

## **Volunteer Management Q&A: Sharon Goldstrohm, Nevada Flexibility-Based Volunteer Roles and Trainings**

Sharon Goldstrohm is the Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator for the Nevada Senior Health Insurance Information Program ([SHIP](#)). Three years ago, Sharon started her SHIP career as a phone counselor. Later, she moved into an outreach coordinator position. Now, she does a little of everything, but her main goal is to grow and strengthen Nevada's volunteer program, especially in rural areas, to increase outreach and ultimately serve more beneficiaries.

In the following Q&A, Sharon took some time to talk with HAP about Nevada's tiered volunteer program called the BEAM team and the new process she is using to train the nearly 40 volunteers that work in the Southern Nevada region, which includes Las Vegas and four surrounding counties. If you have additional questions about Nevada's shift to tiered volunteer roles or sessions-based training, please contact Sharon at [goldshipnv@yahoo.com](mailto:goldshipnv@yahoo.com).

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### **Why create the BEAM team?**

Jeannie Pearce, the Nevada SHIP Director, returned from the SHIP Director's conference last year and told me about Ohio's CREAM team concept. We wanted to build our program around the idea of flexibility and this seemed like the perfect model. Volunteers don't always want to be counselors, and we have lots of other roles volunteers can help us fill.

### **How does the BEAM team work?**

The way we organized the BEAM team is slightly different from Ohio. We have four levels of volunteers, who we call Shipmates, and each level is represented by a deck. Deck A is a group of Administrative Volunteers who don't do any computer work but help around the office and go out to our health fairs. Deck B volunteers are Marketers who only talk about the SHIP program and recruit for volunteers when they go out into the community. We call Deck C volunteers Educators/Trainers. They do many of our outreach presentations, promote the BEAM team as a volunteer opportunity, and are much more trained in Medicare content, so they can answer questions during Medicare presentations. Nearly a third of our volunteers are in Deck D as Full Benefits Counselors that provide the majority of our one-on-one counseling.

We also have 1<sup>st</sup> Mates who have a specialized skill. For example, we have one volunteer who has a background in media, so she is in charge of our media outreach. There are 1<sup>st</sup> Mates who have been counseling for us for years and are invested in the success of our program, so we've given them the responsibility of being 1<sup>st</sup> Mates in charge of a senior center or other outreach facility. This includes watching the newsletters to make sure SHIP services are mentioned, making presentations upon

request, being available for counseling on a regular basis, and keeping the center stocked with posters and brochures.

Our final volunteer position is called an Ensign (Navy term). These volunteers have the same dedication and drive as 1<sup>st</sup> Mates, so we've put them in charge of overseeing outreach in a rural area. One of our Ensigns is a retired professional. We put him in charge of a rural area and soon, we hope to get him a volunteer to support his efforts.

### **How do you train these Decks of Shipmates?**

We used to train volunteers through a two-day training given twice a year but learned it wasn't as effective as we'd like it to be. Volunteers were concerned with the amount of information they were expected to retain, and staff weren't able to provide much choice and advanced notice on when a training would be available. It was more like, okay volunteers we'll have this two-day training one week from now, we hope your schedule can accommodate this time frame. As you can imagine, it wasn't always convenient for volunteers, so we weren't getting the attendance we wanted. Now, we've relaxed on the idea that new volunteers must get trained right away. We still use the CMS Training Suites and modules, but now, rather than offering all the training in two days, new Shipmates can take a module or two at a time, which allows the information to sink in before moving to the next module.

For close to a year now, we have been testing a "sessions and activity-based" training program called [Boot Camp](#), and so far everyone really likes it. Sessions are in-person trainings ranging from a five-hour training (orientation) to two-hour trainings given at different times throughout the quarter. Every Shipmate has to take a certain number of basic training sessions and depending on the Deck level they choose, they may have additional training sessions to complete. For example, Deck A volunteers only need 15 training and activity sessions, whereas Deck D volunteers need 27. We also require that each Shipmate experience every part of the program to have a total understanding of SHIP. After a couple of trainings, we survey new Shipmates to see what role they'd like to play. This decision is in no way final. They can change their mind about their role at any time and be trained accordingly.

### **What have you learned from this new volunteer management approach?**

Regard for the schedules of your volunteers is very important. By centering our program on flexibility and respect, we allow Shipmates to volunteer at their convenience and invite them to invest in the program as part of the team. It takes a little organization to make sure you're logistically prepared for trainings (space, trainer, snacks), and also that you are regularly communicating the options to your volunteers.

In order to shift to this new structure, we had to have a clear vision of what we wanted and why we wanted it. Any lack of clarity would have been felt by the volunteers as we began the shift. We invited our volunteers to be part of the restructuring, asking for

feedback and patience during the transition. Thank goodness, the transition wasn't terribly bumpy and we tried to make it fun. Volunteers are enjoying the new training format. We are pleased that the sessions are well attended, and the volunteers are continually learning and constantly updating their knowledge.

The best part is seeing that volunteers are able to grasp the concepts in the training much easier since they have a chance to take a small piece of the material, do some exercises to practice what they have learned, and then implement that knowledge before moving on to the next module.

Learn more about the original tiered volunteer program, the [CREAM team](#), created by the Ohio Senior Health Insurance Information Program (OSHIIP).