Creating and Sustaining a Volunteer Program

Volunteerism Trends and Facts

Not only is it important to get stakeholders engaged in planning a pedestrian-friendly community, it is also essential to involve them with the construction and maintenance of walkability projects. Use of volunteer resources helps to lower maintenance costs and build long-term support for a pedestrian facility. The best way to enlist and use volunteers is to establish a volunteer program. Before developing such a program, it is important to understand trends and facts that influence an individual’s inclination to volunteer. Consider these trends to identify volunteers that may be recruited to assist with a walkability project (Bureau of Labor Statistics):

- In 2005, women demonstrated more of a willingness to volunteer than men.
- People within the age bracket of 35-44 were the most active volunteers, followed by those 45-54.
- Married people volunteered more than single people.
- Parents with children under the age of 18 were more likely to volunteer than those without children.
- Employed people volunteered more than unemployed people or those not in the labor force. Part-time workers volunteer more than full-time workers.
- Volunteers spent on average 50 hours on volunteer activities. People over the age of 65 averaged the most time spent volunteering, while people between the ages of 16-19 and 25-34 averaged the least number of hours.
- Volunteers were involved most commonly with organizations that were either affiliated with a religion, school, youth-related activity, or community-service project.

People volunteer with a particular organization because they believe in the organization’s mission. If the community has rallied around the planning of the project, these supporters may wish to volunteer to continue to support its mission. In order to maintain the momentum of support, it is useful to understand the following motivations for volunteering (Merrill Associates):

- Shared conviction – A belief in the mission behind the organization.
- Affiliation – A desire to be associated with a particular organization.
- Influence – An aspiration to influence the aims and direction of an organization.
- Altruism – A wish to show an interest in the welfare of others without any promise of tangible recompense.
- Social interaction – A desire to meet others with similar life goals and interests.
- Career building – An interest in using volunteer work as an opportunity to develop
occupational skills and network with others along a similar career path.

- Learning opportunity – A quest to gain knowledge and experience.
- Accomplishment – A sense of wanting to help an organization create and complete projects that give the volunteer satisfaction and pride.
- Community service requirement – As a means to complete a class or graduation project.

Volunteer Program Planning

Projects that have a clear and compelling vision, concrete goals, and broad-based community support exhibit the ingredients to build successful volunteer programs. Prospective volunteers need to strongly identify with the shared vision, feel that the volunteer work is valuable, and believe that they will gain a sense of achievement from involvement. To develop a solid volunteer program, an organization must (Points of Light Foundation):

- Identify the work project while defining how the project contributes to the strategic goals and mission of the organization.
- Outline the tasks associated with the project and identify how it benefits the volunteers.
- Identify potential project partners and investigate potential funding sources.
- Determine the number of volunteers needed and clarify skills needed to perform each task.
- Communicate how the volunteers will be organized (work as a team with team leaders, committee, or independent work).
- Determine the project location, logistical needs, and working conditions.
- Determine the tools, supplies, nourishment needed while determining the training needed for the work and for safety. Train staff and volunteers to prepare for accidents.
- Decide the length of the project (duration and daily work hours) and the total project cost.
- Plan fun and social activities for volunteers.
- Plan volunteer recognition/appreciation events during and after the project.
- Recognize volunteers, project sponsors, partner organizations, and funders.

Roles of Volunteers

A volunteer coordinator may be designated to recruit, coordinate schedules, determine roles, develop job descriptions, and recognize service hours of volunteers. The coordinator should identify the type of volunteer job opportunities that will support the sustainability of a walkability project. Once the type of volunteer jobs are identified, job descriptions need to be prepared to outline the nature of work, needed skills, time commitment, physical demands, required training, and hours and location of work.

The roles of volunteers vary and may evolve depending on the stage of the project. In the early stages of the project, volunteers may form committees to plan walkability projects, solicit funds,
advise the organization, develop a maintenance plan, and coordinate human resource efforts of local community groups, service clubs, nonprofit organizations, school groups, civic organizations, business, and other project partners. During the implementation phase, volunteers may be enlisted to finalize the design of a project, support communications and outreach efforts, assist office operations, and in-kind labor for facility construction or landscaping. Volunteers may provide in-kind services such as labor for facility construction, routine maintenance, or recreation programming. Once the facility is constructed, volunteers can help support the sustainability of the project by other in-kind services such as routine maintenance, recreation programming, or planning and executing special events. Volunteers may also establish trail committees, “friends of parks/trails” groups, adopt-a-trail crews, ambassador programs, and stewardship initiatives. If civic groups or organizations are involved in volunteer efforts, written agreements should be developed to formalize commitments and long-term service obligations. Efforts of all volunteers and volunteer groups should be recognized and credited on signage, press releases, websites, and outreach material.

Recruiting Volunteers

Advertising and promoting volunteer opportunities can serve as a mechanism for recruiting volunteers and enhancing the visibility of the initiative. Promote the need for volunteers through press releases, electronic or print newsletters, existing volunteer referral services, stakeholder groups, speaker’s bureaus, civic events, or other outreach activities. Convey how the volunteer opportunity will benefit both the volunteer and contribute towards the vision and goals of the initiative. Explain the nature of the volunteer opportunity and what roles volunteers will fulfill. When recruiting an individual or group of volunteers, consider the following questions to ensure a good match to the needs of the project (Mayes Wilson and Associates):

- Do you believe in the mission of the project?
- Who are the groups that will use the facility (compare consistent, sporadic, and rare usage)?
- Who will benefit from use of the facility and who in the community will benefit from those people using it?
- Who might be opposed to the project?
- Who are the stakeholders that the organization wants to get involved in the project?
- What are the benefits of being a volunteer?

Good volunteer programs should have policies and procedures to provide structure for the program and guidance for the volunteers. Policies are also a component in successful risk management for the municipality and can be adapted from existing employee procedures. Volunteers should be advised during an orientation process on practice and policies governing alcohol/drug use, confidentiality, liability, safety, harassment, and discrimination (Points of Light Foundation).
Evaluating and Recognizing Volunteers

An evaluation of volunteers and the volunteer program on a periodic or annual basis is essential to sustaining an effective and efficient program. The evaluation process should relate back to the program goals and volunteer job descriptions. Evaluating volunteers can help ensure that a volunteer performs work that matches described work, obtains proper training, receives adequate supervision, and feels a sense of accomplishment. The evaluation process should be a two-way dialogue to allow the volunteer to critique the volunteer program and offer suggestions for improvement.

Finally, a successful volunteer program should recognize and celebrate volunteer efforts and highlight the importance of volunteerism. Several recent studies have shown that recognition also helps with effective recruitment campaigns for new volunteers. The appreciation of volunteers contributes directly to the strength of the volunteer organization and the sustainability of its efforts (Points of Light Foundation).