

Not Like Starting Over

Look at existing models to avoid reinventing your volunteer program from scratch

BY HILARY ANNE HAGER



This spring, after 10 years of managing volunteers in animal care environments, I joined The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) as director of the National Volunteer Center, a new initiative that aims to increase the consistent, professional, and high-level engagement of volunteers across the organization. It's an amazing opportunity to develop, implement, and nourish a volunteer program on a completely different scale, and it's very exciting to be here. I'll be leading the charge internally here at The HSUS, and also continuing our work with those of you managing volunteers in the animal protection field, to provide resources, support, and training as you work to increase the effectiveness of your own volunteer programs.

I've moved from managing a few hundred volunteers in one physical location to working with thousands of volunteers across the country. I'll be involved with everything from providing direct care to animals in our animal care centers to responding to rescue animals from natural and man-made disasters, gathering signatures for ballot initiatives, or helping to keep animals out of shelters by providing counselors and resources to pets at risk. It's quite a change. No longer surrounded by the sounds, smells, and sights of shelters, I'm instead immersed in a cubicle maze in what feels like the nerve center of animal protection. A lot of things feel different, not the least of which is dressing for an office setting instead of wearing clothes that allow me to be prepared for everything from cleaning to animal intake and cat wrangling.

What doesn't feel different is the approach I'm taking as I start this process. I can honestly say that I'm following all of my own advice on volunteer management, which I've shared in this column over the years. I've said it many times, and I'll say it again: Best practices are best practices, whether they're applied in a foster-based rescue group with 10 members, in animal shelters or wildlife rehabilitation centers with hundreds of volunteers, or environments like this, with thousands of volunteers taking countless actions to benefit the animals and make the world a more humane place.

The Takeaways

In this, my final Volunteer Management column for *Animal Sheltering*, I wanted to hit some of the most important concepts we've covered—the most important of which is to not reinvent the wheel. One of the best things about this field is how willing we are to share great ideas and what works. No one should ever feel like they have to come up with something from scratch; the odds are someone has tried what you have in mind, and can give you advice about how to proceed and increase your chances of success.

The first step when undertaking any transformation of a volunteer program is identifying the goals and vision: What does success look like, and how will you know when you get there? In the same way you might identify the mission and goals of an organization through strategic planning, it's useful to think broadly about volunteer engagement, and pull together a team of key players (staff, organizational leadership, current volunteers, past volunteers, and maybe even community members not currently affiliated with the group) to paint the picture of the successful volunteer program in your organization's future.

In previous columns, we've discussed the value of the *Volunteer Management Audit* by Susan J. Ellis (available for sale at Energize Inc.). This tool provides the opportunity for evaluation of your program against best practices and benchmarks of well-run programs so you can identify the gaps and target your efforts. Even after identifying where your program needs shoring up, however, you don't have to move forward alone and make things up as you go. Find organizations that are already doing what you want to do, and network like crazy to see what resources they have to share.

I spend a lot of time online, researching program ideas at shelters around the country. I've come across excellent examples of teen community service projects, cute T-shirt designs, models for court-ordered community service, and great samples of position descriptions for all kinds of interesting volunteer opportunities. When you keep looking for ideas and inspiration, you usually find it everywhere.

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Getting a Good Head Start

I'm a big fan of working smarter, not harder. Borrowing inspiration from other groups is a great example of this. The HSUS offers a wide range of resources for volunteer managers, so it's a great place to start.

Betsy McFarland, vice president of the Companion Animals section at The HSUS, literally wrote the book you need: *Volunteer Management for Animal Care Organizations*, available for sale at animalsheltering.org. With detailed descriptions of all the key elements of well-run programs, and sample materials from shelters and groups around the country, this provides a solid foundation for groups of any size and type.

You should also join the listserv for volunteer managers, also found on animalsheltering.org. This allows you to join the conversation of members around the country and around the world, where people share resources, ideas, and proven program strategies. You'll not only have access to the emails and inquiries sent out by other members, but also the rich archive of past exchanges on a variety of topics. You can search by topic and see all the comments about whatever you're hoping to learn, and get contact information for the people who can provide you more information.

Cat Belteau, volunteer coordinator at the Humane Society of Charlotte in Charlotte, N.C., recommends the listserv. "It's a great resource—people are sharing ideas, it's helpful for getting ideas, and allows you to network with people who have similar programs and who may have solutions for similar problems."

The HSUS and its educational affiliate, Humane Society University (HSU), also have a membership with Everyone Ready, an online staff training program for the management of volunteers. Our membership allows people in the animal protection field free access to this incredible resource, which offers both instructor-led and self-paced instruction on topics ranging from orientation, screening, and risk management to meaningful recognition, report writing, and recruiting. Everyone Ready will not only increase the professional knowledge of volunteer managers but give them

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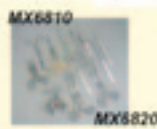
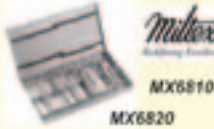
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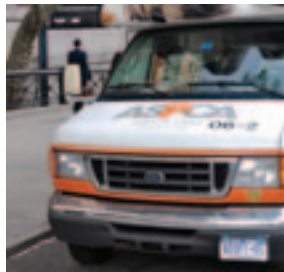
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[volunteer management]

the skills to train the staff and executives they work with to elevate the engagement of volunteers across their organizations.

Everyone Ready is a part of Energize Inc., a one-stop shop for all things related to volunteer management. Everyone Ready members have access to all of the resources Energize makes available, including a huge library of journal articles, a newsletter with current trends and relevant information, and upcoming trainings for managers of volunteers.

HSU offers a certificate program in volunteer management, which represents an excellent opportunity to learn from and with volunteer managers in the field of animal protection. There are five courses: Implementing a Successful Volunteer Program, Training Volunteers and Training Staff to work with Volunteers, Volunteer Recruitment and Screening, Managing Challenging Volunteers and Resolving Problems, and Tools and Techniques to Streamline Volunteer Programs. Each of these courses is instructor-led and lasts four weeks, and provides you with tips, tools, and strategies for creating and sustaining a highly effective corps of volunteers.

Volunteer Program Assessment

Perhaps one of the most powerful tools that The HSUS can offer comes out of our partnership with the Organizational Science department at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC)—the Volunteer Program Assessment (VPA).

This assessment system includes a survey that is presented to coordinators of volunteers in organizations, who then can send the survey out to their volunteer group. The survey results are gathered, analyzed, and organized into a report that is presented to the coordinator, showing individual and organizational results, and comparisons to norms from other organizations.

Jonelle Lang, shelter manager of City of Rochester Animal Services in Rochester, N.Y.,

decided to do VPA last year. As a municipal shelter, the Rochester facility struggles with low staffing levels, doesn't have a full-time volunteer coordinator, and at the time, Lang felt her program was a mess. Since the shelter was unlikely to get the funding for a professional volunteer manager, she decided to use the assessment as a tool to turn things around, point her in the right direction, and provide the resources the shelter would need.



The VPA team had the time and resources that she didn't.

Her volunteers loved the opportunity to give feedback, and she had a 50 percent response rate among her volunteer group, which was a pleasant surprise. Later, after she'd received the results and had had a week to review them, she scheduled time with her VPA consultant to go over the results and really get a handle on what the numbers meant.

The next step was to hold a volunteer meeting to present the results and report back. "The volunteers really took to it," Lang says. "While there was nothing too surprising in the report, we got the tools and information we needed to move forward, and the recommendations from the VPA helped us figure out what we needed to do." While the team munched on the food they brought to share, they identified which major components of the program were the priority, and volunteers signed up for the areas that were most meaningful to them.

Since that time, a group of core volunteers has taken over running the program, managing recruiting, orientation, and training, and Jonelle only has to oversee it and handle problems or big questions as they arise. "I'd recommend the VPA to anyone," Jonelle says. "The volunteers felt involved, they felt heard, and they felt validated. This has been a huge time-saver for me, and it's been just great."

Belteau also did the VPA in her shelter, and she says it helped her identify key areas that she needed to address right away. She has seen an increase in volunteer retention and subsequent increases in financial giving, because her volunteers are happier with a program that was able to respond and reorganize to address their concerns.

The HSUS partners with UNCC to offer scholarships to groups that wish to initiate the VPA in their shelters. While the program is free, UNCC only takes on client organizations that apply for the scholarships, and follow the application process through The HSUS and the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators (SAWA). There's often a waiting list of groups that would like to participate. Moving forward, we hope to be able to offer this valuable service to even more groups in need of self-evaluation.

While this is my last column in these pages, I hope to continue to provide support on volunteer management issues when needed. Feel free to email me at hhager@humanesociety.org, and of course, you can read previous editions of the Volunteer Management column at animalsheltering.org. Check back to see what's happening with the development of the National Volunteer Center, and good luck changing the world. **AS**

Hilary Anne Hager is the director of the National Volunteer Center at The Humane Society of the United States.