

RETENTION: The + and – of Volunteers

By Nancy Macduff

Paid staff can make a dramatic impact on your agency's volunteer retention rate if they understand that having volunteers is worthwhile. Here is a short course on the advantages and disadvantages of using a voluntary work force.

Advantages

- The more people involved in a project, the more participation or membership or greater the outreach.
- "Natural helpers" have been shown to be quite effective with a variety of client groups including youth, seniors, those with ill health. Volunteers are often seen by clients or members as natural helpers.
- Many hands make light work! The more volunteers, the easier the work is for everyone.
- Volunteers grow and develop in their jobs, no matter what their age is! The staff who work with them are contributors and participants in that growth.
- Problem solving is creative and innovative when volunteers put their mind to "fixing" a situation.
- Volunteers are donors!
- Volunteers are supporters of programs that support them.

Disadvantages

- It takes time to plan for volunteers to be involved in a meaningful way.
- Scheduling volunteers and getting them to work on a project is harder than if you do it yourself.
- Planning must be done way in advance if volunteers are to be involved.
- The same volunteers do all the tasks and then they get burned out.
- Sometimes volunteers want to do things their own way, rather than the way you want them done!

Nancy Macduff is a consultant and trainer in the volunteer field and publishes Volunteer Today, a bimonthly newsletter for volunteer and professional staff in private nonprofit service agencies. (The retention notes presented here appeared in the December 1991 Issue.) She has written several books on volunteer management topics and is a frequent contributor to VAL.

- Plans and ideas have to be crystallized and communicated to recruit and use volunteer workers effectively.

Retention: Why?

The retention of volunteers is crucial! It is expensive, both in time and money, to train new volunteers all the time. How can you get to the bottom of who stays and who doesn't? There are five questions that can help determine who stays as a volunteer and who leaves. This information is useful to increase the number that stays.

1. Who volunteers? Who are your current volunteers (i.e., age, sex, income, education, previous volunteer experience, ethnic heritage, etc.)? Knowing who volunteers can give you an accurate picture of your program. For example, in a demographic study of her hospice volunteers, a volunteer coordinator found a wide diversity of religious beliefs that she did not realize existed in the current group of volunteers. This will help with placement and recruitment efforts.

2. Who doesn't volunteer? Who are you missing? Volunteers should represent the diversity in a community. Knowing who is missing can provide information to help plan recruiting efforts. It is also possible to target volunteers who are "different" and try to design opportunities to increase their retention.

3. Why don't certain people volunteer? Knowing you are missing volunteers in the 18-30 age bracket means nothing if you don't ask why. By finding out what will attract people to a position, you can effectively recruit and eliminate those things that drive them away.

4. Why do current volunteers give their time? Check it out! Don't assume! Ask. It helps the program or organization to keep doing the worthwhile things and eliminate those that are ineffective.

5. What benefits arise from volunteering? Ask experienced volunteers what they get from volunteering. Advertise these benefits to those still in the program and as a recruitment tool. ■