

Minimizing Growing Pains

When a nonprofit starts a formal volunteer program, it's not uncommon to have a small corps of volunteers in place. They may have contributed many years of service. They may be members of group that founded or sponsored your agency, or they may have been helped by your organization in the past and have assisted since then. The challenge is finding ways to expand new volunteer involvement with the veterans' support.

Active volunteers are often the first to welcome volunteer program coordinators because they offer hope for continuity, better communication, more resources, and administrative skills that can make volunteers' work easier. But even if program expansion is desired by veterans, the first few months will be filled with "settling-in" issues. Program expansion means change—and that brings some discomfort.

The volunteer coordinator will soon be doing some tasks formerly handled by volunteers. Where does this leave "displaced" volunteer leaders? One good strategy is to form a "transition team" of current volunteers and staff to guide the new manager. Some of its tasks can:

- ◆ Identify what has been going well and where there are areas for improvement
- ◆ Document activities and achievements to date
- ◆ Survey current volunteers and paid staff for their input
- ◆ Conduct a needs assessment for new volunteer roles
- ◆ Draft a volunteer handbook.

The transition team should last at most six months. Later, if a management or advisory council is formed, some members of the team may be asked to extend their service, but by then new volunteers will be on board. It's vital to open the planning process to newcomers as early as possible, or else long-timers will become entrenched.

One area of resistance might come in the development of written job descriptions. Veterans may have been recruited years ago to "help out" and accrued many tasks since then. To expand the volunteer program, it's important to write job descriptions as a first step in recruiting and supervising more participants. Long-time volunteers may resist what this as an unnecessary formalization of their roles.

It's vital to clearly define all volunteer roles. Try calling a meeting and handing out a job description worksheet. Asking each individually to write down what she or he is doing. At the same time, ask a few paid staff to write down what they think the volunteers are doing.

Two results are possible: 1) everyone agrees—in which case you have just drafted a written job description; or 2) there is amazing variation in everyone's perception of their roles—in which case you've demonstrated why the process has value! You can then begin to discuss and negotiate what the job description should be.

The key is to assure veterans that your

goal is not to take away or add tasks (if that is your goal, be honest and suggest alternative jobs to do). Emphasize that the process is to keep things clear, especially if new volunteers are going to join.

If long-time volunteers are openly averse to program expansion, it may be necessary for the agency's administrator to meet with them. Volunteers want to be supportive, and they have a track record of service. If

the administrator makes it clear that the actions are best for the organization's service goals, it may make a difference.

Some veterans may only want their experience to be acknowledged. They may respond to an invitation to design a new volunteer orientation session, give a facility tour, or buddy up with new volunteers.

Be prepared, however: Some volunteers may leave. If they do, try to provide them

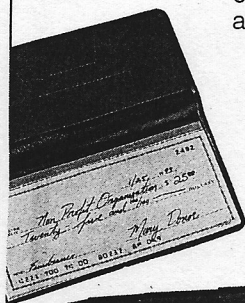
with a "graceful exit"—some form of recognition for their generous service.

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Susan Ellis, president of **ENERGIZE**, a Philadelphia-area training, publishing, and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism, is author of *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success*.

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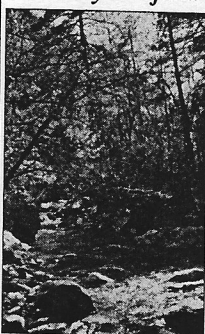
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