

Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers in Faith-Based Organizations

(Pamela Leong, Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, 2004)

Volunteers are crucial to faith-based organizations. They allow programs to have staff resources that otherwise would be prohibitively expensive. Success in recruiting and retaining volunteers is serious business--perhaps even a life-and-death business in organizations that face severe financial constraints. Without volunteers, many faith-based human service organizations could not be sustained. Developing effective strategies for effectively recruiting and retaining volunteers should be high priorities in faith-based human service programs.

Recruiting volunteers. In recruiting volunteers, program administrators should recognize the importance of ties that prospective volunteers might already have with your program. Volunteers in Los Angeles faith-based programs consistently report that they are attracted to organizations where they already have direct or indirect relationships. A physician at a faith-based medical clinic noted, for example, that she volunteered after hearing about the clinic from a friend who herself had been serving the clinic as a volunteer. A volunteer in another program first heard about it from a fellow church member (the congregation has had long-standing ties with the program).

Thus, it makes sense to prepare your current volunteers to be as effective as possible in doing what they already do—recruiting other volunteers. Let them know about your volunteers needs and encourage them to be intentional in inviting others to serve.

Program administrators should pay attention to what will serve the concrete interests of potential recruits. Religious scholar Robert Wuthnow says that contemporary volunteering efforts have become “looser,” i.e., that people often volunteer as a way of dealing with their own personal needs.^[1] For instance, medical students who volunteer at a medical clinic are well aware that, by doing so, they gain direct medical training, education, and hands-on clinical interaction with patients. Some volunteers may be looking for organizational experience that can lead to full-time employment. College students may be interested in building dossiers that will open doors to postgraduate or professional educational programs. Clearly, self-interest can lead people to valued forms of volunteer service.

Retaining volunteers. Because labor is not exchanged for compensation, there usually is no contractual obligation between the volunteer and the organization. This places limits on how much of your program can be carried on by volunteers. “[Y]ou come to a point where you can only ask so much from volunteers...,” as one program administrator observed. Volunteers who have already demonstrated that they are willing to go the second mile in serving the program are especially valuable. Developing strategies for retaining these high-commitment volunteers is one of the program’s highest priorities.

Helping volunteers to see the distinctiveness of your organization is an effective strategy for retaining volunteers. Highlight regularly and often the services and programs that your organization uniquely offers to participants and volunteers. Staff at a medical clinic in Los Angeles, for example, remind their volunteer physicians that the clinic affords them access to a radically diverse patient population and exposes them to a range of pathologies not often found in affluent regions of the city. Volunteers in a Christian adoptive and foster

parent recruitment program have been told that theirs is the only enterprise in Los Angeles County that recruits foster and adoptive parents for deaf infants and children.

Speaking more often about the stake that volunteers have in upgrading and maintaining their community is another approach organization leaders find effective. As members/residents, volunteers have emotional attachments to the community and have personal interests in wanting to advance that community. So, for example, a program administrator at a job training program in Los Angeles routinely speaks to volunteers about the positive difference the program makes in creating a "viable, safe, fun" community for both residents and visitors.

Administrators may also be able to retain volunteers by helping them to feel at home in the organization, to feel included in a community of service. Organizations that emphasize interpersonal connections and/or intimacy among members/staff/volunteers may also improve retention levels. A sense of community, perhaps more than any other factor, strengthens commitment, because the individual then feels an emotional, and perhaps even spiritual, attachment. "There's a family feel to the staff," an administrator at a Muslim free clinic observed. That experience should be shared and actively promoted in the organization.

Here are some first steps that your program can take in its attempts to be more intentional and strategic in recruiting and retaining volunteers:

- Identify the network of relationships that your program currently enjoys. Who are your friends? With which institutions or organizations does your program regularly interact? Where is your program known? What are the most important sources of your current corps of volunteers?

When you have constructed this "map" of program/volunteer relationships, develop strategies for utilizing this network to recruit new volunteers. Staff members associated with the foster/adoptive parent recruitment program, for example, realized that many of their volunteers come from congregations where there are substantial numbers of foster/adoptive families that are being served by the program. Now, when staff members speak to congregations about possibilities for serving as foster/adoptive parents, they mention the need for members to provide short-term volunteer services such as baby-sitting, transportation, and emergency services for these parents.

- Routinely turn to your current volunteers to serve as recruiters of others. A youth services program in Los Angeles, for example, includes in its volunteer orientation program information about different kinds of volunteers that are needed.
- Identify the ways in which an association with your program directly benefits volunteers. Then, in your recruitment of volunteers, target groups whose interests would be served by offering themselves as volunteers. For example, the Muslim free clinic in Los Angeles actively promotes volunteerism among undergraduate pre-med students. These are students whose service in the free clinics tangibly upgrades their ability to compete for admission to medical school.

- Be strategic in your attempts to retain volunteers. You could, for example, create events in which your whole staff—volunteers and paid employees—speak together about the significance of what they are offering participants and about the contribution of their program to the neighborhood’s development. You could review how volunteers are utilized in the program to be sure that they are not isolated—i.e., that volunteers and paid employees work side by side. You could create times and places where individuals simply enjoy each others’ company—around cups of coffee, at lunchtime.

This is part of a series of Thumbnail Case Studies authored by the FASTEN research team and released by Baylor University School of Social Work as part of a 30-month research project funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. This project is designed to identify the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in addressing challenges of urban poverty. The Baylor School of Social Work is leading this research team with members from Baylor University’s business school, the schools of social work at the University of Pittsburgh and Virginia Commonwealth University, and the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California.

This essay represents some of the findings from the FASTEN research project that are relevant to the planning and delivery of services by faith-based organizations. The piece was authored by Pamela Leong (with the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California) with the FASTEN Research Team. She can be reached at pamelale@usc.edu.

Source: www.fastennetwork.org

[1] Wuthnow, R. (1998). *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America’s Fragmented Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.