

Q&A: Volunteer Risk and Program Management Project

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During the regional conferences we were asked some questions about improving the volunteer infrastructure at SMPs. We thought we would pass along some answers to the more frequent inquiries in order to provide quick solutions while we continue to work on customized volunteer management tools.

How can I find trained volunteer management staff?

A key to a successful volunteer program is someone who knows what he or she is doing and has time and responsibility to do it. Most highly successful volunteer programs have a designated coordinator of volunteers who oversees how volunteers are involved and works with partner agencies to ensure that the SMP has volunteers who are appropriately screened, trained and supervised for the work they do. For more information on finding a qualified coordinator of volunteers:

1. Look locally to see if you have a volunteer center or HandsOn Network affiliate (www.handsonnetwork.org/actioncenters/map). These organizations specialize in helping agencies involve volunteers, often providing training programs for new coordinators. They can help you advertise if you are looking for a coordinator of volunteers and can also help in volunteer recruitment. If you don't have a volunteer center

then either the United Way or the Red Cross are good sources for networking.

2. Many communities have local associations of coordinators of volunteers who meet just like any other professionals. You can find a listing of many at www.energizeinc.com/prof/dovia.html. This list isn't comprehensive so if you don't find one for your locality don't give up hope – ask some of the coordinators of volunteers in any of your larger local nonprofits and they can tell you whether there is a formal or informal networking group.

3. You can also advertise nationally via the Internet. CyberVPM is the largest U.S. listserv for coordinators of volunteers. You will see frequent postings from those who are trying to recruit experienced and qualified staff. You can join CyberVPM at groups.yahoo.com/group/cybervpm/. There is no cost and it has lots of archived material on good volunteer program management practice.

For tips on what to look for in a prospective coordinator of volunteers, remember that we've already posted a model position description on the Resource Center website (second bullet under Resources): http://www.smpresource.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Volunteer_Management&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=3262

Where would I learn more about conducting background checks?

First, keep in mind that a "background check" generally means more than a criminal records check. It can include identity verification, references and a Social Security number. A

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thorough “screening,” especially for positions of trust like most of those at SMP, means more than just doing a criminal records check. You should consider using: an application form, an interview (in person where possible), reference checks, driver’s record check when the volunteer will be driving and so on. For a quick overview of the “why” and “how” of volunteer background checks, go to the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse: www.privacyrights.org/fs/fs16d-VolunteerScreening.htm. If you want a more thorough examination of the full range of screening options and how to choose among them for various volunteer positions, then we can cheerfully recommend Linda’s comprehensive book *Beyond Police Checks* at www.lindagraff.ca.

Each state has its own system of conducting criminal records checks. There is no comprehensive listing of exactly how each system works. The easiest way to find out is to talk to agencies that really take this seriously, such as Big Brothers/Sisters or the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) in your community (To find your local programs, visit the national websites: www.bbbs.org and www.casaforchildren.org). They can walk you through the procedures for your state and show you what they do. You can modify that to fit your volunteer position requirements.

Where can I find some resources to get started on best practices, including templates and forms?

There are two ways to approach this:

1. If you generally know what you are looking for (a sample “volunteer application form,” for example), then a basic Google search will provide

dozens of examples. Volunteer programs – like everyone else – often post a lot of their stuff online. Your biggest problem will be sorting through the vast number of responses.

2. If you prefer one-stop shopping then try the mother lode of volunteer management information: www.energizeinc.com. This site is the global central repository of volunteer management material. You’ll find everything from introductory material to in-depth coverage, as well as dozens of publications. Steve is too modest to refer to his book *Volunteer Management*, which is the textbook in the field and is available via the Energize site – but don’t buy it until the third edition comes out later this year.

As a complement to either of these approaches, remember that if you send samples of your own materials to the Resource Center they can post them to the website and you’ll be able to look at what other SMP programs are doing.

We are delighted that you have been motivated to move ahead on these important volunteer program management strategies: professional staffing, appropriate screening and program infrastructure. At the November Volunteer Risk and Program Management steering committee meeting, the first set of draft policies and practices relating to risk exposures will be on the table, to be followed early in the new year with the first set of draft policies and practices on volunteer program management. As these vehicles work their way through the review and approval process, we will be working on the development of a range of tools to accompany their implementation. So stay tuned. There’s lots of help coming to you in the foreseeable future. ●