

## Brief - Volunteer Considerations

Volunteers are the life blood of any neighborhood association. And even when people are dues-paying members, it's often difficult to get them to volunteer their time as well.

### Managing Volunteers

For individuals to commit time, the value of the result has to be very important to the potential volunteer. That's one important reason to stay in touch with the interests and needs of neighborhood residents. Of course, volunteers don't have to be members to participate, so **don't limit volunteer recruitment to dues-paying members.**

#### 1. How do I get people to do a job?

Ask them. Few people will volunteer their services. This does not mean that they don't want to be active. People wait to be asked. Asking builds activity.

#### 2. Who should ask them?

If possible, someone they know and trust; someone to whose influence they respond; a friend, a neighbor, a worker in the same department, a person with prestige in the neighborhood. If you cannot arrange that, do it yourself. Remember that the act of asking is itself important. After this has been done, be sure that the leader of the group welcomes the new recruit she or he will work with.

#### 3. What do I tell them?

- **Make clear what job you are asking them to do.** The job should have a definite beginning and ending. People don't want to sign up for life, so don't ask them to over-commit themselves.
- **Ask people to do things they can do well.** People are more willing to begin things they know how to do. Later, when they are really a part of your neighborhood association, they will be more willing to try new things.
- **Tell each person how their job fits in with the rest.** People want to understand things that they are a part of, and they work best when they know that others are depending on them.
- **Let each person know that their help is needed.** If she or he feels that you are "looking for people" she or he will also feel easily replaceable and less responsible for doing a job.
- **Discuss their own goals and how they fit into those of the organization.** People have their own reasons for volunteering, and you need to know them to lead effectively. Also, you must help people keep their expectations realistic. If their expectations of the neighborhood association can't be met, your association will become a source of disappointment rather than fulfillment.

- **Ask what they would like to know, and give them plenty of time and help in raising questions.** Many people are reluctant to ask questions, but they will work better after they have done so.
- **Do these things in person.** Do not rely on printed circulars, letters, phone calls or email. There is no substitute for talking face-to-face. It lets the person know that you consider the discussion important, and it gives you a chance to get acquainted with them.

### **More Tips for Recruiting Volunteers**

Some of these suggestions overlap the previous list, but this set of tips takes a slightly different angle.

- Divide projects into separate committees. If your association is doing more than one self-help project, have separate committees coordinate volunteers.
- Write job descriptions for volunteers. What do you want the volunteer to do? When? Where? How long will it take? Will they need to bring their own tools and/or equipment?
- Ask residents what they want to do. In your winter newsletter list all the projects/programs your group plans to do in the next year. Ask residents to check the ones they will work on and have them return the form. Know how many volunteers you need.
- No forms returned? Call them. Call the residents who have had some kind of contact with your organization in the past 3-5 years. Did they get the newsletter? Will they promise to help?
- Be sure to tell potential volunteers how they will be recognized if they volunteer.
- Tell people how the project will benefit them and the entire community.

Maybe you've seen the T-shirts that say "Stop Me Before I Volunteer Again!" Those are the same people sit on the association board, are active in the soccer league, scouts, church committees, school functions, and fund-raisers time and time again. The minute they move into a new community, they're asking how they can help. And while this may be accompanied by frayed nerves and time-management challenges, these folks feel genuinely rewarded by their volunteer contributions.

On the other hand, sometimes those same volunteers stay because there doesn't seem to be any interest by others to step in. How can you attract new volunteer blood to your community?

### **Attract New Volunteers**

People volunteer for things they feel good about. Communities that promote a positive image of their community are much more likely to attract volunteers. Newsletters, websites, bill-boards, and notices all reflect a sense of your community.

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Utilize these communication tools to publicize the charm and unity of your community to stimulate volunteer interest.

- Do board and committee members interact in a manner that is respectful with one another and of all opinions? **Most people shy away from conflict and interactions that appear awkward and/or stressful.** There are simply too many other places volunteers can donate their time comfortably.
- **Are your meetings organized and are participants prepared in advance?** Community meetings are typically held in the evening. Meetings that are prolonged by poor organization or lack of preparation to discuss and take action on the issues will discourage potential volunteers from feeling they can regularly commit such a large amount of time. Boards with meetings lasting more than 2 hours should seek ways to be more efficient in order to be respectful of everyone's time and encourage greater resident participation.
- **Reach out for volunteers - don't wait for them to sign up.** Many people are shy or never seem to get around to filling out the recruitment paper the board has sent - but they often respond to a personal invitation. Neighbors, residents who've approached the board about an issue, or owners who've expressed interest in an activity are prime candidates for a personal appeal by current volunteers.
- **Don't ask for long-term commitments.** Ask residents if they would be willing to participate in a short-term project, such as an ad-hoc committee focused on landscaping the front entrance. Look for people that seem to have an interest because their own lawns may be beautiful! Other short-term projects might be working on a community policy, planning a community event or flipping burgers for the association's 4th of July activity. Short-term involvements build relationships where residents become more comfortable with one another, are connected to the community, and are more likely to volunteer again.
- Residents often do not understand the role and responsibilities of a board member. **Think about holding periodic "new resident orientation" meetings.** Have refreshments, let them get to know other volunteers, talk up your community and discuss the roles of the volunteers. People who have volunteered in another capacity within the community are much more likely to run for the board later - and they're a

bit more knowledgeable about the association. So recruit them right there for a committee or short-term project!

- **Welcome new volunteers with open arms.** It's not always easy to join the 'old-timers' who already seem to know everyone and everything. Help them to become active - give them background information so they can be knowledgeable too ... perhaps heading-up a new project will help them become integrated.
- **Don't dismiss newcomer suggestions because "it's already been tried before and didn't work."** Explain the last approach and determine if they have a different one - or maybe the timing wasn't right the last time and the climate is better now. Most volunteers want to feel that they're making a difference.
- **Publicly recognize and thank your volunteers.** This can easily be accomplished through newsletters and websites. As they say - 'a little thanks goes a long way!' Some communities hold an annual Volunteer Appreciation dinner - the costs of which may be covered by local merchants - or a pot luck dinner in which everyone shares. Special ball-caps or T-shirts with your association's name on it in a color that's reserved and recognized in the community for volunteerism is another approach.

We live in a fast-paced world where family members have limited time to volunteer. A positive environment and active recruiting is your best approach to achieving more volunteerism and representation of all community residents!