

Building the Short-Term Volunteer Program



Episodic Volunteering by Nancy Macduff

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NM
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Walla Walla, WA

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Heller An Shapiro, Director of Volunteers at the Friends of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. She has the courage to take these concepts and apply them to the development of an Episodic Volunteer Program. Would that all of us were willing to take risks so more people could enjoy the rewards of volunteering.

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Chapter One

DEFINITIONS OF EPISODIC VOLUNTEERING

Definitions: What is it?

"Ep-i-sod-ic/ep e-'sad-ik; 1: made up of separate, especially loosely connected episodes 2: of or limited in duration or significance to a particular episode, TEMPORARY 3: occurring, appearing, or changing at usual irregular intervals, OCCASIONALLY." Thus it is that Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary defines the word "episodic." A word gaining increasing popularity in the volunteer field.

A study by The National VOLUNTEER Center and J.C. Penney Co. asked those not volunteering why they were reluctant to volunteer. 79% of those asked said they would be more inclined to volunteer if the jobs were short in duration. Many volunteer organizations and programs are seeking ways to attract the episodic or "short-term" volunteer.

In order to develop effective strategies to both recruit and sustain these volunteers it is essential to understand what "episodic volunteering" is and how it is different from the type of volunteering that is currently the standard in the field. The dictionary definition outlines the two most predominant types and kinds of "episodic" volunteer opportunities. The first type is service that is short in duration and the second is one that occurs at regular intervals for short periods of time.

Service that is short in duration

Volunteers who provide service that is short in duration can vary from the one day volunteer at a Special Olympics Track and Field day, to the college student who provides assistance on a special project for 10-12 weeks, to the volunteer serving on a Board of Director's Task Force for six months or less. They come into the volunteer program, organization, or agency for a pre-established time and are truly finished when the job is done in the prearranged period of time. Training, orientation, supervision, and sustaining the volunteers' efforts are all planned and implemented around the short-term nature of the job they have been asked to complete.

Service that occurs at regular intervals

Service to a volunteer program that occurs at regular intervals is often done by people who want to serve their organization, but are unable to do that in a sustained and regular way that occurs on a monthly or weekly basis. This type of service can be the parent who chairs the annual fund drive for a child's group (cookie or candy sales). This is sustained work for a short period of time, usually less than three months, often being less than a month in duration. It includes people who work on the same annual event each year for several years in a row, or every other year.

Both of these models are familiar to the volunteer program manager. Informally volunteer programs, organizations and agencies are accommodating individuals to serve in short-term assignments. So why is the notion of an "Episodic Volunteer Program" such a revolutionary idea?

Most volunteer programs have organized their jobs and services around the "regular" type of volunteer. The "regular" volunteer is a woman, age 35-60, with a master's degree in social work or

business administration, not working outside her home, with semi-independent children and spouse, and willing to give 20-30 hours per week for at least 15 years to a program. This individual is in rare supply today. Studies of volunteers show us that giving regular service; on Boards, as docents in museums, as church school teachers, leading youth clubs and troops, providing service each week in hospitals and libraries is frequently given by those employed, males or the newly retired. The volunteer recruitment effort is geared to the "regular" long-term volunteer. Jobs are designed for them, training is created to meet their long-term needs, motivational activities are used to promote their retention over time, and recognition activities occur during National Volunteer Week.

This strategy is accurate and well-conceived and totally inappropriate for the episodic volunteer. The short-term volunteer may question the validity of their job choice if they are forced to sit through an orientation designed for the long-term volunteer. The volunteer program manager who wants to implement a program designed specifically to attract episodic volunteers must first realize that taking a current job description, written for the long-term volunteer, and applying it to someone serving for a short time is not developing job opportunities for those wishing to give short-term service. There are no short-cuts to developing an effective and quality program to attract those who will serve volunteer programs in small segments.

The development of an episodic volunteer program requires thoughtful consideration by volunteers and paid staff, before going to the trouble of planning it. Start by asking yourself some questions.

Are we ready for an episodic volunteer program?

1. What type of episodic volunteer jobs do we currently have? List all the different types of episodic jobs you have accommodated in the last three years. Remember to list those in both categories. Do you have separate job descriptions? Are these people trained differently? Who is their supervisor? How do the rest of the volunteers feel about their short time service?

2. Will short-term or episodic volunteers be accepted as members of the volunteer and staff team? No one wants to publically deride any volunteer effort, but the fact is many volunteer program managers will tell you that college interns often find little acceptance from the volunteer corp of workers or paid staff. Volunteers and paid staff must be consulted and involved in the process of developing an episodic program BEFORE it is launched. It is critical to allow ample opportunity to air misgivings about expanding current short-term job assignments.

3. Are there human and financial resources to launch an episodic volunteer program? This requires an analysis of the support for such a program. Are current "regular" volunteers and some paid staff willing to work to make such a program a reality? Will management offer \$\$ to support the work of this group? It is ineffective to ask these questions unless you have researched the current trends in volunteerism, in order to show volunteers, paid staff, and management the way of future volunteer recruiting efforts and why on a quantifiable basis it may be the only choice you have. REMEMBER! One of the most important roles of the volunteer program manager is to educate those around you about trends, the future, and solutions to volunteer issues or challenges.

4. Can you document the need for episodic volunteering in your program, organization, or agency? Be sure to have all the numbers on the trends in volunteer recruitment within your own program over the last five years. Pry the same information out of others doing similar business or ask the local volunteer center to supply statistics. This helps to show the problems you are facing now and how that will change over the next five years.

5. Is every partner in the equation prepared to support the development of a dual focused volunteer program? Conceptually this means thinking in new ways about your program. The opportunities offered to others will take two forms: 1) the regular volunteer program recruiting people for on-going and continuous service; and 2) the episodic volunteer who will serve for shorter durations on an irregular basis.

When you have completed this self-assessment it will be clear if your program, organization, or agency is ready to move to the next phase of developing the episodic volunteer program. In Chapter Two you will learn the strategies to plan the actual program from conducting the needs assessment to recruiting. Chapter Three deals with the "sustenance" of volunteers once they have accepted a short-term assignment.

Chapter Two

PLANNING FOR EPISODIC VOLUNTEERING

Recruiting the Episodic Volunteer

The two types of episodic volunteer opportunities are those jobs or assignments in a volunteer program, organization, or agency that allow for service of short duration usually 3-4 months or less. The two primary types are 1) "one-time"- the volunteer who gives one time service; 2) "recurring"- the volunteer who works on a short duration project or assignment that recurs year after year.

Chapter One contained a checklist to assess a volunteer program and determine the preliminary possibilities for an episodic volunteering program. A review of that checklist is a good indicator of whether it is prudent to continue the development of an episodic volunteering program. The volunteer director or program manager needs commitment and support from throughout the organization to develop a new program.

Begin by asking the question, "Do we have episodic volunteers right now?" There may be volunteers serving on an episodic basis who have formal job descriptions and job placement. Conversely, the informal episodic volunteer is usually not supported by the formal mechanisms of the "regular" volunteer program. Usually the individual does not have a job description or a regular assignment.

There are three types of informal episodic volunteers.

1) Special Case This is a person who "drops-in" and can give a few hours or days of service. This person might be a volunteer's child home from college for a few days. 2) Special People The special person volunteer is often recruited to do a very specific task.

As a general rule this special person is skilled and does not have to be trained by the organization. An attorney recruited to examine a revision of the organization's by-laws is a "special person" volunteer. 3) Special Job The individual recruited for the special job may not need any identifiable skill to serve. It is the job that requires an influx of volunteers to complete a specific task. A hospital, for example, distributes an educational newsletter on a semi-annual basis. Preparing the newsletter for mailing, labels and zip code sorting, can be done by volunteers. The special job requires deft hands for a few hours/days.

These formal and informal volunteer positions can be the root for developing a full fledged episodic program. To do that however requires planning and implementation of an organized recruitment and support strategy. Use a clearly defined process to develop an episodic volunteer program and its success is assured. In this chapter we examine the strategies needed to effectively develop an episodic volunteer campaign and conduct recruitment.

The Needs Assessment

Any new program or service begins with a needs assessment. For the episodic volunteer program this includes identifying the current quality and quantity of service by volunteers and the perceived need for episodic volunteers in areas where they are not serving or to increase service in under-utilized areas.

A thorough review of current episodic volunteers should be part of the needs assessment. It includes such things as the numbers serving in the last 3-5 years (a trend indicator). For "recurring" volunteers it should include turnover and retention rates. Demographic information on episodic volunteers could be compared to "regular" volunteers. It is also important to collect anecdotal or narrative information from episodic volunteers.

The anecdotal information can tell you why a short-term assignment is appealing, how the person found out about the job, who trained them, and what suggestions they would have to improve the program. This information is increasingly useful as the program is developed. It also provides baseline information on how to attract people to short-term assignments.

In conducting a needs assessment on the episodic volunteer program it is important to consider specifically the need of the organization's natural constituencies; paid staff, current volunteers and most importantly the clients, members, or patrons.

In many organizations or agencies volunteers are placed in assignments where they are supervised by line staff, not the volunteer program manager. In this case it is critical to determine the needs of staff related to the placement of episodic volunteers. It would be a mistake to ask staff if they "want" the short-term assignment volunteer. Every supervisor wishes for personnel who are superior at their job and stay forever. It is more prudent to ask questions based on the fact that episodic volunteers are a reality for the future. For example:

- * What job tasks lend themselves to the assignment of episodic volunteers; "one-time" or "recurring?"
- * What training do they need before placement?
- * How can they be integrated with other volunteers?
- * What is an appropriate reward and recognition for these volunteers?

If staff do not directly supervise volunteers it is still critical to solicit their opinions on assignments most appropriate for episodic volunteers. For example:

- * How can we most effectively utilize the services of episodic volunteers; "one-time" or "recurring?"
- * How can we support the episodic volunteer?

The current volunteer corps need to be consulted on the development and implementation of an episodic volunteer program.

Here too it would be a mistake to ask, "Should we do this?" The loyalty of long-term volunteers means they value years of service. Given their choice, most like to see younger volunteers following in their footsteps. Like the staff, they need to be asked for input based on the premise that an episodic volunteer program is being developed.

The most effective way to engage the support of current volunteers is to involve them fully in the needs assessment and development process of the episodic volunteer program. The current volunteers know services and needs almost as well as staff. Their help in development and implementation is invaluable. An episodic volunteer committee made up of episodic volunteers, "regular" volunteers, staff, and clients, patrons, or members serves as the developers and implementors of the new program. Not only do all these people have a vested interest in the program, but they possess the most useful information for the needs assessment. In addition, they are likely to become the most effective proponents of the new program.

It is also critical to determine the perceptions of clients, members, or patrons in relation to the short-term volunteer. Depending on the size of the program a telephone or mail survey could be conducted.

Another effective needs assessment tool is the focus group. For the purpose of this assessment, a group of six to nine clients, members or patrons would convene to answer questions about an episodic volunteer program. The facilitator of the session must be an individual seen by the participants as neutral, preferably someone outside the agency. The session should be video-taped for review by the group assessing an episodic volunteer program.

This assessment process would seem to exclude the possibility of making a decision against an episodic volunteer program. Not true. By knowing the full expectations of the organization's or agency's constituencies, it is possible to make the most well-informed decision. Asking volunteers, paid staff and clients if they "want" an episodic volunteer program provides superficial answers.

But those responding to the type of needs assessment described here are forced to look at the full ramifications of instituting a volunteer program that will run parallel to the "regular" volunteer program. No stone is left unturned. A decision "to have or not to have" an episodic volunteer program is made based on the expectations of everyone concerned.

The Plan

If the decision is made, through the needs assessment to develop and implement a volunteer program, the next step is to establish a plan to accomplish the task. This includes setting an over-all goal, and smaller objective statements that describe in measurable increments the steps to be taken to implement the episodic volunteer program. This strategic planning process also serves as the foundation to evaluate the success of the total program.

The Job Description

One mistake to avoid is to take current jobs for volunteers and assume they can be done by episodic volunteers, as is! A primary task to be completed is the identification of new jobs that can be performed on a short-term basis, and the redesign of traditional volunteer jobs so they can be more appropriately assigned to the short-term volunteer.

The redesign of volunteer jobs starts with a task analysis. Industrial trainers break a complex manufacturing task down into component parts in order to develop incremental methods of teaching new employees. There are even standardized programs and systems for conducting a task analysis.

By analyzing the current volunteer jobs it can easily be determined if the possibility exists to develop episodic job assignments. The plain fact is, some jobs in the volunteer

movement cannot be done short-term.

In doing a task analysis you should consider three possibilities.

A. Can a big job be broken into parts? Camp Fire and Girl Scouts recruit adults to serve as "leaders" of young children. The usual expectation is for the "leader" to serve for one school year (preferably more than one year). A recurring episodic volunteer assignment of leader would be to have parents of the children or other adults serving for a specific short time (4 months; 2 months; one month) and to repeat that on an annual basis for the length of club or troop's life span.

B. Can a job be redesigned? A Board of Directors often establishes an array of standing committees. People recruited to those committees are expected to serve for a year or more. Some committee functions lend themselves to short assignments. For example, a task analysis might reveal how one function of the "Program Committee" is the evaluation of existing programs. This function could be carried out by an episodic volunteer committee recruited specifically for this task and reporting to the Board.

C. Can new jobs be created? A task analysis can also bring to the surface new jobs that might lend themselves to an episodic assignment. The Hospice "friendly visitor" program is designed for volunteers to visit with terminally ill patients and their families. Suppose a task analysis unearths the fact that 50% of the volunteers are being asked to carry out "errand" type tasks that take them away from the client and could be done by anyone, such as pick up groceries, sort mail, get library books. An episodic volunteer job could be developed that would match a traditional Hospice "friendly visitor" with an episodic volunteer on a three month assignment. The episodic volunteer completes the errands under the supervision of the long-term volunteer. This provides a much needed service to the "friendly visitor" volunteer and expands the service to the client and their family.

The task analysis is one method to design jobs for episodic volunteers. Another method of generating jobs is to consult the

paid staff or long-term volunteers. One way to do this is to develop a job request form specifically for episodic assignments. Directions need to encourage creativity and the development of jobs of the "one-time" or "recurring" volunteer.

The volunteer director or program manager cannot assume that volunteers or paid staff will understand how to complete the form or develop episodic volunteer jobs. A training session to encourage creativity in the development of new jobs or redesign of current ones is in order.

Screening

Screening episodic volunteers should have all the elements of screening for long-term volunteers. Screening includes written job descriptions, applications, interviews and contracts. Episodic volunteers should be expected to complete a similar process.

The only variations might be in the extent of scrutiny. For example, the application might be edited to fit on a 5 by 8 inch card. Essential information is present, but storage is easier. Interviews might be conducted by specially trained long-term volunteers. The paper work process might be carried out by long-term volunteers or support staff. Episodic volunteers should meet the same rigorous standards as other volunteers. Short-term should never be equated with sub-standard.

Advertising and Promotion

The development of the episodic volunteer program thus far has outlined steps to identify jobs and potential criteria for individuals to fill specific jobs. The process used is a target marketing strategy. Understanding the tasks and qualifications necessary to be successful in the episodic position, provides the information to develop a targeted advertising and promotion campaign. The most

effective way to start is to brainstorm a list of the kinds of people who could fill the positions. For example, the Hospice "errand" volunteer identified earlier might be recruited from college students studying social work or psychology. The advertising campaign is targeted to that group.

The advertising and promotion campaign focuses on the short-term nature of the assignment. While there may be a variety of benefits for an episodic volunteer job, the time commitment required is the primary one. Episodic volunteer advertising and promotion campaigns can be directed to such groups as retirees who spend part of the year in another geographic location, young professionals, college and high school students, young two-career families, and members of other voluntary groups like service clubs, church guilds, or bowling leagues.

The Recruiting Team

The use of a recruiting team could ease the burden of work on the volunteer director or program manager. The team can set numerical targets for recruiting, design the screening process, review job descriptions, design and carry out advertising and recruiting strategies. The volunteer program manager has a "work force" to implement the new program.

The volunteer program manager or director's role is that of cheerleader, coordinator of work, supervisor, mentor, and monitor. It is not doing the job, but seeing that the job is accomplished. It is management.

Chapter Three

SUSTENANCE: EPISODIC VOLUNTEER PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Providing Support for the Short-Term Volunteer

In the first chapter two types of episodic or short-term volunteer programs were defined, then a strategy to recruit the episodic volunteer was outlined. The development of a short-term volunteer program 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 their time of service.

Notice that the word used to describe support for the episodic volunteer is sustain. Sustain 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 is "to continue to support or preserve." (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary). The difference between sustain and maintenance is a subtle but significant one for the short-term volunteer.

Any supervision or support of the episodic volunteer is 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 in 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 the 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 director or coordinator 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 successfully complete the job, including the necessary tools (identifying clothing or hat, pin or badge, etc.) Then the task of the group is to decide the most effective means to prepare the person to do their job. This might include a notebook or a video tape prior to the event, on the job training, and a follow-up to determine what additional information

would have helped them do their job more effectively.

Training for episodic volunteers needs to use efficient and effective means to organize and deliver information so the volunteer can 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, or a one-to-one visit with another volunteer can begin the training process and build confidence in the volunteer that they are capable of doing the job.

The supervision and support of the short-term volunteer has 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 prompt, 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

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 education 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 the supervisor of volunteers who supervise other volunteers. This intriguing 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 in a variety of ways. 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 volunteers 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 are also able to identify 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 by 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 verbally 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 by 5 inch card 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 short-term volunteers can backfire. Any volunteer expects 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-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 continuously evaluated and up-dated 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 long-term volunteers. For that reason a variety of "things" and acknowledgements needs 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.

Additionally 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?

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 work force.

An attitude scale survey is distributed to members of the Evaluation Committee or key volunteers. The survey asks 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 they agree or disagree with the statement. At the meeting the participants review the 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; 2) areas in which training can be used to enhance short-term volunteer performance. Additionally, you might learn information about specific volunteer 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 of J.C. Penney's / 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. Volunteer youth 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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