

Starting a Volunteer Program in an Organization

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PROGRAM PLANNING

Instituting a new volunteer program or reenergizing an existing one involves a process that covers a range of management functions—from needs assessment, volunteer position development, and recruitment, to supervision, evaluation, and recognition. These processes are interdependent and together create a synergy that will enliven your volunteer program. Once instituted, an effective approach to volunteer management will perpetuate itself.

Planning a volunteer program within an organization means changing standard practices and routines. Funds must be acquired and budgeted, relationships must be formed to link the volunteer program into the organization, job descriptions and working relationships must be modified, and policies created and approved to accommodate care recipients.

There are many advantages to establishing a volunteer program beyond that of accomplishing a job with minimal expense. Involving the community in volunteer programs increases public support and helps them understand the work and planning behind management decisions. With volunteers,

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you can expand existing programs beyond the limits imposed by personnel ceilings and budget reductions and begin and complete projects more efficiently. Instituting a volunteer program is not easy nor can it be done instantaneously. Planning a volunteer program includes job development, interviewing, supervision, evaluation, and recognition.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The first step in volunteer program planning involves conducting a needs assessment of the local communities the program will serve and making decisions as to whether the volunteer program can help meet some of those needs. Organize a half-day needs assessment retreat for your organization centered around the question: “If we had more time or expertise, we would...” This exercise can help you create a more abundant selection of volunteer opportunities that address the important organizational needs your staff can not currently address. It is also the first step toward realizing the potential of professionals, and towards helping staff see volunteers as a resource and not competition.



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Questions to ask before conducting a needs assessment

1. What is your organizational vision and mission?
2. What are you trying to accomplish in your community? What is the program's purpose?
3. How do volunteers fit into the program's mission, strategies, and goals?
4. How could volunteers best meet the program's needs to serve more people and make a greater difference in the community?
5. How can volunteers help meet program goals?

The Purpose Statement:
is a written statement that explains the object for which anything exists or is done or made

Example: The purpose of the Grand View Food Bank Volunteer Program is to coordinate the distribution of donated food to those in need in the community through the efforts of volunteers.

Whom to Ask

The incorporation of a volunteer program into an organization can impose many changes in the jobs and working relationships of paid staff. A joint planning process where organization leaders, staff, board members, care recipients, and current volunteers are able to share their needs and perspectives is vital. In the joint planning process, the parties work to overcome differences and reach agreement on how the volunteer program can be most effectively designed, organized and managed to pursue its mission and goals.

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How to Gather Information

There are several methods for conducting a needs assessment – interviews, telephone surveys, mail surveys, focus groups, e-mail or web surveys. The pros and cons of the different methods are weighed in a

chart at the end of this document.. Volunteer programs will select a method

Who Has a Stake in Strengthening or Starting Your Volunteer Program?

- Staff
- Current volunteers
- Clients and program participants
- Community organizations
- Advisory groups
- Potential volunteers

How Can I Determine Our Volunteer Needs?

- Interviews
- Tests
- Surveys
- Task forces
- An analysis of existing information (called a content analysis)
- SWOT analysis
-

See Appendix A for a more detailed list-

for conducting a needs assessment based on resources available, staff time , and the availability of different types of resources in the community.

In an organization that has paid staff, a volunteer coordinator should begin the process of creating volunteer jobs by

gaining staff involvement. Volunteers

are best utilized with staff support. Volunteer coordinators should consult with staff in the process of volunteer program development.

It is important to engage staff by discussing the needs of their program as and where they are having problems reaching their goals.



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Questionnaire to assess staff attitudes:

The level of experience of paid staff working with volunteers.

- Have they ever supervised volunteers before?
- Have they ever worked in an agency that involved volunteers?
- Do they volunteer themselves at an agency?

The level of comfort of staff in working with volunteers.

- Are there positions that staff feel volunteers should not be doing?
- Are there program elements, such as additional staff training that should be instituted before volunteers are placed?

The level of fears that staff feel towards working with volunteers.

- Are there risk management issues?
- Are there worries about loss of staff jobs?

Volunteer Advisory Committee:

Another model and an excellent use of volunteers is a volunteer advisory committee organized specifically to benefit the volunteer program. It serves as a support for the volunteer program, and its function is to provide advice.

Recommendation: The position description for advisory board members should clarify that policies about the volunteer program are subject to

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approval by the Board of Directors. Advisory committee members should understand that they are not there to give orders but to advise and assist.

What Do I Do When I Have Compiled the Results?

- Make a list of the benefits that can be created for the organization, its mission, and the people it serves by involving volunteers in specific ways.
- Make sure the results are shared with those who can help build or rebuild the volunteer program.
- Use the information to guide your unit in the planning process to improve or create a volunteer program.
- Draft project descriptions with clearly state goals and objectives and engage volunteers in designing the implementation strategy.
- Design project-based volunteer opportunities that reflect the long-term volunteer involvement your organization desires.
- Consider what short-term, high impact project you can create that will make use of the skills adults have accumulated in their work lives.
- Explore volunteer position sharing and team volunteering options when developing projects.
- Think creatively about projects that could be done by groups of volunteers at various times throughout the year.
- Design and frame your volunteer projects as if you were engaging consultants or project managers. Let volunteers play an active role in setting project goals, procedures, and timelines to help build their commitment to the work.
- Provide opportunities for advancement. Reward increased commitment and accomplishments with increased recognition and responsibility.
- Ask volunteers what skills they wish to develop or competencies they need to demonstrate.
- Develop a volunteer track for volunteers specifically looking for continued and increased involvement.



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MISSION AND VISION

Effective volunteer program planning begins with the mission of the program. As a volunteer coordinator, you hold an important key to turning the mission into action. It is your job to develop and fill volunteer positions in order to provide the services and care highlighted in the mission. Volunteer programs therefore facilitate the kinds of volunteer participation that will allow the organization to accomplish its mission. Even for established programs, revisiting the mission statement can be helpful when considering an expansion of services or when changes occur in the population or geographic area served by the program.

Mission statements can talk about meeting a need, solving a problem, or defining an organization's purpose. An organization's mission statement is usually no more than a brief paragraph that pinpoints the specific reason(s) for being. (McCurley, p. 11)

An Example of a Mission Statement

The Mission of the Grand View Food Bank is to provide surplus, gleaned, donated, and purchased food to the poor.

Often an organization will also have a stated "vision" that expands on the mission with a description of a desired future. The vision is a mental image or view of broad elements that an organization or program wishes to accomplish, based on its mission. The vision clarifies the future the program is try-



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ing to create. It has been found that a program's volunteers are most effective when there is a broadly understood and widely articulated vision of the role of volunteers in fulfilling the program's mission. When considering a di-

Examples of a Vision Statement

The Grand View Food Bank was organized to address the issue of poor nutrition and hunger among those living in poverty in the town of Grand View. The organization mobilizes volunteers and staff to acquire surplus food-stuffs that can be given to the hungry. It also works to educate anyone interested in the rudiments of healthy eating.

rection for your volunteer program that is based on the mission and vision, revisit the questions on page 3 of this document.

Use the answers to these questions to help you outline a strategy for using volunteers. Consult with volunteers, staff, and others—such as coalition members and board or advisory committee members—who know and understand the organization. Together you can devise a mission-based strategy for working with volunteers.



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VOLUNTEER PROGRAM TRACKING SYSTEMS

Most volunteer programs have a large computer database with addresses, hours served, awards presented, and other vital information. The most direct means by which computers can streamline the management process is with the use of a volunteer database, made possible by one of the many different types of software. Organizations can create their own if they have such programs as,

- Microsoft Access, Filemaker Pro, Excel, or Lotus Approach.
- For a listing of pre-packaged volunteer tracking software, contact nonprofit.gov@PointsofLight.org.

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Steps to ensure an effective database:

- **Create a Records Advisory Team.** This can be volunteers who use the database or have knowledge about databases.
- **Create a written process for working with the database.** Written documents about database instructions mean there is less chance for error.
- **There needs to be a Record keeping King or Queen.** While several people might be keeping the records up-to-date, one person needs to take the lead and report to the volunteer coordinator.
- **Train, train, train.** Volunteers using the record-keeping database are less likely to make mistakes if they are trained. Volunteers need to attend upgrade training as the program is improved.
- **Limit the access.** The only people who can access the database are those with training, and that includes other paid staff. It is easy to do this by using the security parts of the program in the database. The King or Queen of the database should be in charge of access.
- **Clean up.** Many volunteers serve in more than one capacity and that makes it likely they may appear more than once in the database. There should be a regular system for eliminating duplicates in the records and checking the accuracy of the information, you have.
- **Stay on top of Input.** Keep the database viable by timely input of data. This is an ideal job for teens or college students in computer classes—under the supervision of the King or Queen of the Data Base. A good database is only useful if you make changes regularly.
- **Make a maintenance schedule.** Most databases systems have ways to identify problems. Establish a check-up system.
- **Think disaster.** Organize a disaster plan. Back up records once per month in an off-site location, e.g. get the software vendor for your program to make some suggestions and/or involve technology savvy volunteers in this planning.



Adapted from <http://www.volunteertoday.com/May02managesuper.html>

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APPENDIX A: Methods for Conducting Needs Assessments

Interviews

PRO

Can get the highest quality data
Offers the potential to ask more questions
Can record non verbal responses that are nonverbal

Best completion or return rate

CON

Is expensive
Takes a long time to complete
Interviewer bias can skew the results

Telephone Surveys

PRO

Inexpensive
Short completion time
Easy to organize
Can be done after work hours

CON

Can be perceived by respondent as a nuisance
Must have trained interviewers or can lose validity and reliability
Can lose flexibility
No visual cues or information

Mail Surveys

PRO

People can remain anonymous
Can be done on respondent's time table

CON

Very costly
Has low return rate (15%-20%)
No two way communication
Need to have the questions designed by person who knows how to do it—expensive
No chance to correct confusion on part of the subject.

Focus Groups

PRO

Free exchange of information
Can address various areas of concern
Uses an experienced facilitator to get the best results
Inexpensive

CON

Need more than one group to insure the validity of results
Need to keep record of what is said
People need to know clearly their purpose or they can go off of the topic

Email/Web Surveys

PRO

Quick
Inexpensive
Reach a lot of people easily

CON

No two way communication
Need expertise to design questions—can be expensive
No chance to correct confusion on part of the subject.
Responses not anonymous



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WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION

Looking for more information on volunteer program planning or want to access resources we used? Check out these references:

1. Volunteer Management Catalog of the Points of Light Foundation
www.PointsofLight.org/catalog at 1-800-272-8306 or marketplace@PointsofLight.org for publications on many topics including marketing and media.
2. McCurley, Steve and Rick Lynch. *Volunteer Management: Mobilizing All the Resources of the Community*. Downers Grove, IL: Heritage Arts Publishing, 1996.
3. McCurley, Steve, and Rick Lynch. *Essential Volunteer Management*. London: Directory of Social Change, 1997.
4. Wolf, Thomas. *Managing a Nonprofit Organization in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Fireside Books, 1997.
5. Macduff, Nancy. *Volunteer Screening: An Audio Workbook*. Walla Walla, WA: MBA Publishing, 1996.
6. Energize, Inc. <http://www.energizeinc.com>
7. Volunteer Today <http://www.volunteertoday.com>
8. Budgeting for Volunteer Programs www.PointsofLight.org (Navigation: Resources/Tip Sheets and Resource Packets]

