Volunteer Best Practices

What Orientation Should Cover

- Explain what your organization does and its history. How did it come to be and how has it evolved?
- Describe the programs and whom your organization serves.
- Provide an overview of how your organization is set up. Go over the org chart so volunteers understand who does what.
- You can do this individually, or in a group setting. Sat. AM over coffee/doughnuts, evening pizza meeting? Make it fun, get creative!
- Introduce volunteers to your facility. Take them on a tour, introducing them to key staff along the way.
- Go over general policies and procedures, spending the most time on those that impact the volunteers directly. (Share Caritas example)
- Explain how the volunteer management system works. How do they schedule their time? Does the volunteer need to check in? How do they log their hours? To whom can they turn for help? Is there an expectation as to how many hours you need to commit to the organization?

How to Train Volunteers

After orientation, provide specific training for each volunteer that addresses the particular job they will do.

Training should include:

- Take the time to authentically welcome volunteers and orient them to their new role.
- How the volunteer will perform his or her particular task.
- Provide clearly written job descriptions
- What not to do when performing this task.
- How to handle an emergency or what to do when something unexpected happens. (ex: weather emergency, active shooter, medical emergency)
- What the goals are for the task, and how performance will be evaluated.
- What equipment will be required and how to use it.
- A walk through of the task and coaching while the volunteer tries out the task. (Shadowing until the volunteer is ready! – Check for understanding)
- Training is at its best when it is practical, and hands-on.
- You can train in groups or one-on-one, and it can be provided by staff or by other volunteers. (It could be on-line, if you have those resources, or in person.)
- Sometimes training is intricate and takes many hours. However, even if the volunteer task is easy and the time volunteering will be brief, don't neglect the basics.
- If applicable, (food pantry for example...), use role playing. Put the volunteer in the shoes of your guests.

**Extras**

Volunteers want to know up front how much time the job will take.

Everyone is busier than ever, and many volunteers may only have time for short term assignments. Project-oriented, rather than ongoing, tasks seem to work particularly well.

Decide how much time your job will need and include that when you publicize your volunteer position. Will it take 6 hours a week? Does it need to be done on a weekend? Do you need your volunteer for the summer, for a season? Does the volunteer need to be available from 2 to 4 p.m. during the week?
Provide lots of options so that you can appeal to millennial professionals, a busy soccer mom, or the retiree who has more time. Think about offering "alternative" opportunities, such as project-based family volunteering and even micro-volunteering and virtual opportunities.

**Volunteers want to be appreciated.**

Tell your volunteers frequently that they are doing a good job.

Although you will want to come up with some creative ways to formally say thanks, don't overlook the power of a simple gesture such as taking a group of volunteers to lunch, giving out gift cards, or mailing a handwritten thank you note. Social Media is also a great way to recognize volunteers. Give em’ a shout out on your FB page!

**Volunteers want you to communicate with them well and often.**
Regular communication is motivating for volunteers while the lack of it is one of the chief reasons volunteers become dissatisfied. Volunteers like to have a particular person who looks after them.

If your organization does not have a volunteer coordinator, be sure to assign someone to be the point person for your volunteers. Neglect can be deadly. A forgotten volunteer won't return, and you may have lost a donor as well.

Be ready to listen to volunteers and respond to concerns immediately. Telephone them, have meetings, invite them to stop by your office, send info via social media, or email them regular updates or a volunteer newsletter.

Team meetings at the beginning of shifts work great! Get everyone on the same page.