

# Using Volunteers Effectively in Delivering Marriage Education Workshops

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In 2007, over 60 million citizens—about 26 percent of the U.S. population-- volunteered in their community. People volunteer for organizations that support causes they believe in, have a good reputation and because these organizations ask them to volunteer. Recruiting the right people and putting them in the right positions can increase your organization's ability to reach more couples and families without the added expenses of hiring more staff. This tip sheet provides volunteer management techniques to assist your organization in more effectively managing volunteers for the benefit of your organization, your volunteers, and the couples and families you serve.

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Volunteers are, basically, unpaid staff. To manage them, you need to apply the same basic human resource concepts as you do for paid staff. Volunteers need clear roles, accountability and structure. Since volunteers do not receive a paycheck, practitioners need to identify and respond to each volunteer's individual motivation. They cannot be taken for granted; they must feel the work they do is of value.

## Volunteer Recruitment:

According to *Independent Sector*, a leadership forum for foundations, charities, and corporate giving programs, 44 percent of those who volunteered in 2007 did so not because they were looking for the chance, but because they were asked. When looking for volunteers, don't overlook the people in your church, neighborhood or professional networks.

Volunteer recruitment strategies may be different depending on the position you are trying to fill. Remember, just like hiring someone, you want to recruit for a specific "position" or skill set. Consider the following position-specific recruiting ideas:

- ✓ *Couples Marriage Educators or Mentors* are couples who can teach or lead a group. Mentor couples must have a strong relationship and be able to set boundaries. A challenge here can be if one member of the couple is more outspoken or dominating over the other.



- Reach out to couples who have completed your program. Those who were very active in participating may want to give back to the program.
  - Post volunteer openings on the bulletin boards of organizations with which you already have relationships (e.g., churches, neighborhood community centers, etc.).
  - Contact local faith leaders for recommendations.
- ✓ *Teen and Young Adult Relationship Facilitators* have a good understanding of young people and are able to hold their attention and interest. Again, people with experience teaching or leading groups will be best prepared.

- Recruit through local colleges and universities. Students often need community service hours. Post requests for volunteers on dormitory or student cafeteria bulletin boards. Career services or student life offices may also be able to help.
  - Call or email local fraternity or sorority chapters. Most chapters require their members to volunteer in the community.
  - Contact social service degree program chairs and ask if they have any student recommendations. Many Master degree programs in child and family studies require students to do internships or volunteer.
- ✓ *Marriage/Relationship Educators* are the face and glue of your program. Great educators/group leaders are important for the success, strength

and operation of a program. Make sure you are looking for skilled workshop leaders, not just anyone interested in helping. It is difficult to teach someone to be a good marriage educator if they don't have some natural talent or experience.

- Contact neighborhood associations, churches, civic groups and other organizations that issue newsletters to their network of contacts. Ask if you could post your request for volunteers in their newsletters or list serves.
- If your program targets a specific community, recruit from that community when possible.

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## Picking Volunteers:

Finding the right volunteer for the job requires knowing what the job is and what knowledge, skills, and abilities a volunteer needs to do the job. Just like hiring paid staff, you would have different expectations for an event greeter than you would for a marriage education leader.

*Develop Volunteer Position Descriptions* – Develop a written job description that defines the duties assigned to the position and the training, education and experience that is needed to successfully perform the duties outlined. Be sure to include in the job description how many classes the volunteer will be expected to teach (see section on MOUs below). If the volunteer is expected to lead workshops for teens, set minimum experience requirements around leadership and working with youth. If a volunteer will be entering workshop data into a computer, require computer skills.

- ✓ *Create a Selection Process* – A clear selection process shows that your organization values this position. Requiring volunteers to complete an application and participate in a panel interview allows you to review written and verbal communication skills. An interview panel should include leadership, board representation, and at least one current workshop leader. This will allow for different opinions and increase the likelihood of selecting a volunteer who will fit well in your organization. If volunteers will be leading a group or teaching, the interview should include an opportunity for them to demonstrate these skills. Use the interview time to assess their availability to teach in the long-term, especially if you are investing in their training.

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## Volunteer Support and Infrastructure:

Volunteers, especially those who teach your classes, are often the main contact for your program participants. They have the power to make or break your organization's name. A solid system for volunteers that is both supportive and holds the volunteer accountable is needed for success. The following elements are key to developing a supportive infrastructure:

- ✓ *Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)* – A written MOU provides clear expectations, responsibilities and shows the system for accountability. It also serves as a reference point if there are questions. It should be detailed but user friendly.

A written MOU should define the organization's expectations of the volunteer, as well as what the volunteer can expect from the organization. Involving the volunteer in the development of the document leads to greater buy-in.

- ✓ *Written Policies and Procedures* – Like new employees, new volunteers need to know what the rules are and how the organization is run. Provide copies of written policies and standard operating procedures (SOPs). If your organization doesn't have them in writing, consider writing them to give consistency. Written SOPs allow your organization to run smoothly even when key staff members are gone. SOP's need to be clear. They do not have to be long.
- ✓ *Open Communication* – Regular meetings, emails and "touching base" phone calls can help keep communication lines open and prevent any problems. Open communication also helps volunteers feel that what they think is valuable. Listen to their feedback and look for ways to use their ideas.
- ✓ *Ongoing Training* – In addition to any necessary certification or curriculum training, ongoing training supports workshop expectations. Training may be offered on organizational policies such as handling domestic violence or child abuse, working with faith based providers or even CPR or emergency procedures. Look for other free professional development opportunities for your volunteers.
- ✓ *A Single Point of Contact* – If possible, one person in your organization should be responsible for volunteers; this helps better manage the process. Your volunteer will also feel more connected to your program if they know who to call if they cannot make it to an event, or who to go to if

they have questions.

- ✓ *Performance Review* - Even though volunteers are unpaid staff, they should still have performance targets. As with your paid staff, build in a performance review process for your volunteers. This will show the volunteer the importance you place on their position and give the volunteer feedback on what they are doing for your program.

Recognition doesn't have to be expensive, just sincere. Look for small ways to recognize your volunteers throughout the year.

## Keeping your Volunteers:

Thanking your volunteers is important. They are not there for a paycheck, so volunteers deserve credit for their work and commitment to your program. Yearly appreciation events are helpful but not enough. Recognition doesn't have to be expensive, just sincere. Look for small ways to recognize your volunteers throughout the year. Consider the following:

- ✓ Highlighting them in your newsletter or on your website.
- ✓ Offering token appreciation gifts like coffee mugs or tote bags.
- ✓ Providing service pins for volunteer hours.
- ✓ Creating a "Wall of Fame" bulletin board in your lobby.

Volunteers want to make a difference. Creating a setting with the right balance of management and appreciation can increase their ability to help your organization meet its goals.

For more resources on volunteer management, please see these websites:

[www.pointsoflight.org](http://www.pointsoflight.org) (for ideas on promoting volunteerism in your community)

[www.volunteerresource.org](http://www.volunteerresource.org) (for books on volunteerism and appreciation gifts)

[www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org) (for research and statistics on volunteerism)

*The NHMRC would like to thank Robyn Genizal for her contributions to this tip sheet. Robyn is currently serving as the Executive Administrator for the Jacksonville Network for Strengthening Families Initiative, a program she co-developed and implemented in 2002. The program's objectives include increasing the number of prepared marriages, reducing divorce rates and encouraging financial and emotional support for children.*