

# **Supporting, recognizing and challenging volunteers**

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Supporting, recognizing, and challenging volunteers are all separate tasks, but together they provide a strong volunteer program with satisfied volunteers. This article will address these three issues separately, but keep in mind how they work together. Maintaining volunteers is one of the most difficult and integral parts of any volunteer program.

## **Volunteer Support**

Supporting volunteers means different things for different agencies. Indeed, volunteers at a sexual assault crisis centre will need different types of support than volunteer librarians, or volunteers with a sports organization. Volunteer support involves a variety of things, including:

- Communication among volunteers, and between volunteers and staff
- "Debriefing" - talking about the work
- Acknowledging and using volunteer input
- Recognizing "burnout", or when a volunteer is feeling stressed (either from volunteering, or because of personal matters, etc.)
- Keeping in touch through newsletters, meetings, celebrations, in-services

## **Example of Volunteer Support**

Sarah, a volunteer coordinator at Organization X, notices that Linda, a normally cheerful and upbeat person, has been looking 'under the weather'. Sarah schedules time to meet with Linda and learns that Linda feels overwhelmed by the work she has taken upon herself for the organization. To top it off, Linda's child has been sick, so she has not been sleeping well at night, and is feeling really isolated and depressed.

Sarah, being an attentive volunteer coordinator, asks Linda, "What can we do to help you?" Linda is surprised; she never thought of it that way. After some discussion, Linda and Sarah agree that Linda should take two weeks off from volunteering, to care for her child and herself. Sarah offers some self-care suggestions (i.e. relaxation techniques, doing things "just for you" such as reading a book, having a relaxing bath with bubbles and candles) and encourages Linda to call her at the centre if she needs to talk. Linda agrees to call Sarah near the end of the two weeks to see if she is ready to come back - or if she needs a little more time.

As a result of this support, Linda feels validated. Her concerns and stresses are real, and she has a right to look after herself. Sarah is appreciative that Linda shared this information, and wants to encourage Linda the best way she can.

In some situations, such as when doing outreach work, some volunteers may be quite isolated from the agency or program they are working with. In these cases, it is integral

for coordinators of volunteers to keep in constant contact - to see how things are going, to discuss any changes the volunteer is facing, and to maintain a sense of solidarity with the agency.

Even when the volunteer works on the premises, how often do staff and volunteers get together to discuss the work, any challenges or celebrations, and other meaningful contact? Unfortunately, not-for-profits are notorious for having a large workload, and 'making time' can be difficult. However, I cannot stress enough the importance of checking in with volunteers. Scheduling times to meet with the volunteers shows that you value their input, are concerned about their well-being, and that you are interested in what they are doing. Ask volunteers if they feel supported in the program. Doing an anonymous evaluation (where volunteers do not reveal who they are) may solicit more candid reactions. Some possible questions to include in an evaluation are:

1. What do you enjoy about volunteering?
2. What are some of the strengths of the Volunteer Program and/or Coordinator?
3. What are some changes that would make the volunteer team better?
4. Do you receive enough support as a volunteer?
5. What are some of the ways that you feel supported as a volunteer?
6. Do you regularly debrief with other volunteers and/or the Coordinator? If so, how often?
7. How difficult/easy is it to get a hold of the Volunteer Coordinator?
8. What recommendations do you have in terms of supporting volunteers?
9. Which support services do you find most useful, and why: newsletters, in-services, monthly calls, debrief session, other (please specify)?

## **Volunteer Recognition**

Recognizing volunteers in a unique way is a challenge for many coordinators of volunteers. We want to show volunteers just how much they mean to us- without sounding corny, or blowing the budget. This section will offer concrete ideas that I have used, and have found on the Internet. Keep in mind that volunteer recognition does not need to be a costly event; share ideas with other agency staff, and other coordinators of volunteers. You may discover some terrific ideas! Here are a few:

- A volunteer celebration (i.e. barbecue, lunch, coffee/tea and treats). Invite staff and volunteers. This is a fun way to appreciate volunteers. Some coordinators enjoy having this at their home- so that it feels less 'work-like' and volunteers are more comfortable to 'have fun'. This is done at the discretion of the coordinator and agency.
- A plaque to display at the organization recognizing volunteers who have been involved for a number of years.
- When a volunteer has done something really great, remember to write down the impact so that when you write a card or give a speech, you will be able to specify

exactly how the volunteer has contributed great things to the organization. (from Volunteer Canada)

- Creating personalized 'thank you' magnets with the person's name and the name of the agency. These need not be done professionally; simply laminate the message and attach a magnetic strip to the back.
- Volunteers of the Month. This can be displayed at the agency, with a certificate given to the volunteer. If your organization has a newsletter, volunteers of the month can be featured, with personal glimpses into the contributions the person has made.
- Use votive candles and wrap them up nicely with a note stating, "You light up the lives of so many". (from Volunteer Canada)
- Thank you posters by children (The United Way does the usual recognition dinner, certificated, plaques, personally signed letters, etc. However, the United Way of Gloucester County's most recognition program is "Thank You Posters" created by children from local agencies. These hand-drawn posters are very popular. (from Volunteer Canada)
- Create thank you bookmarks with the volunteer's name and a personalized message. Laminate the bookmark, and attach fancy yarn at the top.
- Pictures. For two months before a recognition event, the director of volunteers of a mental health centre began taking photographs of volunteers while they were working. At the event, each volunteer received a photo of him/herself in a matte frame imprinted with a thank you message. (from Volunteer Canada)
- Random gifts and thank you letters- letting volunteers know how much they are appreciated.
- Offer volunteers the chance of professional development; send them to seminars or as representatives of the organization to special events.
- T-shirts or coffee mugs with the organization's logo.
- Submitting media releases on outstanding volunteers, to encourage a newspaper article or television story.
- "Thanks for Raisin' All Those Funds". One idea to recognize volunteers involved with fundraising is to take a small box of raisins, attach a strip of magnetic tape to the back and attach a small note saying "Thanks for raisin' all those funds." These can be put on refrigerators or filing cabinets and work. (from Volunteer Canada)
- Free coffee and treats for on-site volunteers.

- Individualized certificates and cards. These can be made using such programs as Microsoft Greetings. Personalized mementos are always so much more special than a standard card or certificate where one simply fills in a name.

### **Challenging Volunteers**

Volunteers who remain in the same positions, with no chance of change or variety, may become bored. While many volunteers are happy doing the same work, it is important to check-in with individuals to see if they want to try something new, or have increased responsibility. Encourage volunteers to try new things, and to be honest with you, in terms of their levels of interest and desires to 'move on'.

You may decide during your annual program/staff/volunteer evaluation to bring this topic up with volunteers. Or, you can post new volunteer opportunities and challenges for individuals to try out. Nothing feels worse than feeling like your skills are not being used or enhanced. Volunteer coordinators should keep in touch with volunteers to ensure individuals are satisfied with their volunteering experience.