Structural Integrity: Retrofitting Volunteer Program Infrastructure
A Briefing Paper on Making The Case For
Professional Management of Volunteer Programs

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Volunteer-based programs often start small and informally. Good citizens are engaged – often by other good citizens – to respond to an identified human or community need. One of the essential miracles of volunteering is that people respond willingly to requests for help and perform admirably in their volunteer roles. Most nonprofit and community service originated from this fundamental fact of human kindness and generosity.

The development of volunteer programs follows a typical pattern of growth and expansion. As the original volunteer-based, often volunteer-lead service meets with success, and as volunteer efforts produce results, the program grows, often becoming both larger and more ambitious in its objectives. At some point not only does the service itself begin to be more demanding - demanding of more time, more effort, higher skills, greater consistency, and subject to more rules, regulations and/or legislation - but the coordination of the volunteer effort becomes exceedingly more complex as well.

As the demand for service grows, the organizational response is to recruit more volunteers. But expansion represents both opportunity and risk. Underlying weaknesses in the volunteer-based service become exposed as growth in volunteer numbers creates more demand than existing management capacity safely allows, and increased growth, itself, creates additional weaknesses as the system tries to accommodate more than it is capable of handling.

Program growth often results in increased internal and external scrutiny, and seemingly suddenly, the organization's ability to recruit volunteers has outpaced its capacity to appropriately and safely manage that involvement. Inevitably, the organization comes face to face with a critical turning point in the evolution of the volunteer service: the urgent need to step back and put into place the infrastructure that their now larger, more sophisticated and increasingly risky volunteer involvement demands.

Three aspects to backfilling the foundation of volunteer programs are most common:
  • The first is the engagement of experienced professional volunteer program management staffing for the service.

  • The second is the construction of systems that will support, guide, and underpin volunteer involvement and the services they provide.

  • The third is the allocation of sufficient resources and a planning- and evaluation-based budgeting system that keeps pace with the expectations, sophistication, and reach of the evolving service.

The organizational commitment to the development of volunteer program infrastructure represents an important turning point in volunteer-based services. It signals a recognition on the part of the organization's executive leadership that the nature of the service has transitioned from an informal, self-organizing community effort ("just volunteers") to a larger, more complex, and serious service, subject to scrutiny, accountability, and liability. Achieving top level organizational acknowledgement of the seriousness and impact of volunteer-based services can take time and effort. Often it is the sudden flashpoint recognition of the risks and liabilities associated with their growing volunteer program that will stimulate attention.

Whatever the impetus, the decision to construct support systems – information systems, communication and reporting systems, accountability systems, policies and procedures, program and performance standards and program objectives and expected outcomes – is both pivotal and, often, tumultuous. It represents a new way of thinking about the volunteer-based service and a departure from tradition. Change is often met with fear and resistance. And the shift in the center of power and decision-making from a volunteer-based and/or local model to a professionally-staffed system with standards and rules imposed from elsewhere – further up in the organizational hierarchy or at the state or federal level – often requires careful management, sensitivity, and time.

The nature of the service and volunteers' role in its delivery in large part determine the extent of infrastructure required. Where volunteers fulfil support functions only, risks are likely to be minimal and rules and standards can be kept to a minimum. Program staffing can concentrate on the coordination of involvement - recruitment, screening, training, placing, and supporting volunteers to ensure a sufficient and ongoing supply of the volunteer labor component. Note that this, in itself, is made evermore complex by the increasingly very short-term nature of volunteer involvement (long-term volunteers are now very difficult to find) and the self-interest and "picky-ness" of contemporary volunteers.

In programs where volunteers actually deliver the services, and where they work in positions of trust – connecting directly with consumers, performing complex and demanding work, and/or gaining access to vulnerable people, confidential information or money or other valuables – professional volunteer program management is critical. And, arguably, the success of an organization's commitment to the ongoing development and reach of a volunteer-based program is determined in large part by its recognition of that need for professional volunteer program management staffing.

Volunteer program management is now a recognized profession embodying a defined core of education, expertise, knowledge, and competencies. The presence of professional volunteer program management is perhaps the most important variable in the success and development of volunteer-based services. A recent large-scale study of nonprofit organizations and congregations found a clear correlation between investing in professional staff resources to coordinate volunteer efforts and the effectiveness of the volunteer involvement. Their number one, overriding conclusion:

> *... the value that volunteers provide to organizations they serve should make the effective management of volunteers a key priority.* Source: Urban Institute (2004: 24)

This study demonstrates that investments in volunteer management and benefits derived from volunteers feed on each other, with investments bringing benefits and these benefits justify greater investments (pp. 4-5).

In sum, as the work of volunteers becomes more responsible, and as more and more external factors bear on the work of volunteers (legislation, increasing accountability, regulations, civil liability, etc.), the task of organizing the work of volunteers becomes more complex as well. As the research demonstrates and as organizations are recognizing, effective volunteer programs require professional volunteer program management and the most cost-effective investment that generates best returns in safe, satisfying and productive volunteer involvement is the engagement of professionally trained, experienced volunteer program management specialists.

Recommendations Regarding Volunteer Program Development

Investing in Professional Volunteer Program Management

- Define volunteer program manager role

- Require dedicated volunteer program management staffing

- Establish minimum staffing ratios guidelines (FTE : volunteer corps)

- Provide (develop, give access to) professional training in volunteer program management for exustung dedicated volunteer program management staff

- Provide training to other staff who work with, support volunteers as a secondary aspect of their employment function

- Establish minimum qualifications for all new-hires
  - professional education/training
  - minimum experience
  - proven track record of success

- Allocate resources for initial upgrading and ongoing professional volunteer program management training

- Establish essential volunteer program infrastructure elements (policies, procedures, standards, best practice)

- Establish minimum standards in key volunteer program management functions (screening, training, oversight)