A New Service Delivery Model to Support Volunteer Mentoring Relationships

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Volunteer mentoring programs are widely used, but effective organizational structures are still elusive (Rhodes, 2002). The challenge in formal mentoring programs is to structure opportunities for successful relationships to develop, almost as if they were naturally occurring friendships. Consequently, there is both a science and art to supporting formal mentoring programs. Mentoring entails "a caring relationship, primarily concerned with friendship, trust, and empowerment of the learner" (Bennetts, 2003, pg.72). Effective mentoring programs foster developmental relationships that result in a reduction in negative and an increase in positive behaviors and attitudes in youth (Tierney, Grossman & Resch, 1995). The challenges inherent in administering these programs cannot be minimized. The pressure to efficiently support high quality relationships is exasperated by expanding waiting lists and shrinking resources.

To improve the recruitment and retention of volunteer mentors, while increasing the capacity of the organization to serve more youth, a regional mentoring organization implemented a new service delivery model that was designed to streamline administrative processes, expedite recruitment, and improve support of community-based mentors. The agency had a long history of supporting mentoring relationships and was one of the largest regional affiliates of a national mentoring organization. At the time of implementing the new service delivery model, they were supporting nearly 2,000 match relationships.

The organization operated with a traditional case management approach where a single employee recruited volunteers, matched youth and mentor, and supported mentoring relationships based upon regional service areas. The traditional model was child-centric with the "case manager" serving as the advocate of the child. This perspective tended to create barriers for mentors when trying to volunteer. For instance, staff conducted in-home interviews with every prospective mentor and asked over 20 potentially intrusive and often irrelevant interview questions. The strength of the traditional model was that one employee shepherded both the child and mentor through the entire process and served to support the relationship as it grew more independent. Staff felt connected to the child and mentor as they were a part of the entire process. Unfortunately, staff changes (e.g., turnover) inevitably circumvented the benefits.

The new model encouraged staff to consider "a new way of thinking" (Koring & Wilson, 2004) that emphasized the fun aspects of mentoring and reflected a need to recruit a broader spectrum of individuals to serve as mentors. They needed to serve more matches without the ability to increase staffing. Caseloads in the traditional model were about 50-60 matches per employee; the new model would attempt to almost triple that number.

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THE SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

The new service delivery model separated the "case manager" position into three "specialist" positions or functions (See Figure 1). Position one marketed and recruited volunteers and served as the voice of the agency to attract potential mentors. They were encouraged to secure mentor applications and could schedule appointments with the second function, "match specialist," during initial meetings with prospective mentors. Effective position holders were outgoing and comfortable with making presentations. As was discussed by staff, this was the "sales" position for the agency. Position two was responsible for interviewing and matching potential mentors and youth. Effective employees in this position were detail-oriented and attuned to participant interests in order to ensure successful matches. For instance, they had to monitor all paperwork requirements (e.g., fingerprinting) and quickly ascertain mentor preferences through an abbreviated four-question interview session. Their interactions were short-term, and they served as the gatekeeper who matched youth with adults. Once the match was established, the pair (mentor and youth) were assigned a "support specialist." This third position focused on nurturing and supporting the mentoring relationship. They contacted participants regularly (by e-mail and phone), discussed challenges in the relationship, brainstormed solutions and suggested appropriate resources. Since the mentor was expedited through the system, they were often matched without organized training, so this position often "covered the basics" and led additional ongoing training that was offered by the agency. They also organized events that could be simple peer support activities or more comprehensive "parties."

The agency achieved significant efficiencies by having employees with the appropriate skills and interests in each position. The strongest feature of the model was the marketing and recruiting function (position one). The new service delivery model resulted in significant improvements in capturing interested volunteers. In the previous system about 40% of the individuals inquiring would attend a mandatory training and actually participate in a successful match. Under the new system, within three months the yield had increased to 50%, and within a year the yield had increased to 78% of inquiries resulting in successful matches (see Table 1). Other agencies that implemented a similar program obtained significant improvements in volunteer yields as well. In addition, the agency saw a 50% decrease in closures from a 32% closure rate to just 18% subsequent to the first full year of operating the program. The agency also saw a 50% increase in the number of mentors opting to rematch as a result of a closed mentoring relationship from just 16% electing to rematch prior to the new service delivery to 24% electing to rematch under the new service model. Universally, staff recognized that the recruitment and marketing of volunteers had significantly improved. Staff continued to express lingering concerns about match quality irrespective of the impressive improvements signified by the reduced closure rates.

FIGURE 1

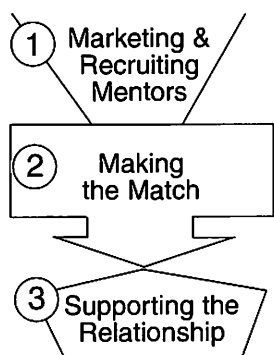### Model to Recruit and Support Volunteer Mentoring

TABLE 1

Volunteer Yield from Inquiry to Match

Example Programs	Baseline	Yield after 3 months	Yield after a year
Arizona	39%	53%	78%
Texas	28%	55%	68%
Wisconsin	35%	42%	83%

CONCERNS DURING IMPLEMENTATION

There were several issues that developed during implementation. One of the most common was that the specialists must communicate laterally with staff members in the organization. The mentors and youth are passed from one employee to another, requiring teamwork that needs to appear seamless to youth and mentors. Incomplete and inaccurate information transferred from one specialist to another was one of the most common concerns expressed by employees. The new service delivery model expeditiously moves volunteers through the process and into a match relationship; consequently, employees might feel compelled to transfer matches before all the paperwork is completed. Effective practices provided an opportunity for all specialists to meet regularly, typically clustered by region, to discuss issues and concerns.

Another concern was that since the individuals were expedited through the system, it was not always clear that they had received the necessary information about their role as a mentor. Orienting was now shared by three staff positions and the pre-placement training was not required. Staff members recommended developing a communication check-sheet that detailed the type of information that should be shared with potential volunteers. This sheet included information such as making sure the orientation packet was reviewed and simple logistics about parking and paperwork were completed. In addition, staff members suggested that the support strategies be more sensitive to the unique qualities of the match. This was referred to as a needs-based approach. For instance, matches requiring more assistance could be flagged by the match specialist. Based on the interview, the match specialists could rank new matches thereby signaling to the support specialist which matches needed additional support. The converse was that long-term matches (i.e., those matched for over a year) might not be contacted nearly as often, or could be contacted only at events or through e-mail. By refining the support network, the agency continued to obtain benefits from the model by expanding services within existing resources.

IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATORS

The model provides several practical elements that can be incorporated into volunteer mentoring programs. The staff responsibilities outlined in the model can be used to guide recruitment and selection of program personnel. These responsibilities are not necessarily restrictive to paid employees; in particular, recruitment specialist functions can be performed by dedicated volunteers who have served as mentors, but no longer desire that level of commitment to the program. They can effectively communicate the benefits of mentoring and can serve as persuasive advocates for the program. Similarly, in smaller programs staff members can assume any of these responsibilities in conjunction with other program activities, or part-time staff can be utilized to fulfill the support functions for mentoring programs. The model also highlighted the value of shifting cultural beliefs about how to engage volunteers in mentoring relationships. The model required staff to recognize the volunteer as a significant customer of the organization. The former culture was more deficits-oriented, with constrained opportunities for the organization while the new service delivery model emphasized assets gained through volunteer engagement.

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