

Train, Support, and Supervise Volunteers

Once you have invited volunteers to join your organization, make them feel welcome. Alert the staff and Board about new projects. Families and groups may want to undertake a project together. Be prepared for these opportunities by considering all the ways you could use volunteers to advance your program goals. Here are some tips for creating an environment where the volunteer can be successful:

- Not all volunteers want to do direct service, so consider engaging them in other ways.
- Prepare training sessions and/or packets so that volunteers can be engaged smoothly and quickly. You will want to include information about your organization, its mission and structure and content knowledge, if needed, for the specific volunteer assignment.
- Organize activities clearly so that you make the best use of their time. Most volunteers have a very low tolerance for disorganization and ineffective use of their time, interest and commitment.
- Develop a pool of volunteers you can trust. Get to know them and their names, so that you can recognize them at events and functions.
- Staff members are critical links in the smooth functioning of volunteer activities. Be sure they are prepared to work with and effectively utilize the volunteers. Organizations are stronger when staff and volunteers work together on a common goal.
- If a volunteer is undertaking a new project, provide written expectations about accountability for all concerned and establish benchmarks for progress.
- Every organization has 'unwritten rules'. Help the volunteer understand the organizational culture in which the volunteering operates.
- Supervision can be a complicated issue when dealing with volunteers. In any program, activity or event, it is absolutely essential to know who is really in charge. Be keenly aware of the ongoing working relationships between staff and other volunteers.
- Skilled and experienced volunteers are perfectly capable of organizing and supervising a project. Make sure they are clear about expectations and the goal of the project. They should know to whom they are accountable in the organization. Make it clear where staff and/or Board approval is required before they go off on their own.
- Sometimes the volunteer is functioning as an 'extra pair of hands' for staff, so that the supervisor is actually a staff member.
- Or perhaps a program department head is leading a volunteer activity that includes other staff, Board members, or volunteers, but the project is being led by the program director.
- Without getting overly concerned about protocol, it is important to clarify these relationships.
- Communications is a key factor in making a volunteer feel successful. Volunteers feel valued when expectations are clear and their input is sought.
- Develop feedback loops for volunteer to report regularly. Frequent communication avoids missteps. Midcourse corrections are easier with open communication.
- Keep accurate records of the contributions of time, talent, and resources to any project. Track hours to determine the value of in kind contributions of time, goods and services.
- There is no substitute for genuine thanks in terms of recognition. That is true for Board, volunteers and staff, especially when all three groups are involved in a shared event.