

# COMMUNITY BUILDING

## WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS

Today, many communities are managed in large part by volunteers. Volunteers hold elected positions in government, lead and run community boards and organizations, operate fire departments, raise funds for schools, and are stewards of a community's natural resources. The time, energy and resources they bring are critical to the community's existence. As financial and paid human resources are allocated to address complex and critical community issues, volunteer resources step in to fill the gap. More and more in rural communities, volunteers are the lifeblood of a community's day-to-day functioning.

At the same time, individuals find more and more obligations competing for their limited time, including employment, commuting and families. As community members are pulled in numerous directions, many want to volunteer in their community but just "don't have the time." They care about the community and want to work for community well-being, but need help to make it work for them. They do have an ever increasing array of volunteer opportunities to choose from.

These challenges are also being faced by many nonprofit organizations, such as charities, which rely largely on volunteers. Communities and these organizations need to rethink how they attract, use and work with their volunteers for the benefit of everyone involved. Many communities have already recognized this fact and have made great strides in making full use of the existing talent pool, recognizing efforts made by volunteers, and exploring approaches to increase and coordinate both the numbers and diversity of volunteers.

There are several good reasons for making a community "volunteer-friendly"

**Volunteers save money.** In 2000, the dollar value of one hour of volunteer work was \$14.83. By working with volunteers, a community can do a lot of very valuable work without having to find the funds for salaries.

**Volunteers bring needed skills.** Many volunteers have specialized skills or knowledge that your community occasionally needs, but doesn't have the funds to pay for. A volunteer who donates their skills to the community on an "as-needed" basis can get often accomplish tasks more quickly than having to find the funds or go through the bureaucratic processes to hire a professional.

**Volunteers bring renewed energy and enthusiasm.** Volunteers, especially newcomers, can bring a fresh perspective and enthusiasm for their work to a community. They can help revitalize current volunteers and may help move projects in exciting new directions.

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**Volunteers increase community ownership.** The more community members involved in a project, the easier it is to gain support for the work. Also, by using volunteers from a community, the project goals are likely to be “in tune” with what the community wants.

Communities are a wealth of volunteer resources. However, many times it is the same small cadre of committed volunteers who perform the majority of the volunteer work. Burnout of these crucial, dedicated individuals is inevitable. Communities need to revisit their current volunteer system to recognize, recruit, retain and reward their volunteers effectively. Communities embarking on such a restructuring or those considering implementing a volunteer program, should consider most, if not all, the following steps of an effective volunteer program.

1. Have reasons and a rationale for wanting volunteers
2. Develop job descriptions
3. Recruit volunteers
4. Screen potential volunteers
5. Conduct orientation of volunteers
6. Train volunteers
7. Supervise volunteers
8. Retain volunteers
9. Evaluate volunteers
10. Recognize efforts and achievements

Planning and implementing an organized community volunteer program will help it run more smoothly and easily. Individuals volunteer in their communities to make a difference. Many times, the incentive to continue is to see the fruits of their labors. Planning and effective coordination of volunteers will help ensure that volunteers and the groups they work with set realistic goals, and design and implement short and long term strategies to attain them.

By linking individuals to their community through volunteer work, a community builds its capacity to shape and create its future. Through involving members in meaningful, valued public work, communities strengthen their ability to function and be sustained in the future. Through involving youth in volunteer work, communities develop involved citizens of tomorrow.

**Resources:**

The Community Tool Box, Kansas State University (<http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/tools>) Giving and Volunteering in the United States, Independent Sector, Washington, D.C.