



# Recruiting Volunteers for Difficult Positions

By Steve McCurley

One of the biggest trends in volunteer involvement during the past decade has been the remarkable shift towards the "short-term volunteer," the individual who prefers to donate time in smaller and simpler chunks than the prototypical dedicated volunteer of the past. Nancy Macduff refers to this as "episodic" volunteering, a propensity for giving time in relatively small, complete units, each with a definite end point measured in hours or days instead of an ongoing in-depth commitment. Others have referred to it as "fast food volunteering" or the "hit-and-run" approach. The hallmark of the short-term volunteer appears to be a reluctance to become involved in a volunteer position that requires a depth of commitment measured either in terms of time or emotional involvement.

This trend appears to be the wave of the future. The 1987 J.C. Penney survey, "Volunteering—A National Profile," revealed the extent of this feeling when it asked non-volunteers what incentives would be necessary to get them involved. Seventy-nine percent of respondents asked quite clearly for a "short-term assignment." Volunteers of the future appear to want to do good, but only under controlled circumstances that do not get out of hand: "I'll give you my time, but not my life."

All of this is well and good, and no doubt will force many volunteer programs to work hard to develop new jobs that can satisfy this trend toward short-term in-

volvement, but what do you do if you are trying to recruit volunteers for jobs that **require** a longer or deeper commitment? What do you do if you are attempting to locate volunteers for jobs which, to be done effectively, either must have a donation of many hours of time over a long period or must have a strong emotional commitment to the work and not just a casual attachment?

There are, in fact, many volunteer jobs that cannot be done well by short-termers. Most are jobs that demand either high-time or high-commitment levels from volunteers. Examples include:

- **Leadership positions:** Volunteer jobs that mandate experience and knowledge to be done well.
- **Emotional bonding positions:** Volunteer jobs that require time and continuity of care for the client/helper relationship to mature.
- **Time-intensive positions:** Volunteer jobs that require expensive training or screening on the part of the agency.

Clearly, not everyone can volunteer to be a hugger at a Special Olympics game—someone has to get involved in the tougher jobs.

## The Answers

Don't give up hope. There are still a number of ways to locate and recruit long-term volunteers willing to give both time and commitment. Here are a few possible ways to approach recruiting volunteers for difficult positions:

- **Redesign the job.** Why fight the inevitable? Sooner or later, and all too much sooner if present trends continue, you may in fact be unable to recruit a long-term, dedicated volunteer for the job. Take a

long, hard look at the job and see if there are ways that it can be split up and divided into smaller units or chunks. You may find that it was originally designed 20 years ago and no one has ever thought of doing anything differently. Be prepared to be burned for heresy the first time you suggest any changes.

You might occasionally be forced to consider an even more radical alteration in the job. Some volunteer jobs may be of such a complexity that the only solution is to turn them into paid positions, either because it is impossible to recruit volunteers for them or because it is actually more cost effective in terms of training and management to utilize a paid employee. Don't find this to be startling, since it has been happening for a long time—almost all of the positions in nonprofit agencies started as volunteer jobs and eventually grew to a point where it became managerially necessary to convert them to paid jobs.

- **Practice saturation marketing.** You may be able to find the right volunteer if you simply increase your marketing and recruitment efforts. While a vanishing breed, there are still some long-termers out there, and you may be able to locate them by practicing one of three recruitment methods:

1. *Mass media recruitment.* Put an ad on television or radio, or write a good classified ad for the newspaper. Perhaps only .01 percent of the population would be interested in your volunteer job, but if over one million people see the ad this could result in 100 applicants.

2. *Targeted recruitment.* Devote time to determining who would really like to do the job and track them down. Start by examining the motivations and backgrounds

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of current volunteers in the position to find out if there are any common factors. Do they all have the same type of motivation? Do they come from similar groups? Did they all hear about the job in the same fashion? Common factors will enable you to identify populations who seem to like the job despite its requirements, and the commonality will enable you to locate others from that population group.

**3. Concentric circles recruitment.** Attempt to locate a volunteer for the position by starting with the population groups who are already connected to you and work outwards. You might capitalize on the fact that most volunteers are recruited by those people that they already know and ask the incumbent in the job to recruit a friend of theirs to replace them. You might look among former clients or your current volunteers for a replacement. This approach will make it more likely to get a positive response, because the group of potential volunteers with whom you will be talking will already be favorably disposed toward your agency.

■ **Gang up on the job.** Another approach to recruitment is to make the volunteer not one person, but several. If the difficulty is that the job is too large for a single individual, then the obvious solution is to make it the responsibility of more than one person. You can approach this via two different methods:

**1. Team volunteering.** Team volunteering is the classic job-sharing approach to the situation. Make the volunteer unit a partnership, with two persons equally sharing the job, or make the job one done by a "lead" volunteer who is given an assistant. The team can split up the time and work requirements. This approach is particularly useful when you are attempting to preserve a volunteer who has a particular expertise but is reluctant to volunteer because he or she doesn't feel like he/she has the time necessary to do all of the work. Their volunteer "aide" can provide the hands; the expert volunteer can provide the brains.

**2. Cluster volunteering.** Recruit an entire group as the volunteer unit. The group might include an entire family, a club or even a business. The group sub-divides the work, lessening the time burden on any single member. Start this process by recruiting one member of the group who will persuade the others to become involved, making the volunteer job their project.

Both of these approaches are substantiated by data from the J.C. Penney survey

of volunteer involvement. In that study, 71 percent of non-volunteers said they would be attracted by a volunteer opportunity in which they could work with friends or peers, and 55 percent said they would be interested in an opportunity to do volunteer work with their families. By giving them these opportunities, you are essentially creating "two-fers"—positions in which the volunteer can simultaneously do good and spend time with others.

■ **Ease them in.** One of the reasons for saying "No" to a high-time or high-involvement position is that the volunteer is afraid. This fear might be based on a feeling that the volunteer won't like the job enough to devote the time and energy to it, that it isn't worth the investment that it would require on the part of the volunteer. It might equally be based on a fear that the volunteer won't be able to do the job well enough, and a reluctance to let the agency down. Both of these difficulties can be dealt with by introducing the volunteer to the position gradually rather than expecting him/her to buy the whole package at once. Here are some ways to let the volunteer become accustomed to the more difficult position:

**1. Test driving.** Offer the potential volunteer a 30-day trial period. Tell him/her to try the job and see if he/she likes it enough to keep it. This is a great approach because it allows both the volunteer to see if he/she likes the job and the agency to see if it likes the volunteer. Schedule a review meeting when the volunteer starts the position and stress that the volunteer is under no obligation to continue the job after the test period—a "no fault" divorce clause. While you will lose some volunteers, you will gain quite a few who have had the opportunity to examine the job without pressure, learned that they liked the work, and decided that investing their time and energy was worth it.

**2. Apprenticeships.** Apprenticeships work by making the volunteer an assistant to the person who is currently holding the job. The volunteer then operates as an assistant at the direction of the volunteer who is responsible for that position. Apprenticeships work exceptionally well for leadership jobs or jobs with large amounts of responsibility that people are reluctant to take because they don't feel totally comfortable about being able to do the work well. During the apprenticeship they can learn to do the work until they are comfortable with their ability to handle it well. At the end of the apprenticeship they can be "recognized" by a promotion to

being in charge, a position which they will now think they have earned.

**3. Propinquity.** This method works through recruiting a volunteer for a difficult position by recruiting him/her for something else instead. This might sound a bit strange if you don't understand the propinquity principle. "Propinquity" is the process of becoming accustomed to and favorably disposed toward those things or people which you are around and used to, something like "familiarity breeds affection." Things or people or jobs which seemed too large or too difficult or too frightening because they were new or strange may no longer seem quite so daunting after we've been around them for a while.

In propinquity recruitment, you attempt to recruit a person for an alternate position which is near or connected to the position for which you eventually want them to serve. For example, if my agency were having trouble recruiting counselors for one-to-one matches with emotionally disturbed children, I might recruit someone to assist in collecting data from the volunteers that we currently had in that job. The data collection position is a small and simple job that is easily done, but while doing it one is exposed to the more difficult job and can learn to understand it and how valuable it is. Through the process of propinquity, the data collection volunteers are more likely to become attached to the counseling job with which they are in contact. When then asked to consider becoming counselors they are more likely not to be as afraid of the position.

One way to view recruitment by propinquity is that you are simply creating a new population of "concentric circle" volunteers who will become interested in the job. Another way to view it is as the "bait and switch" approach to the problem.

## The Conclusion

There is one additional method for recruiting volunteers for difficult positions and it is probably the most meaningful of all. At the bottom of the trend for short-term involvement is a desire by potential volunteers to help but to not get overwhelmed by a volunteer position which they do not enjoy. The obvious answer to this problem would be to ensure that all short-term volunteers begin to look at their volunteer work as so much fun and so rewarding that they want to do more of it. Short-termers can thus be converted to long-termers.

This answer is not as simplistic as it  
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