



# Volunteer Management:

## Challenges and Opportunities Facing Nonprofits

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# Methodology

In August 2009, United Way of King County conducted an online survey of nonprofits in the greater Seattle area. The purpose of the survey was to better understand the challenges and opportunities nonprofits in King County face in engaging and managing volunteers. Findings are intended to guide United Way's strategic planning around strengthening and supporting nonprofit volunteer management capacity, and will be shared with other funders and policymakers to advocate for investment in the sector.

A total of 603 people, representing a broad spectrum of the nonprofit sector in King County, completed the survey. Respondents fill a wide variety of roles in their organizations, with 27 percent being volunteer managers and 19 percent being CEOs.

**OVERALL, THE STUDY FOUND THAT SEVERAL KEY ISSUES WHICH HAVE LONG TROUBLED THE FIELD OF VOLUNTEERISM CONTINUE TO CHALLENGE LOCAL NONPROFITS:**

- **The critical role of the volunteer manager is undervalued and underutilized.**
- **Nonprofit staff lack time and skills to manage volunteers effectively.**
- **Volunteer retention rates are low.**
- **Effective recruitment strategies for "hard to fill" opportunities are lacking.**
- **Nonprofits do not effectively measure the impact of volunteer contributions.**

**THE SURVEY RESULTS ALSO SUGGEST SOME HOPEFUL SIGNS OF IMPROVEMENT IN VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS:**

- **The critical role of volunteers within local nonprofits is valued.**
- **Nonprofits are seeking the professional skills of volunteers.**

We will discuss these key issues further and will explore the implications for King County organizations and funders.

# Trends and issues in the field

Leaders in the field of volunteer management have long been frustrated by the relatively low status accorded to volunteers, and hence of volunteer management, within many organizations. Historically, the view of what volunteers can do and how valuable they are to the organization has been somewhat limited. In the words of Pablo Eisenberg, senior fellow in Georgetown Public Policy Institute’s Center for Public and Nonprofit Leadership, volunteers contribute “useful, ancillary services” while paid people do the more important, professional work. As a consequence, organizations have been reluctant to invest in volunteers. Volunteers have been treated as outsiders, and nonprofits haven’t sought or listened to their ideas.

At the same time, people are volunteering their time differently. Volunteers are seeking short term work that taps their skills and interests and has impact. People are volunteering in greater numbers, yet devoting fewer hours. The change in the way volunteers are engaging with nonprofits has important implications for how nonprofits should manage them.

Organizations are transitioning to this new climate, trying to engage volunteers in more sophisticated and diverse roles, but their volunteer management practices haven’t kept pace with the changing volunteer climate. The Urban Institute’s 2004 Volunteer Management Capacity Study concluded that most nonprofits do not manage their volunteers effectively and estimates this “mismanagement” has resulted in approximately \$38 billion in lost labor.<sup>1</sup>

The United Way of King County survey did suggest hopeful signs about some of these trends but also demonstrates that there is still a long way to go.



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<sup>1</sup> Urban Institute, 2004, “Volunteer Management Capacity in America’s Charities and Congregations: A Briefing Report.” Washington DC.

## The importance of volunteers

United Way’s survey results substantiate the significant role volunteers play in King County nonprofits. The majority of respondents—65 percent—indicated that volunteers were quite important to their organization, and 29 percent said that volunteers were their main workforce. Only 1 percent reported not involving volunteers in their organizations.

These results may suggest a positive trend toward valuing the role of volunteers within organizations. The challenge is to ascertain how effectively local nonprofits are tapping the skills available to them in their volunteer workforce.

**A GOOD VOLUNTEER PROGRAM ENGAGES THE COMMUNITY AS A PARTNER IN MEETING THE NEEDS THE ORGANIZATION EXISTS TO SOLVE.**

## The value of volunteer programs

Leaders in the field of volunteerism have long encouraged nonprofit organizations to place a greater value on their volunteer programs. A good volunteer program engages the community as a partner in meeting the needs the organization exists to solve and gives an organization access to every skill in the community. These expanded skill sets are often those that organizations with limited resources would otherwise not be able to access.

Historically, the concept of volunteers enabling organizations to accomplish mission-critical activities that paid staff lacked the time or skill to do was often overlooked by or unknown to leaders of organizations.

The survey suggests that nonprofit staff are starting to “get it.” Forty-four percent of survey participants said they involved volunteers in roles staff lacked the skill to provide, 65 percent indicated they had volunteer opportunities for professionals to contribute their time, and 70 percent reported that volunteers did things paid staff did not have the time to do. Many non-traditional skill-sets were included in the top ranking list of needed volunteer skills, with community organizing, information technology, financial, marketing, and trade skills all being selected by more than eighty percent of the respondents.

# Trends and issues in the field

It was also inspiring to see that 83 percent of survey respondents thought volunteer management was a needed volunteer skill. Volunteer managers have often been so busy getting volunteers to help other staff that they have neglected to recruit volunteers to assist in managing the volunteer program.

While respondents seem to appreciate the diversity of ways volunteers can contribute, the role of the volunteer manager in facilitating effective volunteer involvement is still undervalued. Less than half of the respondents indicated there was anyone designated to this role in their organizations. In addition, over 70 percent of respondents indicated that the volunteer manager was not involved in organizational planning. And 58 percent indicated that there was no budget for the volunteer program.

This suggests the organization does not appreciate the strategic possibilities inherent in a robust volunteer program and the critical role volunteer managers as leaders can play in their organizations.

In 1994, the Points of Light Foundation conducted a research project<sup>2</sup> in which they found that organizations with effective volunteer programs not only employ a designated volunteer program manager but also expect all staff to participate in and encourage volunteer involvement. United Way's survey shows some positive signs in this area. More than half—53 percent—of respondents reported staff had received some training and recognition for their role in managing volunteers.

This is especially important in organizations where staff other than the volunteer manager do the day-to-day supervision of volunteers.

THE NATIONAL TREND IS TOWARDS EPISODIC VOLUNTEERING, BUT MANAGING SHORT-TERM PROJECTS REQUIRES MORE STAFF.

## Barriers to involvement: Lack of staff time and ineffective recruitment efforts

United Way's survey looked at barriers to volunteer involvement.

The biggest reported barrier was that staff did not have time to manage more volunteers. The national trend in volunteering is towards short term, episodic volunteering.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, more people are volunteering, but they are volunteering less time. While King County organizations have responded to this trend (90 percent of the respondents said they had short-term opportunities for skilled volunteers, and 93 percent said they had event-based volunteer opportunities available) managing more people for short-

term projects does require more staff time.

<sup>2</sup> Points of Light Foundation, 1994, "Changing the Paradigm." Washington DC.

<sup>3</sup> Merrill Associates, "Exploring Contemporary Trends." <http://www.merrillassociates.com/topic/2003/05/exploring-contemporary-trends/>

## Recruitment

**ORGANIZATIONS ARE NOT PUTTING A CONCERTED EFFORT INTO RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS.**

Many people would like to use their time and talents to improve their communities but don't know they are wanted or needed. Their lack of knowledge of volunteer opportunities is a barrier to their involvement.

The survey respondents reported the volunteers most needed by their organizations were also the hardest to recruit. The survey also indicates organizations are not putting a concerted effort into recruiting. The top recruitment methods were, in order of frequency of response: through friends, via the organization Web site, and through word of mouth. These are all passive rather than active approaches to recruitment.

This echoes the reality in many other parts of the United States. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 44 percent of volunteers initiate volunteer involvement with organizations by approaching them on their own.<sup>4</sup>

In order for King County organizations to attract the “hardest to recruit volunteers”, they will need to implement targeted recruitment strategies.

## Retention

**LOW RETENTION RATES ARE NOT NECESSARILY A CAUSE FOR ALARM.**

Not surprisingly, the survey results indicate volunteer retention rates in local nonprofits are low. Only 17 percent of survey participants reported more than 75 percent of their volunteers were still volunteering a year after their first involvement. Low retention rates are a long-standing national trend, and for those organizations that model their program primarily on the old paradigm of involving volunteers in long-term positions, low retention rates is a problem. But the low retention

rates are not necessarily a cause for alarm. Today's volunteers are far less likely to stay in volunteer roles for extended periods of time. However, they may come back to the

<sup>4</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics News Release, U.S. Department of Labor, January 26, 2010

# Trends and issues in the field

organization at a later time, sometimes in a different role, if they had a good experience in their prior involvement with an organization. The challenge for nonprofits is to provide a variety of shorter term opportunities for involvement and ensure a good experience for the volunteer so the volunteer is more likely to return. Today's volunteers require relationships similar to those used to retain donors, keeping volunteers passionate about the organization's work and informed of opportunities for engagement.

There was no particular skill set that people found harder to retain than others. Approximately one-third of respondents mentioned fundraising, management, information technology, and operations skills as the ones hardest to retain.

## Measuring impact

**MORE THAN 60 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS SAID THEIR ORGANIZATION DID NOT MEASURE VOLUNTEER IMPACT.**

Finally, United Way's survey results revealed organizations lack the capacity or the expertise to measure volunteer impact. More than 60 percent of respondents said their organization did not measure volunteer impact. The most common measurement of volunteer involvement was the number of hours worked and the monetary value of those hours. Reporting only the numbers of volunteers and hours engaged does not say anything about volunteer impact on the organization's mission or its clients.

# Implications for organizations and leadership

Volunteers are crucial to nonprofit organizations being effective. The biggest barrier to volunteer-involvement mentioned by respondents was, a lack of time to manage volunteers. To volunteer management professionals who have been in the field a long time, this is a classic, yet frustrating answer. Volunteers can do things that staff do not have time or skills to do, thus freeing up critical staff time.

Nonprofit leaders can begin to eliminate this barrier by encouraging staff to create a volunteer job around tasks they do not have the time or skills to attend to. Nonprofits should also provide the support and training necessary for staff to effectively manage volunteers. When staff see that partnering with volunteers can assist with accomplishing critical tasks, they are more likely to find the time to involve more volunteers in the critical work of the organization.

Leaders of organizations who wish to tap more of the human resource potential can begin with an audit of their organization's current volunteer management practices and priorities. Volunteer management audits can spotlight current practices that can be improved to attract and keep volunteers. Audits can also identify mission-critical tasks volunteers can perform to make the agency more effective.

To enhance volunteer management practices among staff, organizations can include volunteer management duties in staff job descriptions (identify roles for volunteers, participate in recruitment, and supervise volunteers in your area). In addition, volunteer management could be included as an element of every staff person's performance review (for example, did you create any new roles for volunteers this year?). Individual staff will give volunteer involvement more thought and attention if the expectation for working effectively with volunteers is a part of their job responsibility.

Local nonprofits would also benefit by creating a designated volunteer management position within their organizations (if they don't already have one). This position would ideally be a management level position and would focus on the implementation of effective volunteer management practices across the organization.

# Implications for organizations and leadership

As indicated earlier, organizations report they struggle to find volunteers with the right skills. Organizations could be doing more to find them. The recruitment efforts being employed are largely passive. Organizations should focus their volunteer recruitment efforts to target audiences and implement a concerted, targeted campaign to involve those who are most disposed to do the job. Many organizations may feel they lack the time, resources and “know how” to mount an active, targeted recruitment campaign. However, skilled volunteers could do much of the work. It is also possible that organizations don’t know how to target their recruitment efforts to find skilled people who want to volunteer to help.

To retain volunteers, organizations need to adopt new tactics. The challenge is to develop relationship management practices to keep volunteers feeling connected to the organization after they stop volunteering. By staying in touch and keeping them informed about what is going on with the organization and fellow volunteers, the organization can help volunteers feel they are still valued and wanted. There is great potential to use the internet, and social networking specifically, to accomplish this. At some point, a former volunteer might return for another short-term

assignment. Organizations can cultivate ongoing involvement by identifying a variety of skilled tasks or projects and informing volunteers that those opportunities are available.

All volunteer management efforts require an investment of time, money and other resources. Volunteer programs are notoriously underfunded. This brings us to some of the implications for funders.

**VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT AUDITS CAN SPOTLIGHT CURRENT PRACTICES THAT CAN BE IMPROVED TO ATTRACT AND KEEP VOLUNTEERS. THEY CAN ALSO IDENTIFY MISSION-CRITICAL TASKS VOLUNTEERS CAN PERFORM TO MAKE THE AGENCY MORE EFFECTIVE.**

As noted above, a good volunteer program is essential to an organization accomplishing its mission, and as such should be of concern to those giving money to organizations to accomplish mission critical work in the community.

Most organizations lack adequate funding or time to operate effective volunteer engagement programs. Nearly 50 percent of United Way’s survey respondents said the organization would like to have more volunteers but lacked the capacity to manage them. Funding alone won’t help unless it is focused on strategies that increase organizations’ capacity for volunteer involvement.

## To build organization capacity, funders can take these six actions.

### **1. Make volunteer involvement a condition of larger funding.**

A funder could ask organizations applying for funds to provide data on who is in charge of the volunteer program, what volunteers do for the organization and ask for results-oriented data on the impact of volunteers. Funders offering operational funds might ask for information about volunteer recruiting practices, the types of roles played by volunteers, the salary of the volunteer manager, the status of the volunteer manager within the organization and the training staff has received in volunteer management.

Funders who believe involving volunteers is a strategy for engaging the broader community in an issue or for achieving positive mission outcomes could clearly articulate that preference in their grant requirements or simply ask grantees to demonstrate how they involve volunteers or use volunteers to accomplish their mission. Those with “dollars for doers” programs (providing grants to agencies based on volunteerism of its employees) could request the funds go to support the agency’s volunteer programs. Funders could also specifically target some portion of grant funds for the costs of volunteer engagement. One example of this practice is from a corporate funder, Starbucks. A recent funding proposal from Starbucks stated that, “because their vision is to be a catalyst for community action, approximately 10 percent of each grant budget should be allocated to provide resources (supplies, communication materials, staff time) needed for Starbucks partners and others to participate in community service to support the organization.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Starbucks Grant Guidelines, 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/starbucksgrant2010>

## **2. Fund volunteer capacity builders to provide technical assistance to organizations in strengthening their programs.**

There is a rich potential for improving volunteer programs by having knowledgeable people with an outside perspective work with the organization to assess the state of the volunteer program and create a plan for improvement. These intermediaries are a key provider of the training needed within organizations. Funders could support this with grants to either the organization or to the intermediary capacity builder.

## **3. Fund training for organization staff in the strategic and supervisory aspects of volunteer management.**

Although United Way's survey indicates that things are getting better in this regard, more than 60 percent of respondents indicated there was no budget for training in volunteer management. Adequate training and consulting can also address the tactical issues identified in the survey such as how to mount the active and targeted recruitment efforts often necessary to fill skilled positions.

## **4. Fund capacity building for volunteer managers in the emerging new paradigm of volunteer involvement.**

So much is changing in the world of volunteer management. Traditional volunteer management practices based on a human resources model are working less and less. Jobs that are designed to look like paid jobs are less attractive to more of today's volunteer. Efforts to get people to stay for extended periods of time may serve as a barrier to involvement for episodic volunteers. There is a new model emerging, one that makes volunteer involvement efforts more like fund-raising than human resources (although it shares many similarities with human resources as well). Funders could make an impact on the field by giving small grants to networks of volunteer managers to explore the implications of this emerging model.

## **5. Measure the impact of volunteers on achieving the organizations' missions.**

What gets measured, gets done. If a condition of funding is to track the contribution of volunteers toward meaningful outcomes, rather than simply counting hours of service, organizations will need resources to learn how to gather that data. In order to do so, they will have to insure that volunteers' work contributes in a meaningful way to the achievement of the mission.

## **6. Fund efforts to measure the return on investment in volunteer management.**

Because few organizations adequately measure how their mission is impacted through the use of volunteers, it is hard to demonstrate that investing in good volunteer management practices is worth it.

This report is the beginning of an important dialogue between funders and organizations. Both funders and organizations are committed to meeting the needs of the community. Volunteers enable organizations to meet those needs in ways funders would strain to support. For funders to get the most “bang for their buck,” giving organizations monetary incentives to enhance the involvement of volunteers seems therefore to be an intelligent approach.

# Conclusion

Accomplishing United Way of King County’s goals requires a strong community in which residents are engaged in and supportive of the work needed to make our region a better place to live for all people. Volunteers have always been a resource for healthy communities and are gaining recognition as a strategic tool that, invested wisely, provides an enormous advantage to our community.

United Way of King County intends to build on its long history of mobilizing volunteers by providing a multi-pronged strategy to strengthen service in King County. We invest in volunteerism because getting people involved in issues that matter to them is an important aspect of building strong communities and creating fundamental, lasting change.

Organizations can accomplish their missions through expanded and improved engagement of volunteers. We hope that this report will be used to guide nonprofits in investing time, money and other resources into their volunteer engagement practices. We encourage funders to review our findings and join us in supporting organizational capacity to manage volunteers.

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United Way of King County

United Way of King County wishes to thank to two terrific volunteers without whom this survey and resulting report would not have been possible:

**Amanda Buchan**, with Accenture, who provided many pro-bono hours designing, conducting and analyzing the Volunteer Engagement Survey, and **Rick Lynch**, of Lynch Associates, for sharing his expertise in volunteerism on a pro-bono basis --interpreting the survey results and writing this report. He is the co-author of the book *Volunteer Management*, the best-selling book in its field in the US, China and the Ukraine. He has conducted volunteer management workshops in the US, Canada, Australia, Britain, Ireland, Russia, and Singapore.

**Nikki Russell**, volunteer initiatives manager for United Way of King County, was a contributing writer to this report as well.



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