

TROUBLE SHOOTING

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When we hear of a volunteer program being in trouble, most of the time it can be reduced to four basic problems: 1) lack of communication, 2) poor organization, 3) competition, 4) negative community attitude. Any one or combination of these can devastate any program.

In considering any of these problems, the personal ability of the Volunteer Coordinator is an obvious factor. That is, each has his own particular strengths and abilities, and the exact opposite. The trick is to recognize the best in each, and for each to seek assistance where indicated.

A major factor is the amount of time needed for the coordinator to learn the needs and available resources of the institution and the community. As each community is different, the amount of time necessary to develop contacts will vary. It is important that the coordinator join and become active in many community groups. This must be considered as a necessary part of the work.

COMMUNICATION:

Each community will have one or two groups which are stronger and more effective than the others. Obviously the coordinator must have considerable skill in dealing with people to avoid being placed in the position of taking sides between groups in the event of any contention. It is wise for the coordinator to develop a diversified program and limit each group to one program, or to one specific area of the institution. It is fatal to good public relations to assign groups, or individuals, to any area unless a specific need is to be filled. This means the coordinator must develop the project in conjunction with the people in the area in which the volunteers will work. A written job description of the project and what is expected of the

volunteers is essential to maintaining good rapport between the coordinator, the volunteers and the people in the work area.

It is equally important for the coordinator to arrange time to visit regularly each area of the institution to keep current about changing programs and needs. This is also a way of sharing information in order to promote continuing cooperation between employees.

If other areas and departments are aware of the purpose and scope of the volunteer program, they can use the volunteers to better advantage. In addition, if all areas are knowledgeable about the total volunteer program, they can help supervise the volunteers' work, and meet needs before they become problems. The people who work directly with the volunteers and receive the benefit of their services are the institution's official hosts.

In the interest of saving time, a form can be developed which is to be filled out by employees in the work area. This should show the name of the volunteer, the activity, the time involved, the name of the employee supervising the project, the response of the patients and any unusual problems or results. This should be returned to the coordinator by the day after the activity. The coordinator then has the information at hand to follow up to help solve any problems encountered. Notes of appreciation must be written to volunteers thanking them for their interest and participation in the program. These notes should be written within 24 hours of the volunteers' visit. The only exception to this, would be if the coordinator has personally seen and thanked the volunteers at the time of their visit.

Communication within the institution and the community is limited by the failure of the coordinator to take time to develop it. Communications can be assisted by the development of brochures and training-orientation programs. These are necessary to acquaint the communities and departments of the institution with the scope and purpose of volunteer services. That is, in addition to speaking to and becoming involved with community groups, the coordinator must become involved with other programs within the institution. This would involve special events, such as, seminars, workshops, or seasonal programs, such as Christmas, etc. These involve careful organization of time and schedules.

ORGANIZATION:

For the most part, "organization" means organization of work according to available time. In order to meet the many demands of the public, and maintain an effective liaison between the communities and the institution, the coordinator must remain flexible. The name of the game is "Stay Loose." Most of the time when the door opens, or the telephone rings, it is the volunteer coordinator who is "IT". This makes it very difficult to maintain a schedule. Therefore, we must set priorities on certain blocks of time. Tasks which must be done daily are best done early.

A survey of how time is spent is a good investment. Tasks can be divided as to importance, whether they are daily, weekly, monthly, or seasonal. One thing which must be pointed out is that setting priorities does not solve problems. It only rearranges them so that they can be handled effectively.

A survey of telephone usage can also be a help. If a record is kept of in-coming calls, it can be determined if there are certain times of the day when calls can be expected. If there are office chores that are not affected by interruptions, do them at a time when you are expecting calls. It may also be discovered that certain times of the day are better for initiating calls. Nothing consumes more time, or is more frustrating, than finding yourself short of time and unable to get an outside line for a call that must be made at a certain time.

Another great waster of time is meetings which accomplish nothing. Never hold meetings for the sake of the meeting just because it has always been done a certain day. This is also very irritating to volunteers. Do as much communicating as possible on a one to one basis. When group meetings are required, have a definite agenda with important items which require group decisions first. Set up a definite starting and stopping time and stick to it on both ends. It can be quite startling to discover that weekly meetings can be held once a month with the same amount of work effectively accomplished. This is not intended to infer that meetings with volunteers or groups should be reduced at the expense of public-relations. This is the most important facet of the volunteer coordinator's work.

Develop a correspondence file divided into the categories most useful to the individual coordinator. Among others, it should contain the following sections: Community Contacts, Publicity Contacts, Previous Donations File, Material Resources File, Hours of Time Donated File, Idea File, and Requests for Service File.

Delegate routine tasks and decisions whenever possible. One frequent mistake made by coordinators is that they find themselves doing, rather than coordinating. This is not a problem of long duration. The coordinators correct this for themselves, or do not survive very long in the position. Their competition eats them up alive.

Again every community and institution is different. The amount of work that can be done is limited by each individual situation and the amount of available time in which to do it.

COMPETITION:

It seems that every day new agencies are created, which compete for available volunteer time and materials. Don't try to lick-em, join-em. You may have volunteers who can be of help to a beginning agency in establishing projects similar to those you are using. Perhaps the new agency has ideas which can help your program and your materials can be mutually shared. By coordinating seasonal programs, such as Christmas, with a number of agencies, more suitable programs can be developed.

The idea of a number of agencies getting together and presenting a seminar to acquaint all volunteer groups in a community with the needs of all agencies is not new. It also helps in selecting groups which are most suitable to an individual agency's needs.

Do not overlook the most obvious source of volunteer recruitment, the volunteers themselves. Encourage volunteers to invite guests to accompany them for a day. This gives program exposure to people who are most apt to fit in with existing programs. However, volunteers must be given to understand that final selection and placement of volunteers remains with the coordinator. It is easier for prospective volunteers to overcome any fears they may

have about working with patients, if they are assigned with an experienced volunteer whom they have known previously.

COMUNITY ATTITUDE:

Not many institutions have incurred the outright animosity of their surrounding communities. Some stigma exists and also, just as deadly, apathy. Constant constructive publicity in as many of the news media as possible is the most effective tool in conquering either apathy or stigma. The old adage, "The wheel that squeaks the loudest is the one that gets the grease", holds true here.

Another effective procedure is to establish a Speakers Bureau within your institution to provide knowledgeable speakers to the community on request. Establishing an auxiliary, or council of volunteers, will put your volunteers in a quasi-official position to help with this problem. They are usually the institutions most loyal goodwill ambassadors. Hold an open house occasionally with the volunteers helping to provide guided tours of the institution. Make it known to the public when there are changes in programs or professional personnel. Obviously, the coordinator must get to know the news editors of all local newspapers, radio, and television stations.

In short, instead of the institution just being in the community, work toward having it become an active part of the community. This cannot be accomplished without the support and cooperation of all areas and employees of the institution.

CONCLUSION:

There are no programs which do not have problems from time to time. Very seldom are there any straight, uncomplicated answers for problems. However, by putting to work our three most important tools, time, cooperation, and elbow grease, needs can be filled and problems solved.