

## Volunteer Management Tips & Techniques

### Q&A with Dolly Fleming, Executive Director Community of Vermont Elders (COVE)

The Vermont State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP) is one of four state SHIP programs selected to participate in HAP's 2008-2009 Collaborative State Projects (CSP). They applied with the goal of recruiting and retaining more volunteers, particularly for the Annual Enrollment Period, and with the hopes of strengthening the volunteer management capacity of the coordinators.

One component of the CSP is a strategic planning session where key players sit down to think through the outcomes and design of the project. For the Vermont SHIP, this meant developing a role-based volunteer program with a career path so, for example, a volunteer could begin doing SHIP intake work and over time, grow into the role of counseling beneficiaries.

Once the CSP team had the goal and the plan, they needed to learn more about successfully managing their new volunteers. That's where Dolly Fleming, Executive Director of the Community of Vermont Elders (COVE), enters into the project. Along with her work at COVE, Dolly has immense experience working with volunteers at other non-profit organizations such as United Way, Trinity College, Mobius the Mentoring Movement, and Council on Aging, just to name a few. Vermont's Senior Medicare Patrol is a COVE program, so Dolly works closely with the Vermont SHIP as a committed partner.

In the following Q&A, Dolly shares her thoughts on successfully supporting volunteers, particularly when volunteer management is only one of many tasks for which a volunteer manager is responsible. Dolly has also shared her volunteer management toolkit, which has many practical resources, including the Ten Commandments of Working with Volunteers.

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#### **What should new volunteer managers know?**

Volunteers should be a supplement to your program, an addition that enriches and enhances the operations and services, as well as the lives of the volunteers, staff and beneficiaries. Volunteers, however, can sometimes be a burden, rather than a blessing, if the organization is not fully prepared. Without a warm welcome, proper orientation and integration into the program, volunteers are less inclined to stay and are more apt to share that negative experience with others. A bad reputation spreads like wildfire in volunteer networks. Volunteers want the same things employed personnel crave, including meaningful work, a supportive environment, and recognition.

Anyone managing volunteers should know that a big part of volunteer retention is having a program that acknowledges the volunteer's service and skills from the first

interaction. I like to ask people to reflect upon their true feelings about being a volunteer manager before they begin working with volunteers. If you secretly feel that managing volunteers is not for you, the lens you wear will influence your behavior and contribute to the success or failure of your volunteer program. This same exercise applies to the organization's commitment to volunteers. For example, if you have prepared for volunteers, but your organization is unable to designate a proper space for them, the commitment level is likely not where it needs to be for success. With the right initial investment, working with volunteers can be very rewarding and take your program to a whole new level.

### **How do you prepare projects for volunteers?**

It used to be that many of our volunteers were retired, so they committed to one organization for long periods of time. Now volunteers, particularly the "baby-boomers," are more likely to contribute more episodically on projects that have a clear beginning and end point. Potential volunteers likely have many competing priorities, such as caring for children and/or parents, and they may still be working. If you want to retain these volunteers, you have to be ready to use them right away so as not to make them feel like their limited time is being wasted.

It's good for the volunteer manager to be clear about how the volunteer project directly relates to the overall mission of the organization. For example, SHIPs need help answering phones during Part D enrollment, which may not seem all that exciting or relevant. However, if you can describe the importance of customer service on the phone and their role in putting clients at ease, building trust, and ultimately expanding the program's reach, they will see how this seemingly mundane task has larger meaning. Basically, I look for someone to do a specific job, or find someone with a special talent or wonderful disposition and I create a volunteer project around their talents and interests.

Sometimes it is better to bring in a great person doing something they prefer, rather than lose that person by putting them into a role they are not interested in. Say a woman comes in who wants to apply her graphic art skills and you really need someone for data entry. Start her with a project to redesign your outreach brochure. Once she's finished with that, ask her if she could help enter in a few data sheets because with her flyer bringing in more people to the program, there are more applications to be processed. Because she sees the connection to the mission and has already been engaged in a meaningful way that utilizes her talents, she is more likely to help with other tasks as well.

### **How do you keep volunteers engaged and coming back?**

The research says that people volunteer to network, to give back, to build their resume, and to enrich their lives. When you are talking with a volunteer it is important to find out what specifically motivates them, so you can be sure the role you give them meets

their expectations and needs. If they are coming to network and meet people, don't stick them in a back room all alone.

Keeping a volunteer engaged also means checking in with them to address any problems that arise. *How do you like this project, can anything be improved, what else would you like to experience?*

**What advice do you have for people working with volunteers?**

There are many places where volunteers can contribute their time. Volunteers often vote with their feet, so it is important to pay attention to all of the key elements of volunteer management, including job design, orientation, training, supervision and support, and recognition. Be flexible, grateful, and take advantage (in a positive way) of the person's talents and generosity and apply that to the benefit of the program and mission.