

How to Build a Successful

VOLUNTEER PROGRAM



How to Build a Successful Volunteer Program

An effective volunteer engagement program must be approached from the perspectives of the organization, the population served, and the volunteer. Moving from the outward interests of these constituents and focusing in on the overlap of needs can create the perfect volunteer position—one that serves the organization and the community, as well as the volunteer.

The most successful volunteer programs adopt service as a value throughout the organization, truly breeding a culture of volunteerism. To be transformative, successful volunteer management programs must be elevated and prioritized as critical to meeting the overall mission and vision of the organization. Cities or counties that are not at this level yet should start small and develop relevant volunteer projects that add value to the bottom line. A program that begins slowly can ultimately be built into an infrastructure for maximum effectiveness. The ultimate goal of the volunteer coordinator or manager is to create a strategy for volunteer efforts and find staff or resources to run the volunteer program over time.

Identifying a champion

Having an officer, leader, or volunteer management professional in place to advocate for the volunteer movement is critical for institutionalizing and establishing city-wide implementation. For example, Virginia Beach, Virginia, established a decentralized volunteer resources program in 1978. In addition to the city-wide coordination of development of, recruitment for, and statistical/informational analysis of volunteerism, the work group is responsible for providing a “forum for the discussion of volunteerism and related topics.”

Basic expectations of volunteers

- To be provided with all necessary information, including the time and place where they should report
- To know and be known by their key contacts
- To receive a written volunteer description outlining the details of the volunteer role so the organization and volunteer are both clear on responsibilities and expectations
- To be oriented on the overall goals and project, as well as specifics of the volunteer position
- To be provided with any required training to help perform responsibilities effectively now and in the future
- To be given periodic feedback and guidance sessions to help evaluate effectiveness and to ensure they are fulfilling their responsibilities
- To understand the impact of their service on addressing immediate and bigger picture needs.

Information in this guide was adapted from, “InFocus Report: Build a Successful Volunteer Program to Drive Growth and Recovery.”

The director's office is charged with the following primary responsibilities, enabling the city to have a topic expert in a formal role.

- Promotes and recognizes volunteer involvement throughout city government and to the community at large
- Advocates for volunteer resource managers and volunteer involvement
- Fosters collaboration with community organizations; supports projects related to volunteer involvement
- Serves as the “voice of volunteerism” for the city.¹

Measuring volunteer impact

The most often cited measure of volunteer programs tends to be that x number of volunteers gave y hours and that time spared the organization adds up to z dollars. Although those numbers show an important perspective, other key indicators of volunteer program efforts should be given careful thought.

For example, in February 2010 the City of Dublin, Ohio, embarked on a project at all departmental levels to inventory programming efforts and further integrate performance measures. In doing so, their volunteer resources department established key performance measures, as shown below. Establishing such outcomes helps to align a key focus to financial stewardship, promotes development of programs in the right ways for the right reasons, and enables easier reporting of outputs and outcomes.

TABLE Key performance measures, by focus

Focus	Measurements
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost per volunteer managed • Dollar value of a volunteer hour • Estimated dollar value of total volunteer activity
Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of city programs utilizing volunteer services • Volunteer retention rate (by program) • Average number of hours served per volunteer • Full-time year round job equivalent • Percentage of juveniles and adults completing court-appointed service who are retained as volunteers
Customer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of citizens who rate volunteer opportunities as good or excellent • Percentage of volunteers very satisfied or satisfied with their overall volunteer experience • Percentage of supervisors very satisfied or satisfied with their overall volunteer experience
Employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of employees receiving volunteer supervision training • Percentage of employees successfully completing volunteer supervision training • Percentage of employees who are satisfied with their job (strongly agree or somewhat agree) • Percentage of employees who rate the city's support of continual learning and development as excellent or good

Source: City of Dublin, Volunteer Resources, Dublin, OH, USA.

Using citizen input

A community needs assessment is an important part of designing any service project. Assessing community needs can be as simple as taking a walk through a neighborhood or as complex as surveying the entire city. It is important to focus on the community when identifying what is needed. By working together with community members, volunteer managers will build community awareness and help ensure community buy-in and support for the organization's service efforts.

Program coordinators can use a variety of methods to assess community needs. Select one that fits the program's capacity and the scope of the volunteer effort. A one-day project may benefit from an assessment technique that is less time-consuming, whereas for a long-term project, in-depth assessment ensures that resources are being utilized effectively.

Recruiting volunteers

Recruitment is the process of enlisting volunteers into the work of the organization. Because volunteers give their time only if they are motivated to do so, recruitment should be seen as the process of showing people they can do something they already want to do. Recruitment may be for long term or short term projects.

In Dublin, Ohio, the volunteer resources team recruits for programs and initiatives such as the theater, children's wellness, and special events.² Most people do not identify with volunteering with a local government, but they will identify with a theater, a park, a one-time event, or a career exploration model. In addition, many jurisdictions have found that—aside from having their own internal volunteer service coordinators embedded within departments such as police or parks and recreation—building structured alliances with organizations such as HandsOn affiliates, the National Association of Volunteer Programs in Local Government, local Directors of Volunteer Services in Agencies, university service groups, companies or corporate volunteer councils, United Way organizations, and state service commissions helps ease the stress of recruitment.

10-Step Checklist for Building a Successful Volunteer Program



Identify champions

Who is passionate about the potential of volunteer engagement to address city priorities? Who has the appropriate position with the skills set for leading, engaging and advocating the effort?



Assess landscape

How are departments already using volunteers? Formally or informally? Long-term or episodically?



Frame city priorities

What are the two to three strategic priorities where volunteers can help scale work or deepen impact?



Map priority roles within departments

How do the volunteer roles support priorities within departments? Across the city?



Build clear definition of “volunteer”

Who is considered a volunteer (service-learning students, board and commission members, career explorers, etc.)? Work with human resources to make this distinction clear.



Clarify purpose

What are clear job descriptions and reporting requirements for all parties involved?



Clarify deliverables and measures of success

What does success look like for volunteer, department, and city? How will this be measured?



Build support

How will you engage department leaders, volunteer supervisors, and so forth in the new work of volunteer management?



Build adequate training for volunteer managers

How will you ensure that staff has skills to manage volunteers effectively?



Create space for citizen input

How can you ensure that community members have a voice in which needs volunteers will be addressing?

Volunteerism and effective policy

Organizations that encounter the greatest success are those able to combine volunteer desires with effective policy. In addition to developing a high-quality program and plan, measuring volunteer impact, reporting to the public, and assessing and evaluating the volunteer program, it is important to develop marketing and PR campaigns that highlight accomplishments to ensure that programs stay on target and everyone understands the end goals and results.

Some cities, such as New York, have focused their efforts on driving volunteers to activities that address specific local challenges. After defining their priorities clearly, New York also developed a public campaign to champion volunteer efforts, asking everyone in their city to think about what they have to offer and positing that everyone has something to give (nyc.gov/service). Other cities, such as Plano, Texas (plano.gov/VIP), and Dublin, Ohio (dublin.oh.us/volunteer), have established broad-based programs that provide a strong example of how service can be incorporated into a city's daily life.

Ways to conduct a community needs assessment

- **Brainstorming:** Gather program staff, volunteers, and/or other community members to brainstorm community issues and needs. As a group, examine the causes and effects of the issue and then brainstorm potential projects to address the needs identified.
- **Community dreams:** As you meet and mingle with people, ask them about the changes they would like to see happen. If they had unlimited resources, what would they like to change? How would they go about changing it?
- **Community walk:** Hold a forum to collect information from community members about issues and needs.
Ask them to offer suggestions for potential projects.
- **Surveys:** Conduct a formal or informal survey of community members to identify issues and needs. Surveys might include questions such as: What problems do you see in the community? What types of service projects would be most beneficial for the community? What two things do you want to change in the community?
- **Request for projects (RFP):** Soliciting for projects also streamlines project development processes by getting all details of the potential project outlined up front.
- **Targeted requests:** Most projects have parameters such as timeframes, types of volunteers, issue areas impacted, or geography that help narrow down project possibilities. Thus, it is sometimes best to make personal, targeted requests to those who are known to meet the project's parameters.
- **Response to volunteer interests:** Volunteers may express interests in tasks such as painting, reading with children, or affecting particular issue areas such as hunger, homelessness, or HIV/AIDS. These interests can be matched with the needs discovered in the assessment process.

Source: "Take Root Project Development Guidebook" (Atlanta: HandsOn Network, 2006), 7–8. Developed in partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service under cooperative agreement #05TAHGA001. nationalserviceresources.org/takeroot-project-development-guidebook (accessed April 20, 2010).

TABLE Strategies and tactics to ensure long-term success of a volunteer program

Success strategy	Supporting tactics
Continual engagement of and partnership with community stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community leadership programs • Partnerships with nonprofit leaders and executives
Ongoing definition of risk management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liability oversight • Confidentiality agreements • Screening and grievance procedures • Volunteer policies • Safety training and checklist • Terms for dismissal/termination
Clarity with collective bargaining units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency about volunteer roles • Planning with employee unions and union contractors to avoid displacement issues
Clarity with staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency about volunteer roles • Defined staff expectations
Long-term integration with human resource and talent management programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer evaluations • Volunteer training • Promotion of volunteers to leadership roles

Conclusion

As interest in volunteering grows, it is important to thoughtfully dissect what makes a volunteer experience meaningful and what makes volunteers continue to deepen their contributions to the common good. Local governments represent a critical piece of the puzzle in creating tipping points for local volunteer activation. Service and volunteerism is creating real impact in cities large and small, through nonprofit, community-based, faith-based, and educational institutions, and through innovative community programming. Combining the experience, innovation, depth, and breadth of these long-standing volunteer management and activation organizations with the power and policy objectives of cities and municipalities can raise the tide of service—building a stronger, healthier democracy and promising great change for individuals and communities alike.

Notes

- 1 Morely Winograd and Michael D. Hais, —Millennials Lead the Nation in Service to Our Country,|| NDN Blog, September 18, 2009, ndn.org/blog/2009/08/millennials-lead-nation-service-our-country (accessed April 8, 2010).
- 2 City of Dublin, Volunteer Resources, dublin.oh.us/volunteer (accessed April 20, 2010).

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