

COMMUNITY BUILDING

WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS

Best Practices

Volunteers are the lifeblood of many communities. Many communities address issues and accomplish tasks solely using volunteer help. Often, projects, events and activities wouldn't happen without the time, commitment and support of volunteers. To sustain and expand the volunteer base in a community, the following are important points to consider:

- Volunteers are valuable assets – treat them as such. Value all volunteers.
- It's very important to recruit, inspire and motivate volunteers effectively to get a job done.
- Focus on open communication about what is going on in the community and how people can become involved.
- Always communicate positively about volunteers and their activities if you expect others to show interest.
- Make volunteering in a community easy and rewarding.
- Recognize that burnout of existing volunteers is a reality and implement ways to reduce this hazard.
- Don't overlook youth.
- Give people opportunities to change what they are involved in.
- Make sure there is a planned volunteer program, including a good system of managing and supporting volunteer workers in the community.
- Setting goals people feel are important and developing ways to achieve those goals are key to getting people involved and keeping them involved.
- Visible change keeps people involved. On long term projects, ensure there are short term achievements that keep volunteers inspired and motivated to continue.
- Make sure expectations are high, but realistic. Unrealistic goals lead to disappointment and resignation.

- Make sure volunteers understand they aren't personally liable for actions performed in good faith in the public service. State statute and jurisdictional policies cover volunteers in the performance of their duties (barring any gross malfeasance in office).
- Perceived or not, many people feel there are barriers to involvement, such as how long you have lived in a community, who you know, or where you may live in town. It's important to recognize any barriers and attempt to tear them down.
- Determine what keeps willing people away and then address the problem.
- Reward volunteer involvement. To feel involved, useful and important, volunteers must know they are doing a good job. They need to receive rewards for their time and effort. To find out what volunteers need for a reward, ask them. Build in rewarding volunteers as part of the job.
- Create job descriptions for volunteers and make them widely available so anyone interested in volunteering knows what is expected in time, talent and interest.
- Create a volunteer agreement detailing their rights and responsibilities for both parties to sign.
- When volunteers work with youth, research and implement a screening system to maximize the protection of youth.
- Make jobs doable. If a job grows too large, divide the tasks into manageable pieces and distribute the responsibilities.
- Set time limitations for jobs (other than political) to make activities more attractive and manageable.
- Make participation accessible for those currently unable to participate by providing transportation, car-pooling or childcare.
- Research all the sources in the community to create an inventory of potential volunteers in the community.
- Inclusiveness and diversity are necessary to continue expansion of the pool of volunteers. Groups in the community often forgotten as a source of potential volunteers may include the disabled, minorities, unemployed, youth, elderly, businesses, government officials, and seasonal residents. An effective volunteer recruitment program should include identifying all the different groups in town, taking into consideration the unique circumstances for each group in how they can be engaged in the community effectively.
- Conduct volunteer education and training programs so people interested in volunteering know what is expected of them. People who may want to volunteer but fear they have nothing to contribute will see they can be a valuable addition to the community.

- Consider appointing a person to coordinate volunteers in the community. This could be a staff person or a volunteer. This person will be a central resource for all government and non-profit organizations as well as for people interested in volunteering. He/She could match up volunteers, offer orientation and training programs help coordinate reward/recognition events, and provide other types of assistance.
- Set up a simple yet useful system for tracking volunteer information, including number of hours worked, who volunteers are and what tasks are accomplished. This information is useful for grant writing and when rewarding/recognizing volunteers.
- Ensure volunteers are invited to contribute to decision making and planning processes where appropriate.
- Offer a wide variety of tasks – to be completed at home, on-site, weekends, weekdays, evenings, skilled, unskilled – so there is at least one thing for which an individual can volunteer.
- Be sure tasks are interesting and challenging.
- Be sure the work environment is cheerful, organized and productive.
- Make sure the job offers value and meaning to the volunteers.
- Make sure the volunteer has the equipment, tools and other resources to allow them to do their job effectively.
- Ask volunteers for feedback regularly.
- Reimburse out-of-pocket expenses when volunteers have been authorized to make expenditures.

Resources:

Building Communities from the Grassroots – Community Development Academy, University of Missouri