

EPISODIC VOLUNTEERS: Reality for the Future

By Nancy Macduff

Episodic volunteer opportunities are those jobs or assignments in a volunteer program, organization, or agency that allow for service of short duration, usually 3-4 months or less. The primary types are:

- 1. One-time**—the volunteer who gives service once only, and
- 2. Recurring**—the volunteer who works on a specific project or assignment that recurs each year.

An episodic volunteer program—one that runs parallel to the “regular” volunteer program—could be highly beneficial to an organization that needs volunteers. To implement one, the volunteer director or program manager needs commitment and support from throughout the organization to develop this new program strategy.

One of the first questions to ask is “Do we have ‘one-time’ or ‘recurring’ volunteers in the regular program now?” They may be serving with formal job descriptions and job placement; however, the informal episodic volunteer is usually not supported by the formal mechanisms of a regular volunteer program.

There are even different types of informal episodic volunteers:

- 1. Special Case.** This is a person who “drops-in” and can give a few hours or few days of service, such as a volunteer’s child, home from college for a few days.
- 2. Special People.** The special person volunteer is often recruited to do a very specific task. As a rule this is someone

who possesses a skill and needs no training. He/she will volunteer to do a specific job. An attorney recruited to examine a revision of the organization’s by-laws is a special person volunteer.

3. Special Job. The individual recruited to do the job may not need any special skill. The job requires an influx of volunteers to complete it. Preparing a newsletter for mailing, applying labels and zip code sorting require deft hands for a few hours or days.



These volunteer jobs would become part of the new episodic volunteer program. Involving episodic volunteers requires planning and an organized recruiting effort. Using clearly defined strategy to develop an episodic volunteer program assures its success. In this installment we will examine the strategy needed to effectively develop an episodic volunteer campaign and conduct recruitment.

The Needs Assessment

Any new program or service begins with a needs assessment. For the episodic volunteer program, this includes identifying the current quality and quantity of volunteer service and the perceived need for help in other areas.

A review of current episodic volunteers is part of the needs assessment. Include the numbers serving in the last three to five years for a trend indicator. For recurring volunteers, include turnover and retention rates. Compare demographic information on episodic volunteers to regular volunteers. Collect anecdotal or narrative information from episodic volunteers.

The anecdotal information will tell why a short-term assignment is appealing; how the person found the program; what training is needed; and what would make the job more appealing. This information provides baseline data on how to attract people to short-term assignments.

In conducting a needs assessment on episodic volunteering possibilities, consider the natural constituencies: paid staff, current volunteers and most importantly, the clients, members or patrons.

In many organizations or agencies, volunteers are placed in assignments where they are supervised by line staff, not the volunteer program manager. In this case, it is critical to determine the needs of staff related to the placement of episodic volunteers. It is a mistake to ask staff if they “want” the one-time-only volunteer. Every supervisor wishes for personnel who are superior at their job and stay forever. It is more prudent to ask questions based on the fact that episodic volunteers are a reality for the future. For example:

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■ What job tasks lend themselves to the assignment of episodic volunteers—one-time or recurring?

■ What training do they need before placement?

■ How can they be integrated with other volunteers?

■ What is appropriate recognition for these volunteers?

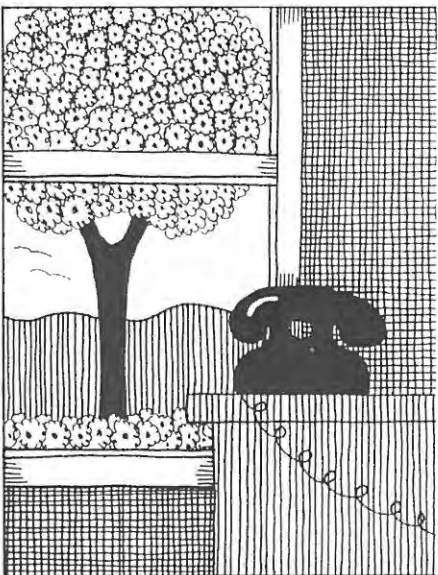
If staff do not directly supervise volunteers, it is still critical to solicit their opinions on the assignments most appropriate for episodic volunteers. For example:

■ How can we most effectively utilize the services of episodic volunteers—both one-time and recurring?

■ How can we support the episodic volunteer?

Consult the current volunteer corps on the addition of an episodic volunteer program. It is a mistake to ask "Can we do this?" The long-term volunteer values years of service. Most would like to see younger volunteers following in their footsteps. Ask for input based on the premise that an episodic volunteer program is being developed.

The most effective way to engage the support of current volunteers is to involve them fully in the needs assessment and development of the program. The current volunteers know services and needs almost as well as staff. Their help in development and implementation will be invaluable. A committee made up of episodic volunteers, regular volunteers, staff and clients, patrons or members can serve as the implementor of the new strategy. Not only do all these people have a vested interest in the program, but they possess the most useful information. In addition, they are likely to become the most effective proponents.



Episodic should not be equated with sub-standard.

How do you determine the perceptions of the clients, members or patrons in relation to the short-term volunteer? Depending on the size of the program, a telephone or mail survey can be conducted.

Another effective tool is the focus group. For the purpose of this assessment, a group of six to nine clients, members or patrons convenes to answer questions about volunteer program needs. The facilitator must be an individual seen by the participants as neutral, preferably some-

one outside the agency. The session can be videotaped for review by the group assessing an episodic volunteer program.

This assessment process would seem to exclude the possibility of making a decision against an episodic volunteer program. Not true. By knowing the full expectations of the organization's or agency's constituencies, it is possible to make a well-informed decision. Asking volunteers, paid staff and clients if they "want" an episodic volunteer program will provide the most superficial of answers. But those responding to the needs assess-

The time commitment required is the primary benefit of the episodic volunteer job.

ment described here are forced to look at the ramifications of instituting a volunteer program that will run parallel to the "regular" volunteer program. A decision to add or not to add an episodic volunteer program is made based on the expectations of everyone concerned.

The Plan

If the decision is made through the needs assessment to develop and implement an additional volunteer program, the next step is to establish a strategic plan to accomplish the task. This includes setting an overall goal and objective steps that describe in measurable increments the episodic volunteer program. This strategic planning process also serves as the foundation to evaluate the success of the total program.

The Job Description

One mistake in organizing the episodic volunteer program is to take current jobs for volunteers and assume they can be done—as is!—by episodic volunteers. A primary task is the identification of new jobs that can be performed on a short-term basis, and the redesign of traditional volunteer jobs to be assigned more appropriately to the short-term volunteer.

The redesign of volunteer jobs starts with a task analysis. Industrial trainers must break down a complex task into component parts to develop incremental methods of teaching new employees. Standardized programs and systems exist for conducting a task analysis. By analyzing the current volunteer jobs, it can easily

be determined if the possibility exists to develop episodic job assignments.

Consider three possibilities:

1. Can a big job be broken into parts?

Camp Fire and Girl Scouts recruit adults to serve as leaders of young children. The usual expectation is for the leader to serve for one school year (preferably more than one year). A recurring episodic volunteer assignment of leader is to have parents or other adults serve for a specific short time period (four months, two months, one month) and to repeat that, on an annual basis, for the length of the club's or troop's life span.

2. Can a job be redesigned? A board of directors often establishes an array of standing committees. People recruited to those committees are expected to serve for a year or more. Some committee functions lend themselves to short-term assignments. For example, a task analysis might reveal how one function of the program committee is evaluating existing programs. This function can be carried out by an episodic volunteer committee recruited specifically for this task.

3. Can new jobs be created? A task analysis can also bring to the surface new jobs that might lend themselves to an episodic assignment. The hospice friendly visitor program is designed for volunteers to visit with terminally ill patients and their families. Suppose a task analysis unearthed the fact that 50 percent of the volunteers are being asked to carry out "errand" type tasks—such as picking up groceries, sorting mail, getting library books—that take them away from clients and could be done by anyone.

An episodic volunteer job could be developed that would match a traditional hospice friendly visitor with an episodic volunteer on a three-month assignment. The episodic volunteer completes the errands, under the supervision of the long-term volunteer. This provides a much needed service to the friendly visitor and expands the service to the client and the family.

The task analysis is one method of designing jobs for episodic volunteers. Another method is to consult the paid staff or long-term volunteers. Develop a job request form specifically for episodic assignments. Encourage creativity and the development of jobs for the one-time or recurring volunteer.

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episodic volunteer jobs. A training or brainstorming session is in order.

Screening

Screening episodic volunteers should have all the elements of screening for long-term volunteers. Screening includes written job descriptions, applications, interviews and contracts. Episodic volunteers should be expected to complete a similar process.

Variations might be in the extent of scrutiny. For example, the application might fit on a 5" x 8" card. Essential information is present, but storage is easier. Interviews

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can be conducted by trained long-term volunteers. Episodic volunteers should meet the same standards as other volunteers. Episodic should not be equated with sub-standard.

Advertising and Promotion

The development of the episodic volunteer program thus far has outlined steps to identify jobs and potential criteria for individuals to fill specific jobs. The process used is a target marketing strategy. Understanding the duties and qualifications

helps develop a targeted advertising and promotion campaign. Identify the kinds of people who can fill the positions. For example, the hospice "errand" volunteer might be recruited from college career centers or social work students. The advertising campaign is targeted to the identified group.

The advertising and promotion campaign should focus on the short-term nature of the assignment. The time commitment required is the primary benefit of the episodic volunteer job. Advertising and promotion campaigns can be directed to groups of retirees who spend part of the year in another geographic location; young professionals; college and high school students; young two-career families; and members of other voluntary groups like service clubs, church guilds, or bowling leagues.



The Recruiting Team

A recruiting team can erase the burden on the volunteer director or program manager. The team can set numerical targets for recruiting, design the screening process, review job descriptions, design and carry out advertising and recruiting strategies. The volunteer program manager has a work force to implement the new program.

The volunteer program manager or director's role is that of cheerleader, coordinator of work, supervisor, mentor and monitor. It is seeing that the job is accomplished. It is good management.

In the next installment, the strategies to support and sustain the episodic volunteer will be reviewed. ■