

Volunteer Management Review™

Changing our Message: Communicating the Value of Volunteering to Fix the Looming Volunteer Crisis

Wednesday, September 12, 2007 - Deb Anderson

Contributed By Deb Anderson

I recently listened to the audio messages from the “Who Cares” initiative led by Paul Reed and Linda Graff. It’s a sobering message. Volunteering is on the brink of major change that is going to impact our communities in ways that can not even be estimated to their fullest extent. We know that rates of volunteering are declining. Between 1997 and 2001 Canada lost a whopping 1 million volunteers.

We also know that the majority of volunteer work is done on the backs of a small core of unsung civic heroes. This 5% of volunteers who are contributing the lions-share of time are an aging group who will sooner, rather than later, be unable to carry on due to their own age and health concerns.

The younger volunteers stepping up to fill their shoes have increasingly high expectations of when, how and what they will contribute, often wanting to share talents that don’t match with organization’s priorities. Mandatory community service is creating a new generation of people who don’t understand volunteering is a gift from the heart but rather an exchange for a credit of some kind.

The future of volunteering is in jeopardy and most of us in the field are watching, awestruck as day after day passes that we can’t finish our to-do lists. It’s no wonder either, considering that the standards for screening are more complex than ever and our offices seem like revolving doors of recruitment trying to replace the short term volunteers leaving ever growing number of vacancies in our programs. There is lack in the infrastructure that supports community effort.

There is no easy fix to these societal problems and many solutions will need to be implemented in order to ensure that the essential services we rely on so heavily will be available in the years to come. One easy-to-implement solution is a change in thinking and communicating about the value of volunteering.

What is the value of volunteering? What impact does deliver? What effect does it have on others? What’s it worth to the country? What is it worth to you as an individual? Is it measured in hours? Is it worth a dollar amount? Is it reasonable to assign a standard rate per hour to all volunteer service? Perhaps it’s more reasonable to use one of the tools that allow comparisons between volunteer work and paid work to calculate a more specific cost per role. This is one way of expressing the value of volunteering. “Volunteers contributed the equivalent of \$1 million dollars of service this fiscal year.” That is a powerful image for some folks. Others look at the financial equivalent of volunteering only as the money our organizations didn’t have to pay for service received. That’s true to some degree as well. Is it fair to assess the value of volunteering based on how many full-time staff would have been required to work the number of hours

contributed? These measurements are all important and a wise Volunteer Manager will be calculating them on a quarterly or annual basis to communicate to stakeholders.

But is that the full picture? I think there is more to see.

Whether the service is essential or a nice commodity, there is an impact greater than dollars and time to consider. It's about how the gift of time makes others feel. What it does to improve their experience in one hour, or their quality of life year after year. How thankful is the new father who ventures into a hospital gift shop and finds the perfect card to express to his wife how grateful he is for the gift of a new baby she has given him? How relieved is the daughter who has been vigilant at her dying mother's bedside when a volunteer arrives to hold the fort while she gets a shower and something to eat? How grateful is the senior citizen who is able to remain in his home thanks to the volunteer who delivers his meals on wheels? How enriched is the child who grows up playing sports, all dependent on volunteers who coach teams each season? What is the impact of volunteers who sort cans in a food bank? How many families were fed because of their time and commitment? What value can be assigned to volunteers who host a Christmas dinner for marginalized children and inviting the jolly old elf to distribute donated gifts? What is the effect on a child who gets to believe in Santa for one more year? What figure can be affixed to the work of a board of directors who keep a museum, orchestra or artist's guild running? How much is a volunteer firefighters unit worth to a small rural community? What value would the family whose house was saved from a fire place on their service?

The impact that volunteering extends to our communities is not measurable. It is too great and broad to calculate. It spreads from person to person in communities around the world. That little girl who still believes in Santa this year also has a Big Sister who shares values and morals and shows her genuine care. Is it the influence of that Big Sister that keeps the young girl in high school rather than becoming one more drop-out statistic from families in poverty? What is the value in that? The social effect of volunteering is like dominoes.

Think about volunteers who are fighting to eradicate disease, to repair and heal our environment, to protect wildlife, to feed the starving children around the globe. How much is one life saved from AIDS in Africa worth? What about a thousand saved lives?

Emergency response and national security are pretty high priorities for most of us. How can we measure the value of the Red Cross? The homes, communities and lives rebuilt on the backs of volunteers after a disaster – what are they worth?

What are volunteers worth in education? Those who sit patiently, encouraging and helping a struggling child learn to read? Those who raise money for field trips, for playground equipment, for text books and computers? Those who sit on parent councils or boards of trustees to ensure that quality education in safe environments remains available to our youth?

What is the impact of volunteers in your little neck of the woods?

Given the decline in volunteering over the past few years and the awareness that the majority of the work done is contributed by a small core group of people, I think we need to start thinking

about and communicating the value of service to others. Map out the trickle down effect in your organization. Ask the experts, your volunteers to help you paint the picture. Nothing will motivate them more to continue serving. Ask clients what volunteers mean to them. Ask staff how their jobs would be different without support from volunteers.

I think of the volunteers who man the information desk at the hospital. Their role is not rocket-science, in fact, many new recruits transfer to other departments looking for more exciting work. This role is however; essential to the people we are trying to serve. Perhaps it's a first-time mom-to-be looking for a prenatal tour or a frail elderly gentleman trying to return his halter monitor, or someone in crisis who needs to speak to a counselor about their suicidal thoughts. A friendly, timely greeting at the front door from a volunteer is essential. It saves the mom-to-be the anxiety of finding the tour on time. It saves the elderly gentleman the energy required for him to wander the halls looking for the drop box. It may save the life of the patient in crisis. What if the customer was someone looking to donate money? What keeps them from walking out the door with their cheque in hand if the atmosphere isn't friendly and they can't find the foundation quickly and easily?

The volunteers who make a long-term commitment as Information Attendants are the ones who see the big picture. They wonder who they might miss helping if they don't show up for their shift. They don't consider the ease of their job, they consider its worth.

The most important key to retention is helping volunteers see how important their work is to the big picture. This bit of knowledge can be used by Volunteer Coordinators in all stages of the Volunteer Involvement Cycle. When planning positions with paid staff or volunteer leaders we can ask how this work contributes to the mission and vision of your organization. Recruitment dollars are used wisely by advertising what impact people can have by making a commitment to your vacant positions. Lay out the route between the small picture of one volunteer job to the big picture of organizational success on every position description. Write annual reports about the impact volunteer service has on your consumers. Exceed the reporting requirements of our boards and funders by including information about impact in addition to the number of volunteers and how many hours they contribute. When recognizing volunteers thank them for their part in achieving the big picture. Teach mentors to talk about impact to their protégés. Educate staff to be specific in their appreciation. Rather than just saying "thanks for coming today", give specific feedback about what benefit the volunteer's time offered to the staff or the clients.

We also need to take the discussions outside of our organizations. Initiate discussions with professional networks about communicating the value of volunteering, the impact and effect, with the community around you. Catch the ear of politicians and demonstrate why volunteerism needs to be a focus on their agendas. Be creative in your attempts to spread the word to community members at large. They need to know how important volunteering really is to the backbone of your healthy, vibrant community in order to motivate them to take action. A mentor once led a demonstration of sorts to garner attention to volunteering. She arranged an event involving every organization in her community and all their volunteers. Together they stood, side by side, holding hands measuring the distance they covered across the community. The aerial photo made quite an impression that night in the local news.

Collaborating with others in the field to spread the message of impact, effect, value and importance to community is good use of our time. Awareness of the need and the gain will motivate people to get involved and that will aid recruitment and retention for all of our organizations. I have always believed that Volunteer Coordinators were unsung heroes, the catalysts facilitating people to meet community needs. With new thinking and a new message we can make a radical change in our communities. We can protect volunteering, something that is of critical importance to everyone around us. I think you will feel like a hero worth singing about!

Now is the right time to change our message. We need to find a new theme song! I'm not sure what rhymes with words like impact, effect, importance and value but I can hear a little jingle ringing in my ears already.

About the Contributor

Deb Anderson:

Debbie has been enthusiastically involved in the voluntary Sector in a variety of roles for the past nine years. She is an energetic volunteer, actively involved community leader, a dynamic educator and facilitator.

Debbie is Coordinator, Volunteer Resources for Niagara Health System. Her responsibilities are with St. Catharines General and Niagara-on-the-Lake Hospitals. In these busy departments, more than 500 active volunteers and auxiliary members serve in more than 30 programs.

Previously, Debbie worked with Niagara College, where she developed curriculum and taught the Volunteer Management post diploma program. Under the umbrella of the Center for Community Leadership, Debbie has facilitated a variety of workshops, for professionals in the sector, about volunteer management, organizational development, facilitation and presentation skills and community development. Formerly, Debbie held the position of Manager of Volunteer Resources with a community-based AIDS service organization.

Debbie's most prized role is with her wonderful family. She lives in Niagara Falls with her husband Joe, children Trent and Ryleigh, and rottweiler Phoenix.

Debbie embraces new challenges, loves to foster team building and organizational growth, and enjoys working with others to make community a better place to live, work and play.

Contact: DAnderson@niagarahealth.on.ca

Publisher:

CharityChannel LLC

30021 Tomas St., Suite 300

Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688-2128 USA

+1 949 589-5938

Or contact us on-line at <http://charitychannel.com/rapid-reply>

Copyright

Volunteer Management Review(tm) is a domestic and international trademark of CharityChannel LLC. Copyright © and Trademark ™ 2007 CharityChannel LLC. All rights reserved. Article or item is copyright © 2007 by the contributor.

Reprints

All articles and other items on the CharityChannel web site is copyrighted by CharityChannel, by the contributor, or both. As a subscriber to the CharityChannel eNewsletters, you have permission to:

*

Print any article or item for your own file or reference purposes.

*

Link from your site to any article or item we publish

*

Forward an article or item to 10 or fewer of your colleagues by email

However, if you would like to reproduce and/or distribute a CharityChannel eNewsletter article or item electronically or in print for uses other than those listed above, you must follow the steps below to secure permission:

How to Quickly Get Reprint Permission

CharityChannel does not charge for reprints. There are three simple steps to getting permission to reprint an article from a CharityChannel eNewsletter.

Step 1: Utilizing the form at <http://charitychannel.com/reprints>, tell us how you propose to use the reprint.

Step 2. If you wish to reprint an article, get the contributor's written permission (i.e. by email). Each eNewsletter contains a bio and contact information about the author and/or a link to the contributor's web site. Sorry, but we cannot help you trace down a contributor. There are too many of them, and besides, you have the same information we do -- the bio on the article page!

Step 3: Provide attribution to CharityChannel and to the contributor as follows:

Copyright © 2007 [Name of Author]. All rights reserved.

This article is reprinted with permission from CharityChannel.com and the author of this article. The author holds the copyright to the article. To receive the entire issue by email each week, visit <http://charitychannel.com/enewsletters> and use the subscription form. To seek permission for reprints, visit <http://charitychannel.com/reprints>. For more information, contact CharityChannel at <http://charitychannel.com/rapid-reply>."