



# A Friendly Atmosphere for Your Volunteers

**Office of Planning, Research,  
and Evaluation**

**Christopher Cihlar Ph.D.**

© 2004 Points of Light Foundation – The Points of Light Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to engaging people and resources more effectively in volunteer service to help solve serious social problems. This material may not be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval systems, for any purpose, other than nonprofit use for volunteer program building, without prior written permission from the Foundation.



## **A Friendly Atmosphere for Your Volunteers**

### **Introduction**

The success of any volunteer organization relies on its ability to attract and retain dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers. Individuals who commit their time and effort to volunteer projects do so for a wide variety of reasons and, unlike the workplace where job promotions and economic incentives often provide management with the tools necessary to maintain a properly motivated work force, the management of volunteers is not so easily accomplished. There is an art and a science to managing volunteers. The “art” reflects a combination of interpersonal skills necessary to motivate and retain an unpaid workforce. The “science” consists of being aware of and following sound management practices.

This paper provides a background on management techniques that promote volunteer friendliness. Because the level of the volunteer friendliness of an organization directly impacts volunteer satisfaction and it is around this satisfaction that the success of a volunteer organization ultimately hinges, the importance of a sound management strategy dedicated to volunteer friendliness cannot be overstated. In addition, young people often times play crucial roles as volunteers yet their needs can differ dramatically from their adult counterparts. The satisfaction felt by young people with their volunteer work is particularly important because volunteer experiences in childhood often times shapes a life pattern of volunteering. Therefore, the second section of this report examines more closely various strategies for incorporating young people into volunteer projects and highlights some of the unique issues working with this group entails.

### **Part I: Lessons Learned**

The most important determinants of volunteer satisfaction are the quality of job assignments volunteers receive and the way they are treated by organization staff. Organizations need to formulate specific strategies to enhance volunteer utilization and satisfaction. These efforts are likely to result in more volunteers who are harder working, motivated and satisfied with their positions. In addition, volunteer friendly strategies result in more and larger financial contributions, stronger long-term commitment among program participants and create loyalty among volunteers and financial contributors.

The level of “Volunteer-friendliness” present in an organization is comprised of many things. In volunteer friendly establishments paid staff, policies and programs provide a positive, pleasant and rewarding experience for both current and prospective volunteers. They concentrate on treating their volunteers well and with respect. They ensure volunteers are not taken for granted but, instead, are viewed as valuable resources. They make it easy and convenient to volunteer and they offer flexible hours and work assignments that interest the participants.

To help achieve volunteer-satisfaction, a conceptual model of the four major components involved in the process has been developed. They include: (1) Volunteer Attraction and Recruitment, (2) Initial Personal Interaction with an Organization Staff, (3) Volunteer Utilization and Assignment, and (4) Post-Volunteering Follow-Up. Each is discussed briefly below.

### **Volunteer Attraction and Recruitment**

Volunteer attraction and recruitment should be an essential component of any strategy emphasizing ‘volunteer-friendliness.’ Marketing strategies should be designed to attract and recruit volunteers by focusing on the significant impact volunteering can have on community, state and national problems and on the exciting, satisfying and intrinsic rewards inherent in volunteering. This effort will markedly increase the volunteer’s understanding of the importance of the program /organization prior to his/her joining the group thus increasing that individuals interest and commitment to the project.

A second key component of volunteer attraction and recruitment should be a general commitment to matching the volunteer’s ability and interests/skills with volunteer work activities. Successful attraction and retention of volunteers requires that the volunteer enjoy his/her work and that the volunteer feels he/she is in a unique position to contribute. A recruiting strategy that accurately portrays the work the volunteer will be performing is most likely to attract volunteers with significant interest and a long-term commitment.

### **Initial Personal Interaction with Program Staff**

The volunteer’s initial interaction with program staff sets the tone for the entire volunteer experience. First impressions matter. Therefore staff policies/procedures should be developed and the staff trained to deal with prospective volunteers in a way that:

- Welcomes the person and express appreciation.
- Reaffirms the ease and simplicity of volunteering.
- Reiterates the commitment to match interests and skills with assignments.
- Emphasizes flexible scheduling
- Collects basic information about the volunteer and provide basic information about organization.
- Solidifies the commitment to volunteer.
- Schedules the next step in the volunteer process.

### **Volunteer Utilization and Assignment**

Successful volunteer organizations recognize the time constraints under which their volunteers live and make available flexible and short term assignments to fit the volunteer’s busy schedule. Further, they formulate an effective orientation/training program and develop volunteer assignments that:

- Express appreciation for the volunteer’s work and time.
- Instill a sense of teamwork among volunteers and staff.

- Offer convenient, flexible scheduling.
- Involve meaningful, significant and enjoyable work.
- Attempt to match with one's interests and always include supportive supervision.
- Offer opportunities for input.
- Provide for frequent positive feedback.

### **Post-Volunteering Follow-Up Plan**

The volunteer's association with the volunteer organization should not end with the completion of any particular project or task. Therefore a post volunteer plan is essential. Effective follow up plans incorporate the following components:

- Formal recognition and appreciation for the volunteer's work and time.
- An exit interview or survey that allows the volunteer to contribute to future planning.
- Encouragement of positive referrals to other prospective volunteers.
- Continuing contact with the volunteer through a newsletter, periodic mailing or get together.
- A way to quickly notify the volunteer of future projects in a way that makes the individual feel his or her skill set would be important to the project's success.
- Low-pressure solicitations for donations.

### **Action Plan**

Volunteer satisfaction is a key component of any successful volunteer organization. In order to better integrate the conceptual model described above into the day-to-day activities of an organization the creation of an action plan is often times quite effective. A successful action plan to improve volunteer friendliness should include three key components. First, a thorough assessment of current organizational friendliness should be conducted so strengths and weaknesses might be properly identified. Second, specific improvement strategies should be developed and implemented in order to address organizational weaknesses. Finally, improvement strategies should be monitored so the effectiveness of the changes can be evaluated. A sample action plan is provided below.

### **Action Plan to Enhance Volunteer Satisfaction**

#### **Step One – Assessment**

A comprehensive objective assessment will provide an overview of a organization's/program's strengths and weaknesses in "volunteer-friendliness." The results can then be used to identify and prioritize areas for improvement.

#### **Examine policies and practices in the following seven areas.**

##### **Organizational Commitment**

Does the organization have a full-time volunteer coordinator? Is a computerized database containing information about volunteers maintained? Do evaluations of the effectiveness of volunteer programs occur on a regular basis?

### **Organization Staff**

Are staff members receiving training about how to successfully interact with volunteers? Do evaluations of the effectiveness of paid staffers in interacting with volunteers occur regularly?

### **Volunteer Attraction and Recruitment**

Does the program have a written plan, with target goals, designed to recruit volunteers? Are there formal procedures to solicit prospective volunteer skills and interests? Are inquiries from prospective volunteers responded to efficiently?

### **Volunteer Orientation/Training**

Is there a formal procedure which matches volunteer skills and interests with work requirements? Does the program provide an orientation or training program to all volunteers?

### **Volunteer Work Assignments**

Does the organization have flexible work options for volunteers? Are work assignments for volunteers interesting, satisfying, and motivating? Do volunteers typically have fun while working?

### **Volunteer Recognition**

Does the organization regularly recognize and thank volunteers? Does the organization hold regular volunteer recognition events?

### **Volunteer Satisfaction Survey**

Are there periodic written surveys of volunteer satisfaction? Are the results from volunteer satisfaction surveys used to improve volunteer programs?

### **Step Two -- Strategy**

After identifying and prioritizing program weaknesses, efforts should be directed to formulating and implementing specific improvement strategies.

### **Step Three -- Monitoring**

After specific improvement strategies have been implemented, it is essential that someone monitor their effectiveness. If the strategy is not working, modifications or revisions might be needed

## **Indicators of Successful Volunteer Programs**

There are a wide range of volunteer programs and the above discussion was designed to apply in a general manner to them. It is expected that individual programs will have unique needs and it is likely modifications to the above suggestions will be necessary. However, an organization attempting to adhere to these suggestions would likely expect their organization to improve in some tangible and measurable way. Indicators of a successful volunteer program may be divided into

two general categories, improvements internal to the program and improvements which impact current or potential volunteers. While it is not possible to list all markers, examples for each of the two categories are listed below.

**Program improvements:**

- Attraction and recruitment of new volunteers.
- Retention of current volunteers.
- Increase in volunteer productivity.
- Higher numbers of volunteers.
- More hours available from volunteers.
- Word-of-mouth referrals to potential volunteers.
- Reduced workload for regular staff.
- The ability of staff and volunteers to accomplish more projects.
- Greater number of donors making financial contributions.

**Favorable Impact on Potential and Current Volunteers:**

- Increased knowledge of the program/organization.
- Higher level of interest in the program/organization.
- Greater interest in volunteering.
- Motivation to work hard in volunteer assignment.
- Motivation to continue performing volunteer work.
- Satisfaction with volunteer work.
- Attachment and commitment to the program/organization.
- Willingness to donate to the program/organization.
- Continuing financial support over time.

**Part II: Youth Volunteering**

Volunteer organizations rely, by their very nature, on the availability of a pool of volunteers. These volunteers come from a myriad of different backgrounds and engage in an extensive range of activities. However, one theme that reaches across this diverse group and unites a large portion of them is the fact that their history of volunteering began in early childhood. This pattern is dramatic and by the time an individual reaches even his/her teenage years an ingrained pattern of volunteering is likely to have developed. In fact, teens who volunteered as children were more than three times more likely to volunteer as adolescents than their counterparts who had not.

Not only does childhood volunteering set in motion a pattern that is likely to remain strong throughout the individual's life a number of very real differences exist between children who volunteer and those who do not.

- Volunteering youths were found to have experienced more psychological, social, and intellectual growth than non-volunteering youths.
- Young volunteers develop a more socially responsible perspective.

- Volunteer work exposes children to real life examples of values-driven action. Through it, children learn how to interact and respond to people in the community who are in need of their help and develop a deeper understanding of the scope of community need.

The importance of recruiting youthful volunteers cannot be understated but one question remains, what does it take to recruit youths to volunteer to help others and improve America's communities? According to a study released done by US Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics - which reinforces earlier findings on this same subject - just ask and most will say yes. In fact, according to the study, 93 percent of teenagers who were asked to volunteer actually did. In contrast, only 24 percent who were not asked directly to volunteer actually took it upon themselves to seek out and perform volunteer work.

Of course who was asked to volunteer likely had a great impact on these results and it is not meant to imply if you took a random sample of teens and asked them to volunteer the results would be so dramatic. A culture of volunteering is established at home and role models are important. Six out of ten adults who reported that they saw members of their family volunteer when they were young currently volunteer. This compares to only slightly more than one-third of adults who volunteer and, as children, were not exposed to this behavior. Volunteering is clearly related to social networks. Parents can promote such activity through examples set by personal involvement in the community and through reinforcement of their children's interests.

### **Basic principles for youth volunteering programs:**

Young people have unique needs and extra steps should be taken to ensure the volunteer experiences for them are both enjoyable and perceived as being valuable. In bullet form below are five principles which should guide youth volunteering programs.

- Social change is possible and children can help bring about that change
- Children should experience social action as a regular part of family life rather than "extra" work need to be done
- Children should be regularly invited to participate in social action that are within their capabilities.
- Children should have broad exposure to advocates, victims, and a variety of different situations.
- Fun should be integrated whenever possible

### **Family Volunteering:**

One particularly valuable way in which young people can be exposed to the value of volunteering is through 'Family Volunteering'. The term means exactly what the name implies, that is families volunteer, in whatever capacity they choose, together as a unit. The importance of modeling family volunteering to society, and agencies, are well documented and benefits of family volunteering

include bringing the family closer together, a strengthening of value systems, (both religious and not), quality family time, and a family feeling that they are giving back to the community.

In addition both adults and children see this type of volunteering in unique ways and derive other benefits from the experience. In particular one major benefit identified by parents is their leaving of a legacy and the instillation of values in their children. Children on the other hand often times identify the perception that volunteering expands their world view and helps ready them for the real world.

There are however, for the young people, some drawbacks to this particular type of volunteering. Children occasionally feel they are not as independent when volunteering with family, would rather be with friends than family and, especially for teenagers, believe volunteering with parents can be a social stigma. Because of this stigma, family volunteering can drop off during teenage years.

### **Intergenerational volunteering**

A second type of volunteering that can be particularly beneficial for young people is intergenerational volunteering. Communication between people of very different ages often times is considered by both parties to be of special importance.

Studies show intergenerational contact fosters favorable images and attitudes of the younger generation towards older persons. Likewise, older volunteers, particularly those who have little other contact with young people, often develop an empathy for younger generations that did not previously exist.

Intergenerational community service programs, when developed along sound program planning principles, invoke powerful communication and social support dynamics that not only have a significant impact on the lives of the participants but also generate community improvements and help establish a sense of cultural identity and continuity.

Promotion of intergenerational volunteering programs is necessary for a variety of reasons. These reasons include:

- To define areas of social problems change
- To increase public knowledge about volunteering
- To garner community support for volunteering
- To secure future expansion and/or maintenance of volunteering

Intergenerational volunteering programs are one way to meet the needs of the changing family. Though some intergenerational family mentoring and respite programs currently exist, the need for such supports far outweighs the supply.

### **Conclusions**

This paper was meant to provide a broad overview on volunteer management. Depending upon a particular organization's needs and program activities there exists a wide range of more topic specific literature. Elizabeth Caplan, and Kathryn Schutte study, "*Community Service Participation as Enrichment: Rationale, Outcomes, and Best Practices*" is an excellent piece on creating volunteer friendly organizations and Paul Light's "*The Volunteering Decision: What Prompts It? What Sustains It?*" explores volunteer retention. Kristen Porritt's piece, "*Family Volunteering: The Ties That Bind: An introduction to preparing your agency for family volunteers*" further examines the concept of family volunteering and Nancy Henkin and Eric Kingson article "*Advancing an Intergenerational Agenda for the Twenty-First Century*" better details intergenerational volunteering. Finally, Connie K. Schondel, and Kathryn E. Boehm's article "*Motivational Needs of Adolescent Volunteers*" provides a discussion of teenage volunteers.

The examples listed above are just a small example of the large body of literature presently available to those seeking to improve their volunteer management practices. Organizations should take advantage of this vast array of information so that volunteer management can more efficiently and effectively attend to the unique needs of their most valuable resource, their volunteers.



POINTS  
OF LIGHT  
FOUNDATION  
&  
VOLUNTEER CENTER  
NATIONAL NETWORK

Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation  
The Points of Light Foundation  
1400 I Street, NW Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20005  
Tel: 202-729-8192  
Fax: 202-729-8181  
[Research@PointsofLight.org](mailto:Research@PointsofLight.org)