

Volunteer Program Challenges During Difficult Economic Times

Lack of Staff Trust:

- Unsure of the volunteer coordinator role
- Fear that volunteers will take over paid positions
- Needs of the department cannot be met by volunteers
- Staff is uncomfortable with engaging volunteers to help in that way
- Union staff refuse to work with volunteers

Addressing the Challenge:

- What is your role in placing volunteers?
- Ask what type of activities would be difficult for volunteers to perform?
- Explain how many volunteers it would take to fill one staff position like a page and the resources it would take – making it unfeasible.
- Encourage staff to understand that your role is to support the mission of the organization and advocate often that volunteers are not appropriate to fill various roles.
- Explain scope of duties of volunteers and how they typically do a small aspect of one position.
- If the perception is that laid off staff have been replaced by volunteers ask upper management to address the issue. Discredit rumors and false information by having open communication.
- Share information on how volunteers are vetted and trained.
- Address staff performance issues quickly. If staff are rude, do not communicate, or are unwilling to work with volunteers explain the organization's expectations in regards to working with community members and hold staff accountable.

Fear of Change:

- Staff layoffs/reductions - volunteer contact changes
- Volunteer layoffs or cuts to volunteer programs
- Constant change
- Mourning the loss of what use to be (staff and volunteers)

Addressing the Challenge:

- Ensure that volunteers are communicated with regarding organizational changes before they occur.
- Develop checklists for staff about responsibilities of volunteer supervisors.

- Establish a communication process which involves volunteers and how they can ask questions.
- Allow volunteers to mark the loss of the way things use to be through a meeting, blog or some other vehicle. Then reemphasize your library's vision and mission. Ask them to support the library as it is now.

Busting Myths:

- Volunteers are free labor

Addressing the Challenge:

- Volunteers need to be recruited, trained, supervised, scheduled and recognized.
- It takes considerable staff time to build relationships with volunteers and address issues that arise.
- Often many volunteers are needed to do the task one single staff member did. For example, staff member Sally Smith shelved holds for two hours a day, five days a week. Five volunteers may need to be recruited to do this one small task (one each day).

A Good Problem to Have:

- Too many volunteers want placements and not enough openings

Addressing the Challenge:

- Develop a waiting list for positions.
- Stop volunteer recruitment.
- Work with staff on developing new volunteer tasks or positions.