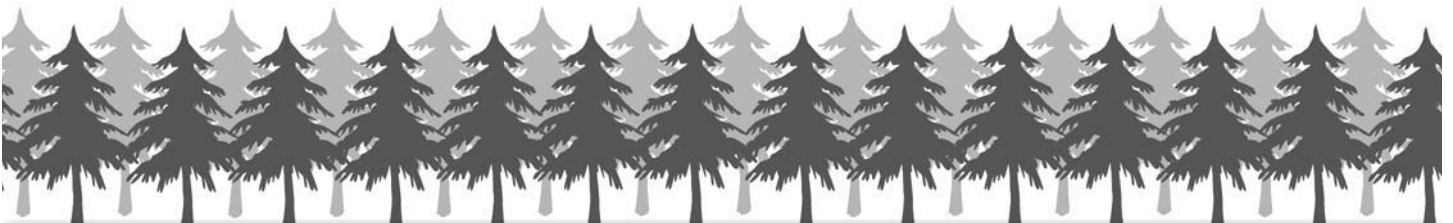

4. Volunteers



4. Volunteers

Introduction

Almost all sport, culture and recreation programs, and events rely on volunteers. They just would not happen if community members, parents, families and friends did not get involved. Therefore, it is very important to recruit, organize, and care for volunteers in a very deliberate and good way. Sorting out who gets paid and who doesn't can often be an issue, particularly when most community events and programs are running on very limited budgets. A good rule of thumb is to try to encourage people to donate their time and efforts but set up policies that are clear so that no one person or situation is being treated differently than others – unless an exception is required.

Volunteers come in many forms, and with different contributions. They are not all equal, but their willingness to be part of something should be appreciated, well used, and then recognized. Volunteer opportunities range from being on a board of directors, to helping with a specific event or program, donating rides or food, providing specialized expertise, to being on committees or task forces.

We sometimes confuse participants or audiences with volunteers; they are different in that a volunteer has a set job or tasks, reports to someone in the organization, and is accountable for the outcomes of their efforts. Orientation and training are a key part of having an effective group of volunteers and it is up to the organization to provide the time and effort and resources to make the best use of those who offer their services and also to know when not to accept offers of assistance. One of the most common complaints heard from volunteers is that they showed up but there was nothing for them to do or they don't know what to do and no one seemed to be in charge.

“Without our volunteer base we would never be able to sustain our special events year after year.” – Jennifer Donaghy, Recreation Director, Denare Beach

Developing a Volunteer Strategy

Managing and supporting volunteers is every bit as complicated as finding them and every bit as important as managing staff. This means that a plan should be in place to make sure we do it to the best of our abilities. A volunteer strategy is simply a guide to help organize and support volunteers and should be developed with input from volunteers themselves.

A volunteer strategy should be developed with the following in mind: what the organization requires from its volunteers; what volunteers need to be engaged and interested; skills and knowledge required for specific tasks; security considerations and good solid planning with input from all involved. Most of all, volunteers need and want to be useful, recognized and thanked. A good solid volunteer strategy requires that someone is responsible for it and that time is dedicated to supporting and nurturing the volunteers of today, as well as those of the future.

Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers

Each community is unique and has very different dynamics that need to be considered. Generally speaking, however, people need to be in the habit of volunteering and be invited or asked (more than once or twice) to volunteer, and they need to be asked in a way that leaves room for them to say no or not this time. Sometimes using pressure or guilt works for the short run but not in a good way over time. What does work is asking people how, when and for what they might volunteer and then linking the need to what they are interested in doing. Public recognition for volunteers not only shows appreciation but also encourages others to get involved.

Many communities say that they do not have enough volunteers (or that it is always the same people who do all the work). We get in the habit of relying on the same group of individuals or families and don't think about recruiting in a different way or from different sources. For example, most high school students are willing to help but might need support and training. Certain people who have said no in the past might be willing to help if asked again in the right way and for the right things. An important consideration is asking what gets in the way of them volunteering. Issues such as child care or transportation might be able to be resolved as part of planning for and supporting volunteers.

We know the right things to do but often do not take the time or make the effort to formalize or expand our relationships or support volunteers and volunteer development. Communication, matching skills/interests with opportunities, and recognition are the keys to retaining volunteers once they agree to help.



The Northern Context

The north takes pride in our volunteerism, which is absolutely necessary to help support staff and to make sure that programs and events take place. We are good at it, and we volunteer a lot. Some of us do it too much, and in the north volunteer burnout is a concern. In other cases, it is all about being part of a family – either your own or that of the clubs, teams and events that take place on a regular basis. The northern way is for everyone to pitch in, elders, youth, and parents – but we are also starting to rely very heavily on “paid staff”. In order to increase the satisfaction of volunteers, we know that thank you goes a long way, and we try to treat volunteers the way we would like to be treated when we are volunteering.

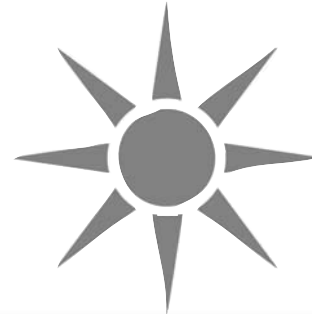
4. Volunteers

What's Important to Know?

- ★ Volunteers are as important as staff and require the same amount of effort and support – having a volunteer strategy is important.
- ★ Volunteers need an orientation to the organization (mandate – vision – goals – key people) and room for their questions and ideas.
- ★ Volunteer protocols and policies help everyone understand the rules. Learn the protocols for elder involvement and make sure it is followed.
- ★ It is also important to know how communities work (each one is a bit different). Know what the protocols are for various groups and find ways to be accepted if you are not from the community.
- ★ When volunteers enjoy their experience they tell their friends and families all about it – they do the same if they've had a bad experience.
- ★ Develop a screening policy for volunteers and always do a reference check.
- ★ Volunteers are a good source of information and are the messengers for your organization (for better or for worse).
- ★ Appreciation should be shown in many ways so that all volunteers feel valued.

Tips and Advice

1. Make good use of volunteers by matching their skills and interests to the jobs.
2. Recruit volunteers from a number of sources being clear about what is needed.
3. Invest in the relationship and training of volunteers and thank them often.
4. Be organized, keep everyone well informed and don't over use volunteers.
5. Know the barriers for people who don't volunteer and help to overcome them.
6. Youth are willing to help, but it is up to us to create a useful place for them.
7. Be consistent, be on time, always give thanks, and do what you say you will do.



Story

There are lots of volunteers in Canoe Lake – more than enough – and they are treated very well. They are given t-shirts, awards banquets, volunteer dinners and volunteer socials. The volunteers say they like to work for someone who is organized. They have a schedule, their roles are explained in a straightforward way, and there is a backup person if someone doesn't show up. After each event the volunteers names are announced on the radio, newspaper etc. to thank them publicly.

“The kids are coming out – the hardest part is finding enough parents to help out.” – Charles Smith, Physical Education Teacher, Deschambault Lake

“In 2001, the Northern Saskatchewan Games and Cultural Festival was held in Black Lake and Stony Rapids. It was good for the two communities to put it on together and we had many volunteers to help. This type of event should definitely continue in future years. It provided an opportunity to volunteer and work together to put on an opportunity for the young people to be part of a team and learn more about each other's cultures and ways of life.” – Terri-Lynn Beavereye, Stony Rapids/Black Lake Host Community Committee

Toolbox Connection

In the toolbox you will find the following tools related to this section:

- Volunteer Inventory
- Volunteer Strategy Checklist
- How to Keep Volunteers
- Creative Ways to Say Thank You
- 100 Ways to Give Recognition to Volunteers
- Volunteer Policy Sample
- Online Volunteer Training Centre Overview