

# SUSTENANCE: PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR THE SHORT-TERM VOLUNTEER

By Nancy Macduff

In my first installment on episodic volunteers (spring 1990 VAL), I defined two types of episodic—or short-term—volunteer programs and discussed the importance of a needs assessment as well as job descriptions, screening and recruiting. The development of a short-term volunteer program, however, does not end with bringing the recruits through the door to an organization, agency or program. An episodic volunteer program also includes strategies to sustain and support the volunteer during his/her time of service.

Notice that the word used to describe support for the episodic volunteer is *sustenance*. Sustenance is the process of “supplying with the necessities of life, nourishment” (*Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*). The process of supporting the long-term volunteer is often referred to as maintenance. This means “to continue to support or preserve” (*Webster’s*). The difference between sustenance and maintenance is a subtle but significant one for the short-term volunteer.

Any supervision or support of the epi-

sodic volunteer should be grounded in nourishment and the immediate care necessary while the person is doing the job. It is important to check the attitude of your agency or organization toward short-term volunteers. A goal to lure volunteers with the promise of a short-term assignment, only to send messages that you really want them to stay forever, can lead to disaster.

A key to how episodic volunteers are treated rests with your current corps of volunteers. Their attitudes and behavior can determine the success or failure of the program. It is best to involve them in the planning, beginning with the needs assessment. They should be an integral part of planning the “sustenance” strategies to support the short-term volunteer.

This is best done by creating the episodic volunteer program the same as you would a program for youth volunteers. It is a separate entity—a specialized program to attract a certain type of volunteer. This gives it credibility with the current volunteers and allows the volunteer administrator to engage long-term volunteers in building a program that will be successful. It is a change strategy designed to revise attitudes and beliefs about what kind of volunteering is “appropriate” in an organization or program.

### Training

The best place to begin is with training. The episodic volunteer does not have time

to attend 35 hours of required training. The nature of appropriate jobs for short-term volunteers rarely requires that amount of training. The best method to develop and design training is to engage current experienced volunteers and some experts in adult education and training on a volunteer training committee.

Suppose the short-term volunteer is going to serve as a registration assistant for an all-day event. They will work about four hours. The volunteer training committee should review what is absolutely essential for them to know to complete the job successfully, such as the necessary tools (identifying clothing, pin or badge, etc.). Then the task of the group is to decide the most effective means to prepare the person to do the job. This might include a notebook or a videotape prior to the event, on-the-job training and a follow-up to determine what additional information would have helped them to do their job effectively.

Training for episodic volunteers needs to use the most efficient and effective means to organize and deliver training that will help the volunteer be successful. Adults can be nervous and fear failure in new situations. The volunteer program plans to reduce that fear through effective instructional strategies. A variety of training techniques that are self-directed can go a long way in preparing the volunteer. Audiotapes, videotapes, short workbooks, a one-to-one visit with another volunteer

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*Nancy Macduff is a nationally known volunteer trainer, author of several books on volunteer management and publisher of the newsletter, Volunteer Today. She is publishing a small book on episodic volunteering, which contains more information on the subject. Watch for listing in the next (spring 1991) ToolBox section of VAL.*

can begin the training process and build confidence in the volunteer that they are capable of doing the job.

### **Supervision**

The supervision and support of the short-term volunteer are similarities to the supervision of temporary help in an office. You are not building a long-term career volunteer, but rather capitalizing on the strengths of the individual. Feedback needs to be prompt, direct, courteous and designed to bring about immediate changes in behavior.

Volunteer programs that wish to attract a steady corps of episodic volunteers need to examine the training they provide for volunteer and paid staff supervisors. A special training course, "Supervision of the Short-Term Volunteer," could be required. Topics might include examination of the reasons people prefer short-term assignments, how to determine individual skills very quickly, practice in giving quick, direct feedback to enhance job performance, opportunities for supervisors to explore their own attitudes toward the short-term volunteer, and means to evaluate and reward performance.

Supervision of short-term volunteers can be done quite effectively by long-term volunteers. A large, national volunteer organization is exploring the idea of designing programs to recruit a small number of long-term volunteers who agree to serve 15-20 hours per week for a minimum of three to five years. The agency will dramatically change the support and educa-

triguing idea is best done in a field study situation, but has extremely interesting possibilities for such organizations as hospice, the humane society, orchestras, hospital volunteer programs, youth agencies, and so many more.

### **Recognition**

A key to effective supervision and sustenance of episodic volunteers is recognition. This is the formal and informal system of acknowledging performance. As with long-term volunteers, the episodic volunteers need to have their work recognized through a variety of different methods. It is inappropriate to use the current volunteer reward and recognition system to acknowledge the work of people who only do one-time service.

The recognition system for episodic volunteers needs to be a part of the whole recognition system for paid and unpaid staff. It will undoubtedly be less formal than the rewards given to someone with 20 years of service. Current volunteers should be involved in designing the recognition system for episodic volunteers. These are people who will guard tradition to ensure that long-term volunteers are not offended by the system used with short-term volunteers. They also should be able to identify those effective and quick recognitions and rewards that are related to a specific job.

The committee planning recognition might consider developing a list of "things" supplied to supervisors of short-term volunteers. This might include buttons or pins, small 3 x 5-inch fill-in-the-blank certificates for exemplary performance, pencils, pens, note pads all with the organizational logo, coupons for free meals or hair cuts or other services, and a list of tips to acknowledge good work.

Volunteers who return year after year should be recognized through a sequential volunteer process. A benefit auction that "hires" the same volunteers, only once per year, needs to make sure that returning volunteers are not receiving pencils year after year. A simple 3 x 5 record keeping system can record the volunteer's name, job, year serving and the recognition given all volunteers that year. It is a simple task to see that appropriate acknowledgements are given to the right person.

It is important to remember that over-recognition of a short-term volunteer can backfire. All volunteers expect acknowledgement of their work, but loading them down with things can make them feel

guilty that they did not do more. That guilt could keep them from volunteering again. Most people volunteer not to get a prize, but to help a project that is important to them. A sincere thank-you from a long-

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term volunteer, client or member, or paid staff can sometimes mean as much as the pin or badge. The balancing act between too much and not enough can best be sorted out by volunteers. It also needs to be evaluated continuously and updated with input from current short-term volunteers.

It is also important to have variety in recognition. Two new studies being conducted in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin tell us that volunteers are motivated by a wide variety of things. The variety of needs of episodic volunteers is no different than that of the long-term volunteer. For that reason a variety of "things" and acknowledgements need to be available.

### **Evaluation**

Evaluation can be one way to provide recognition to volunteers. For example, auction volunteers might receive a short report on the effect of the event and thus their work. You could include total receipts, attendance, net receipts, the money earned and its relationship to client services. This short report and a thank-you letter can be a powerful way to acknowledge the volunteer's job and reinforce the agency's mission.

In addition, you can use the collection of this information as a tool to assess the use of short-term volunteers. Is it cost-effective to use episodic volunteers for this activity? How could they be used more effectively? What is the benefit of using people with short assignments? What are the challenges you face in using episodic volunteers?

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tion provided to the long-term volunteer. The long-term volunteer then becomes a key player as supervisor and planner of the much larger episodic volunteer corps. This makes the volunteer program director or manager the supervisor of volunteers who supervises other volunteers. This in-

Likewise, you should be evaluating the performance of the individual volunteer. In long-term volunteer programs individuals receive feedback about performance. This helps them to act more effectively when they return. In contrast, the episodic volunteer only receives feedback directly during the time of performance. They have little time to correct mistakes to improve performance. So how do you evaluate volunteer performance?

This is an ideal place for an Evaluation Committee. A group of paid staff, long-term volunteers, and some of the short-term volunteers could meet for one session to examine the event or activity and the performance of volunteers in a general way. This is different than a program evaluation in that it focuses directly on the performance of the workforce.

An attitude scale survey could be distributed to members of the Evaluation Committee or key volunteers. The survey would ask people to respond to statements related to volunteer performance. Such statements might say such things as, "Volunteers were punctual." "Volunteers performed the cashier task easily." Then each committee member has the opportunity to indicate whether he or she agrees or disagrees with the statement. At the meeting the participants review the

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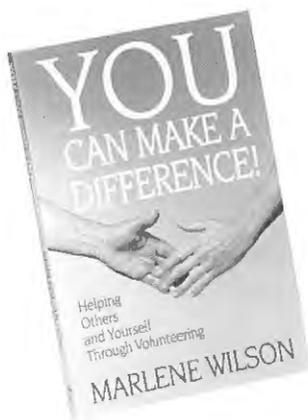
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results of the survey and share their perceptions and observations from the activity, event or assignment and make suggestions for the next time.

This process can do two things: (1) identify areas in which it is inappropriate to place episodic volunteers, and (2) identify areas in which training can be used to enhance short-term volunteer performance. In addition, you might learn information about specific volunteers' performance that would help in their placement should they decide to participate again.

The sustenance of episodic volunteers does not happen accidentally. Like the recruitment, selection and screening of short-term volunteers, it is best done in a planned and organized manner.

Futurists and studies like that done by J.C. Penney/The National VOLUNTEER Center tell us that short-term volunteering is the wave of the future. Futurists predict that 3000 voluntary associations, organizations and programs will be lost between now and 2010. The organizations that survive will be those, that like their brothers and sisters in the for-profit sector, have learned to diversify. Youth volunteer programs, programs to attract volunteers who are disabled, and episodic volunteer programs are an effective means to diversify and reach out to new markets of volunteers. ■



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