Building Capacity for Using Volunteers

This section provides an overview in a step-by-step format that describes how an organization can use volunteers to do more with less. Sections include: planning a volunteer program, recruiting and interviewing volunteers, managing volunteers, retaining and recognizing volunteers and, finally, additional resources in the City of New York to assist an organization in building an effective program.

Planning for Volunteers

Needs Assessment

A needs assessment for using volunteers in your organization is a critical tool used to help inform the development and planning of programming. It is the first step that should be undertaken when thinking about creating a new volunteer program or when reviewing current volunteer programming. An organization must approach a needs assessment with the desire to think outside of the box and to be innovative in their responses or else this process may not produce results that would help enhance the use of volunteers at the organization.

A needs assessment is a series of interviews or surveys meant to inform the scope, design and direction of the program.

Every department in your organization should be interviewed to find out the following information:

- Current projects that could use volunteers (*Helpful to rank by need)
- Future projects that could use volunteers – think broadly and imagine possibilities
  - Sample question: “If our organization was able to recruit volunteers with the right skill set, what projects could you see our organization using volunteers for to help increase our capacity to meet the mission of the organization?”
- Types of tasks that the volunteers could do
- Types of skills that the organization could use (which should include any language needs, either spoken or written)
- Approximate time frame of volunteer needs (i.e. weekly for 12 weeks, ongoing, 1 hour/month)
- Internal management strategies for volunteers

Once a needs assessment is completed, review the needs of your organization. Look for patterns that could help in volunteer recruitment. Also look for similar suggested volunteer roles that could be grouped together to enhance the volunteer’s experience. Present the findings throughout the organization so that there is an organization-wide buy-in for using volunteers.
If the organization is thinking about expanding or changing the current volunteer program, a needs assessment should still be undertaken and should include interviews with current volunteers as well as staff.
**Position Descriptions**

Recruiting motivated volunteers begins with a position description, written similarly to a job description. Below are some keys to creating a volunteer position description. These should be done, with various amounts of specificity, for all volunteer positions that your organization will have. Once the description is complete, organizations should post the opportunity on NYC Service’s website ([www.nyc.gov/service](http://www.nyc.gov/service)) and other volunteer-related websites.

Position descriptions should include:

*Program Description*

Your mission or a description of the particular program you are seeking volunteers for should be included in your description. The mission statement/program description should be no more than two-three sentences long.

*For example*: Program X is a school-based nutrition-education program designed to encourage children to eat more wholesome foods. The curriculum materials, which are designed for elementary students, allow children to explore how plants grow and where food comes from.

*Volunteer Duties*

This section describes what the volunteers will be doing. Volunteer duties should be outlined in detail. A good volunteer description should be four - five full sentences in length. It is best to include approximately three main duties that a volunteer will be responsible for; include those duties in the first few lines of your description.

*For example*: Volunteers are needed to assist teachers in structuring and leading workshops that are held once a week between the hours of 9:30 am and 3:00 pm throughout the school year (September–June). Workshops are held in schools throughout the five boroughs. Volunteers may assist in areas including cooking instruction and nutrition education, so let us know of any special skills in these areas that you have!

*Requirements*

This section includes requirements such as training, hours, specials skills or languages needed. Be clear about what is required.

*For example*: Volunteers must be able to make a three -six month volunteer commitment, be 18 years and older and attend one, four-hour training.

*Special Skills or Interests*

This section allows for the organization to add any special skills or interests that are not a requirement for the volunteer opportunity but would enhance the volunteer and organization’s experience. These
categories must be descriptive to the particular opportunity you are advertising for, not what your organization does.

For example: Prior teaching or volunteering with elementary-aged students experience is preferred.

Recruiting Volunteers

Outreach

Once a plan is in place, it is time to begin reaching out to potential volunteers. This can be one of the most difficult aspects of the volunteer process, but there are a few easy steps to take that can help connect the right volunteers to your organization.

1. Use available resources: Post your volunteer opportunity on NYC Service’s website as well as other free volunteer-oriented websites.

2. Use your network: Send the volunteer opportunity to your network – including your organization’s board members, who should be encouraged to actively assist in volunteer recruitment.

3. Outreach materials: Printed brochures or well-designed flyers sent via email in a PDF format will help to announce your volunteer opportunities to new audiences. These materials should include a brief (in a paragraph or two) discussion of your organization’s mission and vision, a description of the volunteer position(s), and should include where to go for more information.

Interviews

Although organizations appreciate the goodwill that people are offering when approaching volunteering, not every volunteer and organization are a perfect match. It is important to screen and interview your volunteers.

Before asking any questions, the interviewer should give a brief overview of the organization and the position for which the volunteer is interviewing for. Questions to the volunteer fall into at least four categories, listed below with corresponding suggestions.

- General Information, such as:
  - Why do you want to volunteer with the organization?
  - Tell us more about your past work and/or volunteer experiences.

- Skills, such as:
• What skills do you feel that you embody that will allow you to be successful in this position?
• What types of leadership roles have you held in the past?
• Tell us about your time management skills or other abilities that are needed in this position.
  o Workplace Climate, such as:
    • How do you handle stress?
    • How do you handle conflicts in a workplace environment?
  o Communication, such as:
    • What is your comfort level with specific technology that you will use as a volunteer?
    • Please provide me with an example of your writing skills.
    • How comfortable are you in communicating with diverse groups of individuals?

If there is a good match between the organization and the volunteer, review the next steps in the process (i.e. orientation/training, background checks, etc.). If it doesn’t feel like a good match, thank the volunteer for their interest.

Orientation

Like employees, volunteers who are not properly managed and are unclear on their role and goals cannot be completely effective. To this end, after a volunteer is interviewed, an orientation should be given. Even one-day volunteer opportunities should begin with an orientation. If no specific training is required, but general instructions must be given, a volunteer orientation is most useful. A sample orientation schedule is included below.

Volunteer Orientation Schedule

1. Introduction to the organization’s mission, goals, history, major programs, and culture
2. History of the project the volunteer will work on
3. Specific details for the project including volunteer role, expectations, goals to be obtained, etc.
4. Relevant contact information for the project at the organization
5. Distribution of legal documents, if necessary, which may include liability waivers, photo release forms, or confidentiality agreements.
If the organization is only adding a single volunteer, a short training with the volunteer manager at the organization may be sufficient. The same information listed above for an orientation should be given to the individual volunteer.

Wherever possible, on-site orientation is important to help familiarize the volunteer to the environment. If it is not possible to hold an orientation or training at the site of the volunteer work sufficient site information should be provided.

**Waivers**

Waivers are often required when hosting service projects that require manual labor. Check with your legal counsel and insurance provider to determine whether volunteer waivers are required, and what information must be included. It is helpful for the waiver to be emailed to participants before the event, along with specific instructions for the service, so that it can be filled out prior to the volunteer’s service and save time during the day.

- Each waiver form should include the following:
  - I. First and Last name
  - II. Address, City, State, Zip code, Phone Number and Email
  - III. An emergency contact name and phone number
  - IV. Volunteer’s signature
- Each waiver form may include a section granting permission to the nonprofit to photograph or video tape the volunteer for promotional material or any other functions.
- If the volunteer is under the age of 18, a parent or guardian must sign the waiver before the volunteer can participate so make sure to include this.

**Managing Volunteers**

The appropriate model for managing volunteers depends on the level of commitment required and the staffing available.

Volunteer projects that require an on-going commitment should be managed by a staff member whose work within the organization is related to the project.

- The level of commitment that a volunteer position requires should determine how much management a volunteer needs. For certain longer-term volunteer positions, such as a mentor program, a mid-program evaluation might be a good idea.
- Volunteer managers should meet with volunteers briefly each time that the volunteer comes to review tasks, any relevant changes or challenges in the work and to set expectations of that volunteer’s work. These check-in meetings are important to set the tone and prepare the volunteer.
- Tasks should be reassessed by the staff member on a frequent basis so that the volunteer’s skills are being used to their fullest potential and the work is being done effectively.
- If a volunteer is not performing his/her tasks, a conversation should be had with this volunteer. The decision is then left with the volunteer manager whether that volunteer should continue volunteering with the organization, be moved to another project or have more supervision when volunteering.
For some volunteer projects, an organization may wish to designate a team leader/supervisor for volunteers who also happens to be a volunteer.

- The volunteer team leader should be a trained and trusted volunteer who is familiar with the project and its objectives.
- The volunteer team leader should be the main point of contact for the volunteers. Provide all volunteers with this person’s contact information.
- The volunteer team leader should have frequent check-ins with the staff at the non-profit to ensure that the program is moving forward in the way that the organization envisions it.
When leading a volunteer service project event, ask:

- Are the places where volunteers are needed accessible?
- Are they suitable for people with disabilities?
- Are the places comfortable? If not, do my volunteers know what to expect?
- Are there barriers that could be removed to make the site more convenient/comfortable?
- Are the places well-equipped? Do I have all of the necessary tools and materials, with enough quantities for all volunteers?
- Is there a certain type of clothing that volunteers should wear? If the volunteers are painting, do they know to wear clothes that can get paint on them?

**Tracking Volunteers**

Creating a volunteer database is important for retention; organizations often lose track of volunteers after a long lapse in a person’s attendance. An effective database can be simple and created in readily available spreadsheet templates. An active database will help to keep track of past volunteers, help to mobilize active volunteers, and keep track of who your most active volunteers are.

Things to include in a database:

1. First and Last name
2. Contact information for volunteer (including Phone Number and Email Address)
3. Projects and locations where the person has volunteered
4. Dates of their volunteer projects
5. Relevant skills (including languages spoken if relevant) of the volunteer
6. Notes section (where a staff supervisor can provide any detail about their work)

**Evaluation**

After every volunteer project, it is a good idea to have volunteers complete an evaluation. For a one-time or short-term volunteer, the evaluation can be a simple document or online survey asking for volunteer feedback. This kind of document will provide guidance on how to improve future volunteer opportunities. An evaluation sheet will also show your volunteers that you are open to their feedback.

To make the evaluation most useful, make sure to ask for the following information:

- Date and time of their volunteer project
- Number of hours they volunteered
- How they heard about the volunteer opportunity or organization
- A scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” where volunteers answer a succession of questions about their experience
- A qualitative section where they can describe their experience
For volunteers who are working with your organization over a longer period of time, a more formalized evaluation similar to an employee evaluation is beneficial. Create two documents with the same questions with one being filled out by the volunteer and the other by the volunteer manager. The two should then meet to review and identify any areas for growth and to celebrate success. This is a way to ensure that the volunteer is working toward organizational goals as well as to get valuable feedback on the volunteer process.

Recognition

A large part of retaining volunteers is effective recognition of their work. It’s important to remember that not everyone is motivated by the same type of recognition and that the type of recognition that you give to volunteers should depend on their projects and the duration of their work. Recognition does not need to be expensive to be effective, but it’s key to implementing committed volunteer projects and in determining what motivates volunteers.

Some examples of recognition:

- **Celebratory luncheon for all volunteers**: This is a good way to bring both staff and volunteers together to thank them for their hard work.

- **Awards**: Awarding volunteers in some way is also key to showing gratitude for volunteers’ work. A “Volunteer of the Month” award is one example of an award an organization can choose to give. Presenting a framed certificate and/or recognizing them as the Volunteer of the Month in your newsletter is a good way to publicize this news.

- **Thank you notes**: Notes can take many forms: personally addressed from the Executive Director or Volunteer Manager and privately distributed, a public announcement in an organizational newsletter or website, or a note from a client served by the project (a child in the mentoring program, a resident of the shelter, etc).

- **Organizational traditions**: It is good important to recognize any long term volunteers in the same ways that you recognize great work traditionally in your organization (besides monetarily, of course).

**Other Examples of Effective Recognition:**

1) A technology professional, who does not like public speaking, has volunteered to help your nonprofit build a new client database and update the website. *How do you recognize her?*

   - This person might not appreciate a lot of public attention, so don’t call her out in front of a crowd. A hand-written note or lunch from the Executive Director might work best.
2) An art student has volunteered to clean your museum and art studios twice a week. 

*How do you recognize him?*

- As a student, this person might appreciate networking with your organization’s partner artists. Invite him the next time you have a private art showing or introduce him to the artists you work with.

**Retention**

There are two things that are most directly connected to volunteer retention: a meaningful assignment and recognition. When a volunteer feels that his or her work is meaningful and appreciated, s/he is much more likely to return to volunteer with an organization.

Creating Volunteer Leaders, who help to mentor and lead other volunteers, allows some volunteers to feel rewarded for their prior work with the organization and also motivates them to continue to volunteer. Volunteers can thus work to gain more responsibility and see that they are making a real difference in the organization. Be sure to publicize the requirements of a Volunteer Leader and the attributes that are required.

Evaluation is also an effective retention tool. It communicates to your volunteers that you are open to their feedback, and provides you with information that you need to consistently improve your projects.
Below are listed resources that can be helpful for an organization building its volunteer program.

**NYC Service**
Through its largest initiative, the NYC Civic Corps, as well as two other initiatives, Board Serve NYC and Professional Volunteer Services, NYC Service supports nonprofits and public agencies to use more volunteers strategically and effectively and helps to drive volunteer activity to the City’s most pressing needs: strengthening communities, helping neighbors in need, education, environment, health, and emergency preparedness.

Through initiatives like the NYC Civic Corps, NYC Service works with experts in the service field to identify and put into action best practices in utilizing volunteers strategically and effectively in order to build capacity and maximize organizational resources.

**NYC Service Background**
In April 2009, Mayor Bloomberg launched NYC Service, the citywide initiative tasked with setting a new standard for how cities can tap the power of their people to tackle their most pressing challenges. NYC Service is comprised of 30 diverse and innovative initiatives that aim to achieve three overarching goals: to help more New Yorkers connect to service opportunities, to more easily and target volunteers to address the City’s greatest needs and to promote service as a core part of what it means to be a citizen of New York City.

A focus of NYC Service is heightening accountability within the field and to set a new standard for measuring the impact of volunteerism.

NYC Service’s website (nyc.gov/service) is a one-stop shop for volunteers to locate and access one-time or ongoing volunteer opportunities. The site includes enhanced search and matching capabilities, promotes volunteer opportunities from nonprofits and City agencies, and encourages individuals and community groups to engage in service efforts. In order to post opportunities, organizations must complete a short, free registration process.

- **Website:** [http://www.nyc.gov/service](http://www.nyc.gov/service)

**Grants**
**Foundation Center**
The Foundation Center strengthens the nonprofit sector by advancing knowledge about philanthropy. The Center is the nation’s leading authority on philanthropy and is dedicated to serving grantseekers, grantmakers, policymakers, the media, and the general public.

- **Website:** [http://foundationcenter.org](http://foundationcenter.org)

**Risk Management**
**Go Pass**
Go Pass, an initiative of NYC Service, offers nonprofits a simple, easy and reliable screening process for volunteers, which will help reduce costs and enhance safety and security. Go Pass aims to increase the capacity of volunteerism at nonprofits serving children and youth, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations.
Nonprofit Risk Management Center
The Nonprofit Risk Management Center provides assistance and resources for community-serving nonprofit organizations with practical, affordable suggestions for controlling risks that threaten a nonprofit's ability to accomplish its mission. They offer a wide range of services from employment practices to insurance purchasing.

Volunteer Management
New York Association for Volunteer Administrators: The New York Association for Volunteer Administration (NYAVA) is a membership organization that promotes professionalism and strengthens leadership in volunteerism. In addition to workshops pertaining to volunteer management, NYAVA also offers hands-on training to persons interested in a career in volunteer administration, with placement in a professional environment.

Idealist.org: Idealist is an interactive site where people and organizations can exchange resources and ideas, locate opportunities and supporters, and take steps toward building a world where all people can lead free and dignified lives. Idealist provides a comprehensive database of tools for organizations.

Points of Light Foundation: Points of Light Foundation (POLF) is an excellent resource for the volunteer, nonprofit, or volunteer manager, as well as an excellent referral source to other resources.

Capacity Building Resources
NYC Civic Corps: The NYC Civic Corps, an initiative of NYC Service, unites a diverse and professional corps of volunteers working at New York City agencies and nonprofit organizations. Members of the NYC Civic Corps build, support, and manage volunteer programs that affect the critical impact areas of economic opportunity, health, education, clean energy, and the environment.

BoardServeNYC: BoardServeNYC promotes and sustains effective nonprofit board governance by recruiting, training, and then helping talented New Yorkers find volunteer opportunities as board members. The program provides committed volunteers with a meaningful and productive way to share their professional expertise and personal passion with nonprofits.

The Fund for the City of New York: The Fund seeks out, adapts, applies, and assesses ways to enable government and nonprofit agencies to achieve excellence through its core programs. The Fund develops and helps implement innovations in
policy, programs, practices and technology in order to advance the functioning of government and
nonprofit organizations.

- **Website:** [http://www.fcny.org](http://www.fcny.org)

**AmeriCorps (State & National, VISTA, Senior Corps, NCCC):**
Organizations interested in using national service to address critical community needs are invited to
apply for a 2011 AmeriCorps grant. Resources include online resources and technical assistance calls.
- **Website:** [http://www.americorps.gov](http://www.americorps.gov)

**NPower:**
NPower provides high-quality, affordable IT services to nonprofits. They help organizations improve
their return on technology investments by saving money on quality solutions that help organizations
deliver on their mission, delivering the solution quickly to ensure a return on investment, and
encouraging innovation that makes a difference from a mission perspective to help the entire nonprofit
sector.
- **Website:** [http://www.npower.org](http://www.npower.org)

**Taproot Foundation:**
The Taproot Foundation strengthens nonprofits by engaging business professionals in service. Every
year, hundreds of nonprofit organizations rely on the Taproot Foundation's Service Grant program to
provide pro bono marketing, HR, IT, and strategy management consulting services that better equip
them to tackle society's toughest challenges.
- **Website:** [http://www.taprootfoundation.org](http://www.taprootfoundation.org)