.

How the Data Can Be Used for Planning

Now that the Chair has data about the volunteers, he or she can begin to track and analyze the progress being made in filling all the assignments for the Event.

Using a spreadsheet program or column-lined paper, the Chair can build a matrix of the positions available to positions requested/assigned. This is a simple tool that can be used to determine number of openings and assure that assignments are not over-filled. The data base method can produce this same information in a report format.

The use of a data base also can provide many other reports about the volunteers, requested assignments, number of positions filled by first preference selections, shift availability and special requirements. Since the data base organizes the information and the report program must only be written once, this can provide greater flexibility in the ways the application form data can be used to plan the event. During one project this information was used to monitor T-shirt size distribution, number of volunteers by organizations and number of volunteers reporting for duty per shift.

ORGANIZING THE EVENT

Using the event schedules and the volunteer application response information, the Chair and Coordinator now can organize the event plans. This includes determining specific job assignments, notification of assignment, training plans and resolving problems.

Job Assignments

The Chair and Coordinator first should meet to determine who will be assigned leadership roles, if required. Then a subsequent meeting should be held with the Chair, Coordinator and Leaders to complete the remaining job assignments. If response incentives are used, then this is the first consideration in job assignment. This is where knowledge of the individual applicants is useful to match the person with specific duties. If an assignment is not suited to the person, this will result in a bad experience for the individual and the public, and people will not volunteer a second time if the first experience was a negative one.

Below are some sample descriptions of job assignments for volunteer staffed events:

- **Crowd Management:** Act as a public relations person, troubleshoot, manage lines and elevator crowds, answer questions and watch for lost children. Volunteers in this position may be outside and will not be seated.
- **Information Floater:** Act as a public relations person, distribute free items, answer questions and hand out flyers, maps and performance schedules. Volunteers in this position may be outside and will not be seated.
- **Welcome Center:** Meet and greet the public, providing general information about the Center and the Event. Volunteers in this position will be working along side Marketing personnel.
- **Volunteer Check-in:** Manage the volunteer check-in process. Have all volunteers sign in, distribute assignment sheets and other materials (as required) and provide shift coverage information to the Event Chair. This is a seated position.

Notify Volunteers of Duties

Once the application forms have been received, notification should be sent to all volunteers regarding their assignments. This can be done either by telephone or letter. The telephone is recommended only for very small Events. A form letter or computer generated letter is preferred. This provides the volunteer with a written confirmation for the receipt of the application form and the specific job assignment. This letter can also serve to notify the volunteer of Event training and assignment report times and locations.

Selecting Group Leaders/Assistants

The Chair and Coordinator should always use the full resources of their volunteer corps. This includes their leadership abilities. Large events can prove to be an exhausting, arduous undertaking for one person. Leaders can help the Chair schedule all the job assignments, call extra volunteers to fill vacancies and, most particularly, help manage the volunteers on the day of the Event. Since large events can also cover a wide physical area, the Chair and Coordinator cannot be everywhere. Leaders can be responsible for a group of similar positions or specific physical locations.

The first place to look for Leaders is the application form. People who are interested in assuming responsibility will indicate that they are willing to take on added responsibility. Here again, it is very helpful to know the volunteers. The leaders should be available to work the entire Event, have strong leadership skills and good interpersonal skills. It may be helpful to call specific people and ask them for assistance in this capacity. This approach sends a clear message to all volunteers that they are respected and encourages them to increase their level of commitment.

Training Volunteers

The Event Chair and Coordinator should schedule training/orientation sessions for volunteers prior to the event. Training sessions should include the following information: Event schedule, introduction of key event people, job assignment detailed "walk-through" and instructions, day of Event procedures, where to call if unable to work, emergency handling procedures,

review of hand-out materials (optional) and rain contingency plans (optional). All information covered in these sessions should also be provided in writing. Larger annual events should have more than one session to provide everyone the opportunity to attend. An abbreviated session should be conducted the day of the event to provide updates of last minute changes of the schedule to the volunteers.

Negotiating Through Problems/ Opportunities

The Chair always must be prepared to negotiate through any problems that may appear while organizing the Event. This specifically includes dealing with placement of volunteers who require special considerations. An example is a volunteer who is assigned to work in a children's area but is uncomfortable around them; the Chair then should discuss with the volunteer other opportunities that are more suited to his or her abilities and preferences. This discussion should culminate in agreement between the two people on an alternate assignment. The Chair and Coordinator also may have to negotiate with the Event Program Committee on what positions are made available to the volunteers.

COORDINATING VOLUNTEER AND PAID WORKER ACTIVITIES

It is common to have job assignments where some of the people are paid workers and other are volunteers. In these circumstances both parties should be treated equally. An example of this is in an Event's staging areas for performances, the Stage Manager and technical crew might be paid staff and the remainder of the crew volunteers. Job assignments for the volunteers and paid workers should be integrated in each area of an event, where the paid workers and the volunteers both bring specific talents or skills to the position.

DAY OF EVENT MANAGEMENT

Sign-in/Verify Work Area Coverage

It is extremely important that the sign-in procedures are designed to provide efficiency in checking all the volunteers and providing information back to the Chair about "no show" assignment openings. A

sign-in sheet in alphabetical order with the volunteers' names and assignments has proven to be the most effective. The Chair should plan to spend a few minutes reviewing the sign-in sheet to verify all areas are properly covered. It is also helpful if a group of volunteers is designated as "floaters" who can help fill in some of the positions opened by last minute cancellations. If these floaters are not all used by the cancellations they then can be available to help provide breaks to the other volunteers on a rotational basis.

Responding to Emergencies

Anything can happen, especially with a large event and most likely when least expected. This is where being flexible is most important. Even with the best planning, an area of an event may turn out to be more extensive an effort than estimated. This is when the entire plan needs review to determine the strategy for handling the problem area. The key here is to keep a level head and move quickly. In this situation having area leaders can be most useful, because the Chair can survey each of the leaders to determine which volunteers can be moved, have the leaders explain the situation and deploy volunteers to the new positions.

EVENT FOLLOW-UP

There are three major points that must be accomplished once the Event is done, but planned prior to the Event. They are: volunteer appreciation, Event evaluation and issue documentation.

Volunteer Appreciation

The best form for providing volunteer appreciation is a letter. This can be done by using a form letter and adding a personal note or, if using a data base, send out a form letter with the specific details of name and assignment imbedded in the letter. The second option does appear to be more personal and individual notes can also be written on them. All the letters should be signed by the Chair and Coordinator. Budget allowing, a small thank you party for the volunteers is also a great way

to show appreciation. However, it is not recommended that the party be the day of the event. By the end of an event all the volunteers are tired or have worked an earlier shift and not all will be able to attend. Announce the party date during the pre-event orientation or in the thank-you letter.

Volunteer Surveys/Suggestions/Evaluation

It is important to solicit the suggestions and comments of the volunteers and paid workers from each event. These are the people on the front line, dealing with the public. This can be accomplished by preparing a follow-up evaluation (see Appendix B for sample format) for all the volunteers to complete. The evaluation should be available for volunteers to complete at the end of their shifts, for each shift worked on an event. If an event lasts more than one day, feedback from each day can be used to help with the day-of-event management for subsequent days. Most people derive their comments from the recent experiences and a delay in getting comments can result in loss of key points. Also, if the evaluation is not completed as the shift finishes and is mailed out, there is a lower rate of return. People need to know their comments are appreciated and the post-event review should reference comments. These should also be documented in the event check-off list.

Issue Documentation

It is very important that the Chair provide clear, concise documentation on all the activities associated with each Event. This information can be used from one event to another and year to year. Each Chair should add to this documentation, providing insight to specific situations and recommendations on how to handle them differently the next time. This documentation and the Event notes are priceless to the next Chair for planning the next Event. The information should also include a summary of the volunteers' evaluation of the Event. Appendix C is a sample of an Event check-off list and follow-up notes summary format.

APPENDIX A
(APPLICATION FORM)

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone (H): (_____) _____ (O): (_____) _____

Organization/Affiliation: _____

Please select your available work assignment shifts:

- 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. (assignment priority)
 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Please read through the attached job assignment descriptions and number your choices in order of preference, with 1 being the most desired:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crowd Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Information Floater |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stage Crew | <input type="checkbox"/> Welcome Center |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ticket Distribution | <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer Check-in |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer Refreshments | <input type="checkbox"/> Membership Lounge |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stroller Check-in | <input type="checkbox"/> Character |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Character Guide | <input type="checkbox"/> Musical Zookeeper |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Refreshment Monitor | <input type="checkbox"/> Area Leader |

Please identify any special requests below, we will do our best to accommodate them. (i.e. can only work inside, wish to work with ____, physical limitations, etc.)

T-Shirt Size: _____ Medium _____ Large _____ X-Large _____

Please return this application to: Event, Address

APPENDIX B

EVALUATION FORM

Please take a moment to write down your suggestions and ideas so we can make the next Open House even better. Thank You!

Please check the area(s) in which you worked

- | | | | |
|-------|------------------------|-------|---------------------|
| _____ | Crowd Management | _____ | Information Floater |
| _____ | Stage Crew | _____ | Welcome Center |
| _____ | Ticket Distribution | _____ | Volunteer Check-in |
| _____ | Volunteer Refreshments | _____ | Membership Lounge |
| _____ | Stroller Check-in | _____ | Character |
| _____ | Character Guide | _____ | Musical Zookeeper |
| _____ | Refreshment Monitor | _____ | Area Leader |

Specify the location for your assignment:

What did you get out of volunteering at the Event?

What did you like least about the Event?

**Did you attend the orientation session?
If yes, how could next year's be improved?**

What would you suggest as the single biggest improvement we could make for next year?

What is the second biggest improvement we could make?

Do you feel that your area could have used: _____ More volunteers
_____ Fewer volunteers

Please explain your reasons:

Please return this form to: Event, Address

APPENDIX C
EVENT CHECK LIST

Event Name: _____

Event Date: _____

Theme: _____

Number of Volunteers:

Proposed: _____ Actual: _____

Job Assignment Listing:

Event Location Mapping:

Special Requirements:

Restrictions/Guidelines:

Materials/Hand-outs:

Leaders Utilized: Yes _____ No _____

Training:

Materials:

Instructors:

Training Rooms:

Training Dates:

Coordinating Points:

Events Follow-Up:

Surveys:

Recognition:

Chair Tracking Notes:

Total Hours Worked: _____

Coordinating: _____

Day-of-Event: _____

Telephone Calls: _____

Expenses: _____

Travel/Mileage: _____

Meetings Attended: _____

Notes/Comments: _____