

# Volunteer Management

## Building a Successful Volunteer Program

How to step back, slow down, and plan for long-term growth

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Animal shelters and rescue organizations are often so desperate for volunteers to offset their small budgets that their volunteer programs are developed quickly, with very little structure or planning. It's therefore no surprise that serious problems often arise—including conflicts among staff and volunteers, and volunteers who are disruptive, poorly trained, and end up creating more work for shelter staff. These serious issues can slow the growth of a volunteer program and even make staff question the need for volunteers at all.

We encourage your organization to step back, slow down, and plan your volunteer programs using a series of building blocks. These steps can help give a program a strong foundation, preventing major problems and supporting healthy growth.

Each of the blocks we discuss below builds on the previous one. We recommend that all animal shelters and rescue groups with volunteers begin at the first block, focusing on addressing issues there before moving on to the next. You might even consider not bringing in new volunteers until issues in each of these areas have been addressed. While it can be difficult to stop bringing in volunteers, we believe it can create a much stronger program in the long run—and bringing volunteers into a dysfunctional system helps no one.

We hope to get into more detail about these individual steps in future columns, but in the meantime, we hope these building blocks will help you get started!

### Establish Support from Leadership

Leadership is the foundation of any successful volunteer program. Organizational leaders must set the tone for the program and promote the essential role of volun-



teers to staff and the public at every opportunity. The role of volunteers—and the organization's appreciation of it—should be visible in the mission statement of the organization, throughout its website, in its literature, and even in the physical space provided for volunteers.

Anyone looking in from the outside should be able to see that volunteers are appreciated and considered an integral part of the organization. Messages that reinforce the importance of volunteers are given through direct and subtle cues; messages throughout the organization should be consistent. Leadership can show support of the volunteer program by allocating resources for a volunteer manager as a part of the executive team. The manager should have

input on important decision-making, as well as a budget for the tools and resources the program requires to run smoothly

A great way to assess the organizational support for the volunteer program is to complete Susan J. Ellis' Volunteer Audit, available at the website of Energize Inc ([energizeinc.com](http://energizeinc.com)). Leaders will be able to use the suggestions about best practices as a measure for where their organization stands, and identify areas that need improvement.

What if leadership has a negative attitude toward volunteers, or fails to truly embrace the program? In that case, managers will need to take special care to screen volunteers for excellent interpersonal skills. Volunteers in this envi-



vent volunteers from filling in gaps with their own ideas—many of which may not be consistent with the organization’s views and practices. If you already have a volunteer program, enlist your best volunteers to help create the education program and to become mentors to new volunteers.

You may want to incorporate online training that potential volunteers can do from home (check out the training available at *4act.com*), and you may want to consider creating instructional videos that show the proper way to perform volunteer tasks. Anyone with a digital video camera and some basic editing software can help put these videos together for you.

A training checklist should be started for each volunteer-in-training to track where the volunteer is in the process and document that they’ve successfully acquired the skills and knowledge required.

Training helps new volunteers find their feet, but the process can also be an excellent way to determine if someone is the right match for your organization. Formal acceptance into the program should occur only after the candidates have successfully completed their volunteer training. At that point, they should be asked to sign a volunteer agreement that contains the major expectations of volunteers—including supporting shelter policies and staff decision-making. The agreement should detail the means through which volunteers may provide feedback.

For those individuals who are not selected, the volunteer manager should provide contact information for other volunteer opportunities within the community.

### Grow the Program at the Proper Pace

Shelters often bring in more volunteers than they can handle. Limit the number of volunteers to a manageable number for the staff and volunteers available to screen, train, and supervise them. Recruiting the right volunteers and training them well grows the program’s capacity to recruit more; existing volunteers can help mentor, train, and even supervise new recruits.

The need to actively recruit volunteers will decrease as the volunteer program’s

reputation improves; people want to volunteer where they will be well-managed and get the support they need. Your program will be more attractive to the types of prospective volunteers you want.

### Put the Tools in Place

Volunteer managers should spend the majority of their time on tasks related to improving the volunteer experience rather than on administrative tasks. Every program has administrative requirements—including tracking hours, recognizing volunteers, and creating systems for ongoing communication with the volunteer team—but those don’t need to take up the bulk of the program manager’s day-to-day efforts.

Spend several days tracking how much time is used on which activities to identify the tasks that take the most time, then access the tools available to make those tasks easier and less time-consuming. Tasks such as contact management and scheduling volunteers can easily be handled with online systems, such as *volgistics.com* or *instant-scheduling.com*, saving the volunteer manager huge amounts of time that can be spent on more essential duties.

Think about how you are using your time and what tasks are really frustrating you, and then give yourself permission to imagine, “If only there were a tool that allowed me to ...” If you can imagine it, most likely someone else already has and has figured out how to solve the problem ... you just have to find it!

### Acknowledge Volunteers Publicly and Privately

All staff should regularly thank volunteers for their help. A simple “thank you” from a staff member can mean so much. The organization should also identify benchmarks for when to recognize each volunteer for their contribution of time and energy. Although volunteer hours are not the only means of measuring a volunteer’s donation to an organization, it can be effective to privately acknowledge individuals when they reach 50, 100, or 200 hours, etc. Volunteer databases like *volgistics.com* track volunteer hours and can make recognition easier; you can set the system to

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## Resources

For the latest ideas in volunteer management, check out:

[animalsheltering.org/volunteerdiscussion](http://animalsheltering.org/volunteerdiscussion)

[volunteerforanimals.org](http://volunteerforanimals.org)

