

Finding and Retaining Volunteers

A compilation of techniques from our panel of experts

Before you begin your volunteer program

- Identify your mission, help clarify why people should care or want to volunteer/work for your organization
- Clarify why you engage volunteers to accomplish your mission
- Create clear job descriptions and schedules so potential volunteers know what opportunities are available
- Create a volunteer agreement outlining rules, code of conduct, expectations, and job duties
- Create a volunteer application
 - Include interests, work history, lifting limitations
 - Put a link to the application on the org FB page and Website
 - Keep applications at the worksite, for walk-ins
 - Respond quickly to applications—it shows respect
- Create a Volunteer agreement and policies and procedures for the board, staff and volunteers
 - Include sexual harassment, code of conduct, and expectations of volunteers
 - Follow the policies. Volunteers who are sexually harassed or work in an environment of drama will quit and tell their friends why. It's a downward spiral and the org looks really bad
- Create a uniform: It helps volunteers feel "a part of the team." Examples include: Tee shirts, aprons, jackets, hats

Actively seek volunteers

- Place article in local newspaper
- Post it on organization's Facebook page
- Include it in newsletters and donor letters
- Post it on organization's website
- Ask staff/volunteers to invite friends
- Reach out to diverse agencies and groups, to people different than you to recruit diverse volunteers

Meet the applicant

- Find their passion – find a way for people to get involved that will inspire them
- Discuss their interests, availability, limitations
- Discuss the organization and the positions that are available
- Answer questions
- Show the applicant the worksite during program operation

Set volunteers up for success

- Read through the Volunteer Agreement with the volunteer. Have the volunteer sign it and keep it in a file. Clarify rules, code of conduct, expectations, and job duties—BEFORE they start working! Setting "ground rules" right away can prevent having to fire a volunteer later
- Provide training on their duties and how the duties impact your services. Answer questions, make sure the volunteer feels comfortable in their new role. If necessary, work with them to get them started, or pair them with a long term volunteer to learn from
- Be flexible – volunteers aren't employees. Have grace for mistakes and no-shows
- Communicate! Keep volunteers in the loop about any changes or decisions that will impact them

Appreciate your volunteers!

- Be kind, smile, know their names, ask about their lives—they become a second family over time
- As a manager, be willing to work in any area of the program when needed. Keep workloads appropriate and lead by example
- Trust the volunteers, avoid micromanaging
- Put someone else in charge sometimes-it shows trust and respect
- Provide opportunities for learning and growth—this keeps people involved for the long haul
- Ask volunteers for their ideas and make decisions using their input. Volunteers who feel heard are much more likely to be invested in an organization and stay for a long period of time
- Tell volunteers that they are appreciated and encourage them
- Publicly celebrate your volunteers
 - Put on a recognition dinner or event each year
 - Keep track of individual volunteer hours and include it in a thank you card each year

Provide feedback, share enthusiasm

- Enthusiasm and positive reinforcement can help some people stay excited and engaged
- Provide constructive feedback in a timely way. You are all part of a team, and all team members should be working toward the same goals and outcomes
- If a behavior or attitude needs to be addressed do so with respect. Document all important conversations. Keep a file on each volunteer (electronic or paper) that captures conversation content, reached agreements, plans of action, date, and staff involved. Let the volunteer know that you will do this in X amount of time to see how it's going. Then do it!

Make the job site comfortable for the volunteers

- Chairs-for use when things are slow
- Provide breaks when possible
- Fatigue mats—to decrease back, leg, and foot pain (many volunteers are disabled or older)

Downloadable Resources *(to find these you can google the title, or put in the URL below)*

"Starting A Volunteer Program", HandsOn Network Whether starting a new program or evaluating and revitalizing a current one; this resource provides a clearly defined process and practical suggestions:
http://www.pointsoflight.org/sites/default/files/site-content/files/bp_startingvolunteerprogram_2010_hon.pdf

"Take Root: Volunteer Management Guidebook," Corporation for National Community Service, HandsOn Network. This resource provides a variety of tips and tools related to effective volunteer management from recruitment through retention:
https://covoad.communityos.org/cms/files/GB_TakeRoot_Volunteer_Management_unkn_HON.pdf

"The New Volunteer Workforce", Eisner D., Grimm J., Maynard S., Washburn, S, Stanford Social Innovation Review (Winter 2009.) This resource provides a summary of research regarding the most common reasons why volunteers leave an organization and best practices for effective engagement:
https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_new_volunteer_workforce