



Volunteers in Local Government: Partners in Service

Local governments in America must constantly redefine ways to provide high-quality services for citizens while controlling or cutting costs. In recent times, this effort has been made more difficult by a constant expansion of responsibilities either delegated from federal and state governments or generated by citizen demand for increased services.

At the same time, citizen skepticism about government at all levels has been growing. Citizens are telling the media and pollsters that they feel that government has somehow gotten away from the people it was designed to serve.

April 17-23:

National

Volunteer

Week

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An Untapped Resource

Developing volunteer programs is one strategy that local governments can use to counteract these trends. Volunteer programs can help local governments maintain and expand existing programs or implement new initiatives during tight fiscal times. What is more, when citizens become involved as volunteers, they see firsthand how local government functions and the many service demands that counties and cities are trying to tackle.

All in all, local government volunteer programs are a win-win proposition for everyone involved—the local government, the volunteer, and the general public, which reaps the benefits of the donated service.

A survey conducted by the National Association of Counties (NACo) in the fall of 1993 found that county governments are beginning to realize the benefits of local

Photo: Debra Ernst, Arlington County, Virginia

government volunteer programs. The NACo survey of all U.S. counties found that volunteers provided an estimated \$1.8 billion worth of services to all U.S. county governments in 1992. In addition, the number of counties identified as having a volunteer program had increased more than 100 percent since a similar NACo survey was conducted in 1990.

Of the 417 counties that responded to the survey, 93 percent indicated that they currently use volunteers. The top 10 areas of volunteer service identified were the following:

Fire/EMS	66%
Aging services	64%
Parks and recreation	51%
Social services	44%
Youth Services.....	44%
Public health.....	42%
Environment/recycling.....	37%
Education.....	36%
Police/correction	35%
Transportation.....	34%

As Barbara Sheen Todd, county commissioner, Pinellas County, Florida, a long-time supporter of volunteerism, notes, "In times of tight budget constraints, increasing demands for service, and mounting citizen skepticism about government as a whole, promoting the development of local government volunteer programs only makes sense."

What Can Volunteers Do for Your City or County?

The possible ways in which your local government can use volunteers are limitless. So, too, are the benefits. Several examples of successful local government volunteer programs follow.

Court Appointed Special Advocate Volunteer Program. Boone County, Kentucky (population 57,589). Few would dispute that all children have a right to a secure and loving home. In Boone County, local officials and a dedicated volunteers corps are secur-

Keys to a Successful Volunteer Program

Support from the Top

Support from local government elected officials, managers, and department heads is necessary to create, plan, fund, and implement a volunteer program effectively. Without such support, few programs get off the ground, and far fewer succeed.

Staff/Volunteer Relationships

Good working relationships between paid staff and volunteers are critical to the success of a local government volunteer program. To build these relationships, management and staff must both be involved in the planning, implementation, and supervision of volunteer programs.

Legal Framework: Policies, Procedures, and Ordinances

Written, formal policies and procedures governing the establishment of a volunteer program underscore the importance of the volunteer effort. Such policies and procedures facilitate the effective treatment of volunteers and enhance the appreciation of volunteer efforts. In certain limited instances, a local government's use of volunteers may be governed by state law.

Assessing the Need for Volunteers

Before comprehensively planning a city or county's volunteer program, a complete analysis of current and potential volunteer activities should be undertaken. Only then can the local government determine what types of volunteer assistance are needed and what types of skills a volunteer would need to carry out a given task.

Developing Job Descriptions for Volunteers

Volunteer job descriptions are the most important management tool in a local government volunteer program. A job description should define the responsibilities and tasks to be performed and should serve as a written agreement between the volunteer, the supervisor, and the program coordinator.

Training and Supervision

To be truly effective, volunteers should be trained not only on the tasks they are to perform but also on the mission, history, and services of the local government and of the specific department to which they are assigned. After assignment, supervisors should view volunteers in the same way as they would view paid staff and should supervise them accordingly.

Recordkeeping, Reporting, and Evaluation

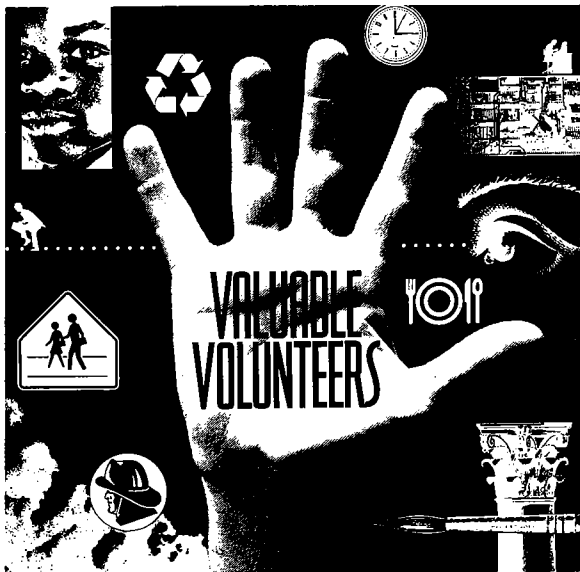
Reporting volunteer activities is as important as performing the volunteer functions themselves. Careful documentation of volunteer activities is a management tool that can be used to evaluate the program and the volunteers' performance, to provide feedback to the community on the value of the volunteer program, and to demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of county or city programs as a whole—both the portions of the programs that are funded and the portions that are donated or volunteered.

Volunteer Recognition

Volunteers need to be recognized for their contributions to the local government. Such recognition not only is important to retaining and motivating existing volunteers but also can be used as a means of attracting new volunteers.

ing this right for the county's abused and neglected children. Thanks to the efforts of the county's court-appointed special advocate (CASA) volunteers, these children now receive a thorough review of their cases and prompt action toward permanent resolutions in their best interests. Currently, the program involves 20 active, trained volunteers, who provide more than 4,000 hours of service a year.

Agewise: An Outreach Program for Healthy Aging. San Bernardino County, California (population 1.4 million). An estimated 15 to 25 percent of older adults are at increased



risk for mental illness resulting from such things as physical deterioration, loss of spouse, retirement, or financial problems. One major obstacle to meeting these needs for an older population is that seniors often are reluctant to seek mental health services. As part of its effort to develop a healthy aging program for San Bernardino County, the department of mental health has enlisted the help of older volunteers, who are recruited, trained, and supervised by program staff to serve as

peer counselors to other older adults who are experiencing mental health problems.

Benefits of Volunteer Programs

Cost-Effective Government

Local governments must continually redefine ways to provide quality service at a low cost. Volunteer programs aid in cost-effective operations. Paid staffs provide necessary continuity, while volunteers fill in gaps in service.

Perception of Government Operations

Volunteers see firsthand how local government functions and help promote positive images. They serve as a knowledge base for other citizens in the community.

Knowledge of Elected Officials

Volunteers often become personally acquainted with their public officials and learn the goals and purposes of local government programs. A volunteer can relate a sincere story of trust and understanding to other citizens better than any paid public relations campaign.

Professional Skills and Education

Volunteers with a variety of educational backgrounds and experiences lend their expertise to county and city projects. The additional knowledge, skills, and commitment of volunteers improve the quality of local government services and products.

Additional Resources

Volunteers active in their local governments become advocates for programs by seeking donations of time, money, and materials to meet the goals of specific projects.

Stronger Democracy/Empowered Community

Volunteers from all walks of life have an opportunity to participate in their local government and to have a voice in the development of their community.

Citizens' Productivity Committee. Collier County, Florida (population 168,500). Faced with a public frustrated by government and with a strong antispending sentiment, in 1991 the Collier County Board of Commissioners sought to involve citizens more closely in government. To begin with, the commissioners wanted to develop and get citizen input to review various operations with the county manager's office. To this end, the board of commissioners solicited the help of a group of community volunteers to take a one-time, comprehensive look at county operations and to report their findings back to the board. The committee's initial recommendations resulted in numerous cost savings for the county, and as a result, the Citizens' Productivity Committee has been supported strongly by the board as well as by county staff.

Handicapped Parking Enforcement by Disabled Volunteers. Glynn County, Georgia (population 62,500). Like many other counties in recent years, Glynn County has made efforts to integrate more fully into

community life those residents and visitors with disabilities. County government has made public buildings more accessible, modified sidewalks to include curb cuts, and designated parking spaces near building entrances. While these improvements were welcomed by many in the community, some of the community's nondisabled residents began using the more conveniently located "handicapped parking" spaces intended for people with disabilities. In response to complaints by disabled residents, the county police chief and the mayor's Council on the Disabled lobbied for legislation before the Georgia Assembly to allow people with disabilities to enforce the proper use of the spaces. Once the legislation had passed, disabled volunteers were recruited and trained as parking enforcers. The program has resulted in a 75 percent decrease in the abuse of handicapped parking restrictions.

Master Recycler/Composter Volunteer Program. Montgomery County, Maryland (population 750,000). Recycling has become a hot issue for local governments in the 1990s. The problem is often how to implement an effective program with limited staff and even more limited funds. Faced with this dilemma, Montgomery County began to expand its recycling efforts in 1991 by establishing an interagency task force to determine the most effective way to use volunteers in the county's recycling program. Since that time, the county has recruited more than 220 active volunteers, who provide about 6,000 hours of service per year. Volunteers educate the community about recycling and augment staff capacity by providing outreach and information.

Health Department Volunteer Program. Boulder County, Colorado (population 225,339). Confronted with the all-too-common challenge of trying to do more with less, the

Boulder County Health Department decided in 1986 to build on its long history of community support and volunteerism to furnish additional services to county residents. Today, more than 1,800 active volunteers donate nearly 34,000 hours of service per year, providing such services as

HIV/AIDS outreach and education, mass cholesterol screenings, immunizations, outpatient counseling, teen mentoring, and community education. **PM**

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Resources on Local Government Volunteerism From ICMA and NACo

The National Association of Counties (NACo), with the support of a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, has produced resource materials for local governments interested in developing or expanding their volunteer programs. The NACo resources include:

- *Volunteers and Counties: Partners in Service.* A free guidebook that highlights 12 successful county volunteer programs.
- *The Volunteer Toolbox.* A detailed guide available for \$15 to help counties initiate volunteer programs. The guide includes sample volunteer policies and procedures, volunteer job descriptions, volunteer applications, and volunteer service evaluations;
- *Volunteerism Database.* Access to written materials from county volunteer programs across the nation and a database of information on over 40 programs.
- *Technical Assistance.* Project staff who can provide technical assistance and training to local governments.

For more information on the NACo volunteerism project or to order any of these materials, contact either Sandra Reinsel Markwood or Peter Lane at the National Association of Counties, 440 First Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001, 202/942-4235 or 202/942-4288.

ICMA Resources

- *Contracting and Volunteerism in Local Government: A Self-Help Guide.* A Special Report available for \$30 that uses worksheets, case studies, and sample forms to help local officials explore the use of contracting and volunteers. (Item number 40177; contact the ICMA Distribution Center, 1-800/745-8780.)
- *Volunteer Handbook.* A Clearinghouse Report available for \$17 that was developed for city volunteers by Arvada, Colorado, discusses the goals of the volunteer program and the volunteer's rights and responsibilities. (Item number 40270; contact the ICMA Distribution Center.)
- *MIS Inquiry Service.* Access to database documents containing information on local government volunteer programs. (For information about the Inquiry Service at ICMA and its fees, call 202/962-3659)