

Q & A: Volunteer Risk and Program Management

At the 2009 national conference, AoA Director of Elder Rights Barbara Dieker introduced a 3-year program, now called the Volunteer Risk and Program Management Project. Linda Graff, president of Linda Graff and Associates, spoke about trends in volunteerism. A story on the project ran in the February edition of The Sentinel, beginning on page 3: [http://www.smpresource.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Media/The_Sentinel_\(February2010\).pdf](http://www.smpresource.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Media/The_Sentinel_(February2010).pdf). Here, consultants Linda Graff (LG) and Steve McCurley (SM) give background on risk management and an update on the project.

How has the role of the volunteer changed in the last decade?

LG: That's a good place to start this discussion because risk management relating to volunteering has a lot to do with the evolution of volunteering and its coordination.

The important transitions that have led to the more recent attention to risk management have been in progress for a couple decades at least. If we went back 30 or so years, volunteerism would look quite different. Volunteers tended to be confined to more menial work: stuffing envelopes and working behind the scenes. In the 1970s and 1980s, many nonprofit and other public, health and community-service organizations began to recognize that volunteers – everyday people – have a wealth of talents, skills and experience, that they can be trusted with important and confidential information and can be relied upon for high-quality work. The notion of “they’re just volunteers,” connoting only low-level workers doing unimportant work, eroded as volunteers were increasingly invited to move onto the front lines of service provision.

We are now seeing volunteers take on highly skilled tasks, a trend I think will continue as Baby Boomers seek out volunteer opportunities in which they can apply their considerable expertise and influence.

More often than not, volunteer work is now important, complex, sophisticated, “real” work. In many organizations one would be hard-pressed to distinguish the work of paid staff from the work of volunteers. “Volunteering” increasingly refers to the pay scale, not to the nature or importance of the work or of the person performing it.

You mentioned that volunteer coordination has also changed in this time.

LG: Yes, that's certainly true. When organizations were asking volunteers to do routine, low-level work, the coordination of those efforts was fairly straightforward. Lining up a few folks to show up at a designated time to complete a task was no big deal. Now, when you're asking volunteers to offer what amounts to professional-level services, such as representing the organization, delivering presentations to the public and providing critical information about health care fraud and abuse to vulnerable beneficiaries (and gaining access to confidential information along the way), the organization and coordination of that kind of work is, itself, increasingly complex and demanding. It takes considerable specialized knowledge and skills to do this work well.

For example, screening becomes a terribly important volunteer program function when you

ask volunteers to undertake demanding, highly skilled work or fulfill positions of trust.

Positions of trust?

SM: That is a term we use to denote positions that involve one or more of three things: unsupervised access to vulnerable people; access to private, privileged or confidential information; and/or access to money or other valuables such as property or artifacts. These days we need to also think about access to data and identity.

Millions of volunteers are occupying positions of trust in hundreds of thousands of organizations across the country, and now, really, worldwide. It is critical to ensure that the right people are in the right positions. While screening connotes the need to ensure that inappropriate or potentially harmful people are not accepted into positions from which they can do harm, it is equally important that the people we place in important roles have the skills, ability and willingness to do the work that will be expected of them.

LG: But it isn't just screening. Getting the right people in the right jobs is just the beginning. Ensuring that our screening decisions were correct is an ongoing function. Because the work that volunteers do is so important, it is critical that organizations ensure that volunteers meet the required standards, are reliable and dependable and generate intended outcomes. That means that volunteers in important roles like those at SMPs need to be monitored, supported and guided. Recognition of work well done is critical, but so too is corrective action if a volunteer is not doing a good job. Some people will think that's a tough approach to volunteer management, but it's absolutely necessary when volunteers are doing

important work. With SMPs, the work of volunteers is *extraordinarily* important. Mistakes can have a negative impact on beneficiaries, the SMP organization and others in the community. Don't get me wrong: It's not that we don't trust volunteers! It's that the work they do is so important that we absolutely must oversee that work closely.

How are organizations adjusting?

SM: It means recognizing that engaging volunteers effectively requires specific knowledge and skills. Even experienced managers of paid employees do not necessarily have the specialized expertise needed to engage, coordinate and support volunteers. The most obvious, and logical, adjustment is allocating more time to paying attention to what volunteers are doing and how they are doing it. This typically means having a designated manager for the volunteering effort who pays attention to areas such as screening and appropriate training; it may also mean making sure that all staff who work with or supervise volunteers are also trained in carrying out their responsibilities.

If you look at some of the more effective volunteer programs, such as Court Appointed Special Advocates, you will see as much attention paid to ensuring that staff are capable of supervising and supporting volunteers effectively as you will see in ensuring that volunteers are capable of performing their own roles. It is truly becoming a "partnership" and neither paid staff nor volunteers can succeed without the other.

You will also see in other progressive volunteer organizations such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters much greater attention to the interviewing and

screening of prospective volunteers to ensure that you've got the right people to begin with, and careful, ongoing follow-up with volunteers to ensure that their work is meeting program objectives.

*I*s there a link between program management and risk management?

LG: The two are integrally entwined. In truth, a well-organized and well-managed volunteer program is a program in which many, if not most, risks will be well-managed.

*C*an you explain?

LG: Sure. When an organization is thoughtful about the work that will be assigned to volunteers and when it develops positions that are well-planned and appropriate for volunteer involvement, the chances of success are better, and by implication, the chances of failure or harm are less. Thorough screening (and by that I mean not too much as well as not too little) helps to place the right people in the right job, resulting in quality

services and less chance that things will go wrong. Well-trained volunteers will perform to a higher standard and make fewer mistakes. When volunteers are well-supervised and well-supported, the organization not only provides quality programming but also can intervene sooner and help volunteers perform best.

Showing appreciation of work well done means more than just a certificate or a once-a-year reception. It means regularly noticing the work of volunteers, recognizing efforts and achievements,

saying thanks in a genuine, heartfelt, personal, day-to-day way. That's not just good management. It produces more satisfied volunteers who feel productive and motivated to their best. It helps to reduce potentially harmful errors.

SM: The point is that good volunteer program management goes a long way to reducing and managing risks related to volunteer involvement. If volunteers are performing low-level or less-important work, then the management of their efforts is similarly less demanding. But when volunteers, like our SMP volunteers, are doing complex, responsible work, their efforts deserve good and careful management. To do less is to disrespect volunteers, their efforts and contributions. As the trends Linda mentioned continue and we involve more volunteers with higher skills and higher expectations, the need for volunteer management to improve will continue. The rule of the future will be "skilled volunteers require skilled management."

*W*hy is this an important topic for SMPs to address at this time?

LG: There is never a wrong time to ensure that programs are well run and services are of the highest quality. But right now, with escalating attention to health care fraud and abuse, SMP is evolving into a program with further reach. More attention and higher funding are putting SMPs in the public eye. It is likely that higher expectations will accompany both the attention and the resources.

SM: It is amazing how many programs don't address this issue until after there is a disaster or a scandal. Not to press the point too far, but the more responsible the work that volunteers do, the

more they connect directly with “clients,” the greater the likelihood that something of significant consequence will go wrong. I think it’s commendable that SMP has decided to address this in a preventative fashion and can thus avoid the knee-jerk approach that usually follows the catastrophe. With SMP we’ll be able to incrementally introduce improvements and build program infrastructure, making it a lot easier on everyone.

You’ve both mentioned “infrastructure.” What is that?

LG: It is all of the volunteer program management functions and systems – communication, evaluation, accountability, policies, procedures, standards – that we have been talking about. That includes conscious and deliberate attention to risks involved in delivering SMP programs: risks to beneficiaries, risks to volunteers, risks to the SMP organizations. Risk management has become an integral function in volunteer programs today and I would suggest it has never been more important in the SMP system.

What is the progress of the SMP risk management project?

LG: We have been taking an orderly, systematic approach to risk management in the Volunteer Risk and Program Management Project. We have identified a range of risks related to the SMP volunteer work. We have developed an inventory of risks (and the list is fairly lengthy, reflecting, again, the importance of the work SMP volunteers do and the degree of access they are granted in the course

of their work). We have carefully prioritized those risks, taking into consideration the likelihood of occurrence and magnitude of harm of each.

SM: Right now we are looking at a range of strategies that *could be* implemented to reduce and control each risk. We have made no decisions – that will begin to happen in the fall – but it is likely that many risk control strategies will take the form of policies, procedures, standards, guidelines and recommended (but not necessarily mandatory) exemplary practices in volunteer program management. We had planned to make some risk control decisions early this summer, but we then had the opportunity to attend the regional conferences. Because that will allow us to talk directly to SMP staff from across the whole system, and more importantly, the opportunity for SMPs to share directly with us the risks they experience and their ideas about potential solutions, we decided to hold off our decision making.

LG: Another development is that we have expanded the membership of the steering committee that is advising AoA on this project. We’re pleased to have more input, again, from SMPs. We’ve also created a review team, which is a collection of six SMP representatives who have agreed to work with us over the winter of 2010 and spring of 2011, reviewing and providing feedback on proposed risk control strategies and draft products (policies, procedures, and so on). As Steve said to me when we first started this project, we’ve been working way too long in this field to want to produce a bunch of products that won’t be helpful or adopted. We’re trying to be practical by looking for realistic, doable ways that SMPs can make their programs both more effective and safer. ●