Elements of a Successful Volunteer Program

1. Planning

You should answer the following questions as you plan your volunteer program:
- Why are volunteers wanted?
- What are volunteers expected to do?
- What resources are needed to support volunteers (staff, space, equipment, furniture, and supplies)?
- Who will provide training and ongoing supervision of volunteers?
- How much time will a volunteer task take?

2. Volunteer Job Descriptions

To ensure effective utilization of volunteers, it is necessary to define the work to be done with as many specifics as possible. Volunteer job descriptions should include, at minimum, a title, purpose for the assignment, the scope of work, a training and supervision plan, and time frames.

3. Recruitment/Public Relations

Public relations is a necessary tool in making your organization visible to funders, the public and prospective volunteers. If people do not know about your programs, they are unlikely to volunteer. Recruitment is the process of finding and encouraging people to give their time and energy to the organization. The best recruitment is targeted to the audiences most likely to have skills and interests that match available volunteer job descriptions.

4. Screening and Selection

The screening and selection period is the time to discuss expectations on both sides and to begin to set standards. Many supervision and management problems can be prevented by effectively interviewing prospective volunteers. The process of matching a new volunteer with the most appropriate assignment is key to insuring their retention in your program.

5. Orientation

Orientation is the overview of the total organization necessary for every volunteer, regardless of specific assignment. It places the work into context and allows for consistent introduction of policies, procedures, rights and responsibilities.
6. Training

Training should vary with the demands of each specific job description and the background each volunteer brings to the organization. There is the need for initial, start up training, plus the need for ongoing, in-service training.

7. Supervision

As with salaried staff, volunteer staff need support from someone who understands the organization and knows the work that needs to be done. Volunteers differ, however, in that they need to have constant access to someone in charge (preferably the volunteer coordinator) while they are working.

8. Recognition

Recognition is one way to pay volunteers for their efforts, but it has many nuances. If there are annual dinners and certificates, but no daily support, recognition can feel empty. While formalized thank you events are important, informal recognition is more important. This includes everything from knowing volunteers’ names to including them in staff meetings and decision-making. It is also part of recognition to offer constructive criticism, since such training implies a belief that the volunteer can do even better work.

9. Coordination

By definition, volunteers are part-time staff. Coordinating volunteers’ schedules can be an amazing logistical challenge. A volunteer program must have a coordinator who is able to manage all the details of scheduling, appropriate assignment, volunteer recognition and evaluation.

10. Record Keeping and Reporting

Documenting volunteers’ invaluable work assists in recruiting, training, recognition, and fund raising (volunteer hours can be applied to in-kind match). For purposes of insurance and to back up the income tax deduction claims of volunteers, record keeping is also necessary. Reports of cumulative achievements of volunteers should be shared routinely with volunteers themselves, as well as with administration or funding sources.

11. Evaluation

Along with program evaluation, it is helpful to conduct individual performance reviews with volunteers, so as to maintain motivation and allow for personal growth and program improvement. The criteria used to evaluate volunteer performance should be clearly outlined with volunteers at the time of their orientation and with the staff who will supervise them.

12. Volunteer/Salaried Staff Relations

Using volunteers to assist paid staff requires the support of your organization. It is critical that teachers and other staff who could benefit from the use of volunteers understand your model for recruiting, screening and placing volunteers as well as the ways your position will support their work. Build job descriptions and feedback models with staff to ensure their buy-in.