

Volunteer Management

During Tough Times, “Fund” What’s Free

Facing budget cuts, shelters should invest in volunteers

BY HILARY ANNE HAGER AND MEGAN WEBB

In this issue, *Animal Sheltering* is pleased to introduce a new department, Volunteer Management, which will provide practical advice for attracting, retaining, and getting the most out of those unpaid workers whose invaluable contributions help keep shelters humming. The new department, written by Megan Webb and Hilary Anne Hager, will appear in every other issue, alternating with the Behavior Department you already know and love.

Webb, the community outreach program director for Oakland Animal Services in California, and Hager, the shelter activities coordinator for Everett Animal Services in Everett, Wash., are probably familiar faces to many of you. They teamed up three years ago at Animal Care Expo to present workshops on creating and maintaining volunteer programs. They also co-teach several online volunteer management certification courses for Humane Society University (HSU), and they were among the experts interviewed for “Please Curb Your Volunteer,” a feature story in the Nov-Dec 2008 issue of *Animal Sheltering*. When they approached us with the idea of writing a regular column, it was an offer we couldn’t refuse!

As always, we welcome input from you, the readers—and we’re eager to put our new columnists to work! Got a volunteer question that needs an expert answer? A sticky issue you’re wondering how to address? Send your queries and suggestions to asm@hsus.org and we’ll pass them on to the gurus.



If you need volunteers, make sure you design a program that makes them feel welcome.

Whether your shelter is funded by government or private sources, the troubling news about the economy will likely have a big impact on your operations.

Your organization may be facing serious funding decreases. At the same time, the safety net it provides is becoming more critical than ever as people lose their homes or jobs and can no longer care for the companion animals in their lives. Volunteers are key to maintaining a high level of service in the face of staffing cuts and budget shortfalls, and managing these volunteers must be a priority for shelter leadership.

So what steps should the forward-thinking organization take in times like these? This is the time to prepare for an increased dependence on volunteers by creating the structure and supervision that will support a

successful volunteer program when you will need it the most.

First, the director and other management staff of the shelter must publicly embrace the intrinsic value of dedicated volunteer program management and commit to making it happen. Establish a budget for the volunteer program that reflects the real costs associated with its operation, including items such as copying and printing, advertising, events, recognition/appreciation, technology tools like databases or websites for recruiting, and ongoing training for the volunteer manager. The return on investment in terms of hours of service and quality of care for the animals, as well as the benefits to the public, will be well worth the effort, and most volunteer programs really can be run on a relatively small budget. No one will question the allocation of resources to a program that has such a positive impact.

Be flexible and creative enough to include volunteers with varying time commitment capacities in your program while still providing the structure, screening, and task assignments that benefit everyone.

Support Your Program

It is essential that the volunteer program be staffed appropriately. Shelter directors would never expect one manager to oversee 100 to 200 staff, yet they often expect a single volunteer manager to oversee that many or more volunteers—while simultaneously running outreach, fundraising, education, and even foster care programs. This is simply too much to ask, and devalues the importance of the volunteer program. A well-run volunteer program includes all of the elements of a traditional human resources program and is more complex than simply coordinating well-meaning people to come into the shelter for an hour or two.

We believe that the management of volunteers can be one of the most difficult jobs in the shelter; it requires an understanding of conflict management, training, and other complex issues. Too often, the hiring of a volunteer manager is almost an afterthought, and shelters hire inexperienced individuals who quickly become overwhelmed by the job. Your volunteer manager should be an experienced supervisor and a part of your management team.

This is also the time to figure out if you have the right support in place for your program. If the volunteer manager needs additional training, the shelter leadership should work to connect staff with resources offered by The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), including the online volunteer management certification course offered through Humane Society University (HSU). Training will allow them to build the skills necessary to be a high performer in a difficult job.

Keeping Everybody Happy

One of the most important roles of the volunteer manager is to create positive relationships among staff and volunteers. The volunteer manager is going to need a lot of support from the director to help the staff understand and cope with an increased reliance on volunteers.

Staff who embraced the volunteer program during stable financial times may come to see volunteers as a threat to their jobs if budget cuts begin. Antagonism from staff will upset volunteers, making them feel unwanted and unappreciated. The direc-

tor must regularly communicate with staff about the volunteer program and give them an opportunity to openly discuss their fears. Employees should also receive regular training on working with volunteers. Staff members should be evaluated on their ability to effectively work with volunteers and understand that inappropriate behavior toward them will not be tolerated.

It is also important that volunteer and staff roles are not blurred. Lack of clarity in this area can cause employees to feel threatened or to take advantage of the program by delegating their own work to volunteers. Identify the roles volunteers fill and the tasks they perform, and describe how those differ from staff functions. Well-defined tasks will allow you to be very clear about the essential skills and requirements you will need to look for when choosing the “right” volunteers for your organization.

Differentiate between what abilities people must have before they walk in the door and what skills you will be able to develop through training.

Identify a wide variety of ways volunteers can benefit the organization, and think outside the box.

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Consider developing volunteer positions that offer varying levels of time commitment so you can accommodate those who may not be in a position to make a three- or six-month commitment but who still have value to add to your operation. It’s likely some positions, such as those involving extensive animal handling, will continue to require longer training and commitment, but it’s possible other positions could be adjusted to be a win-win for the program and for volunteers in flux and in between jobs.

The Temptation of Warm Bodies

When a shelter is short-staffed, it is tempting to just let every applicant join the program in a frenzied effort to get enough bodies to get the work done. Don’t do it! It will be more critical than ever for volunteers to be the right fit for your organization if they’re entering the organization in a time of crisis.



ENI LECKART-MICROBY

Megan Webb with her two dogs, Suzie and Rosie.



JEANNE WOHL

Hilary Anne Hager

Make sure the people you invite to join the program will fit into the culture of the organization and will be a welcome part of the team. Poorly selected volunteers can cause conflict and drive high-functioning volunteers away. It is essential to develop a screening process in order to identify individuals who will be able to perform volunteer duties well, form positive relationships with your staff and other volunteers, and work within the framework of your policies and procedures.

Also, volunteer training will never be more important than it is when volunteers are engaged in so many elements of a shelter's operations. No matter the time constraints and the need to hurry people into their new volunteer positions, training is a step that can't be given short shrift.

Staying in the Loop

During times of stress, it becomes more essential than ever for the volunteer manager to be aware of concerns or complaints from volunteers and/or staff about the volunteer program—and to quickly address them. It's human nature: People tend to fill in gaps in information with visions of the worst-case scenario, and these rumors—about staff cuts, about the behind-the-scenes machinations of one “bad apple”—can quickly spread through an organization and sour an entire volunteer program.

Your volunteer manager should attend staff meetings to listen and respond to staff about volunteer-related issues. There should also be increased communication with volunteers about any budget cuts and changes at the shelter. We recommend sending out regular e-mailed updates to volunteers, setting up a volunteer discussion forum that your volunteer manager facilitates and oversees, and establishing a schedule for regular volunteer meetings.

Courtesy Counts

Once you've screened for the right volunteers for your agency, and trained and supervised new recruits, you want to make sure that this investment is not wasted—you want to keep these individuals as active members of your volunteer program. You are not paying people money to volunteer for your agency,



Volunteers can help your shelter accomplish amazing things, but you need proper structure to ensure they don't end up in a tangle!

but your program will benefit if you figure out other ways to reward them.

When shelters are stretched to capacity, it is easy to forget some of the simple and inexpensive things that can make volunteers want to continue to donate their time and energy to the organization. Volunteers need to feel that their efforts are appreciated and im-

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Also, it is important to contact volunteers if they don't show up for a volunteering shift so they realize that their absence is noticed and that they're missed when they aren't there. They need to enjoy volunteering. There are likely to be an increasing number of agencies in your community competing for volunteers, so if it's not enjoyable and meaningful to volunteer for your agency, your recruits will go somewhere else. It is critical that your staff welcome volunteers warmly and that your helpers feel they can ask the staff for assistance and advice whenever needed.

Your shelter's volunteer program can truly provide your organization a cushion in these difficult economic times. However, without support and planning, the volunteer program can also become a source of frustration and fear for staff as tensions rise over budget cuts. This is the time to prepare your operation for more volunteers taking on more responsibilities. An investment in the volunteer program will reap significant dividends in volunteer hours—right when you need them the most. **AS**