

Volunteers: Or, Who Can Help?

Volunteers in your library can be a great asset. Or they can feel like just more work and responsibility. How this valuable asset is managed can make all the difference. **If you have a good plan for managing your community volunteer resource, the possibilities are limitless!** Volunteers are not free, but they can cost-effectively extend library services. Before you begin using volunteers, several areas should be addressed.

Staff Acceptance and Involvement Are Crucial to Effective Use and Retention of Volunteers.

If your staff does not feel comfortable and appreciative of volunteers, the volunteers know it and will not stay. Sometimes staff will view volunteers as competition for their jobs. NEVER place a volunteer in a position that replaces or could be seen as replacement of paid staff, especially where customer privacy is an issue. Volunteers are for assistance with and expansion of your programs, not to replace paid staff.

Supervision and scheduling of volunteers begins with planning what staff members will be assigned this task.

Identify a staff member or members who will be assigned the responsibility for recruiting, screening, and assigning volunteers. This person need not be the person who trains and directly supervises volunteers. The staff member responsible for the area where the volunteer works would be best suited for training and direct supervision. Don't have a staff member who can or will do this job? Consider recruiting a Volunteer Manager, That is, a manager of volunteers.

What Can Volunteers Do?

Identify needs or wants to supplement and assist the work of staff. Don't be afraid to dream big, as there are very talented and skilled people in your community who are just waiting to share their knowledge, experience, and time.

Volunteers should never have access to the library's circulation software or be able to see a patron's circulation history or other personally identifying information (PII). Volunteers cannot be held to the same standards as paid employees.

Develop position descriptions for routine volunteer positions.

But stay open to those volunteers who wish to share special skills that you hadn't even thought of. How about asking a local software developer to teach a basic coding class?

Create a formal application form.

There are many examples out there. Be sure to request references and inform the potential volunteer that you may conduct a background check. Even people you may have known for years should fill out application forms.

As part of your volunteer policies or guidelines, know the law concerning insurance, grievance procedures, background checks, termination, and volunteer rights. The Library's attorney can help with this.

A volunteer handbook is just as important as a staff handbook.

Include things like your library's mission, vision, and value statements. Safety policies, position descriptions, contact information, map of emergency exits, library parking details, and of course a welcome letter or statement.

There are many free, quality online sources to answer most any volunteer management training need.

A local volunteer managers group can put you in touch with experienced people in the field.

Recruiting volunteers is easier than ever!

With the online tools now available, new volunteer recruits find you! Of course, word of mouth from existing volunteers is still a great source. And community service groups, such as RSVP and the Telephone Pioneers and even local businesses have been a source for reliable and knowledgeable volunteers. Remember, if you get too many applicants, you don't have to say yes to them all! Your library doesn't hire more staff members than it needs. Just follow the same logic when hiring volunteers!

All volunteers should go through the process of interview, placement, and orientation just like new library staff.

Always ask for a minimum commitment. This may vary from position to position. Make it very clear that you expect a certain level of quality and workplace behavior, and just what that standard is.

The longer you can retain your volunteers, the fewer training and supervision duties for the library's paid staff.

Retention is much easier than constant hiring and training.

As you would evaluate any program or employee, volunteers and your volunteer program should go through periodic evaluation.

Volunteers, just like staff, can be “let go” if they are not working up to the standards they agreed to during orientation.

There are many great reasons to make use of volunteers at your library. One of the most important is: If you have an interested, engaged, and appreciated volunteer group, you have the best library advocates you could ever wish for. If volunteers love their volunteer jobs, they're going to talk about it to anyone in the community who will listen.

Recruiting Resources

- **VolunteerMatch**
 - Volunteer matching website sponsored by Points of Light. List your organization's needs to be connected with people in your community who wish to volunteer. This site also has many useful volunteer management training tools. Very powerful resource.
 - <http://www.volunteermatch.org/>
- **United Way**
 - Directory of Volunteer Centers with interactive volunteer recruiting tools. Find your local United Way Center and list your organization's needs to be connected with people who wish to volunteer. Very powerful resource.
 - <http://www.unitedway.org/take-action/volunteer>
- **AmeriCorps Seniors**
 - Make giving back your second act.
 - <https://americorps.gov/serve/americorps-seniors>

Volunteer Appreciation Resources

- **Positive Promotions**
 - Great source for gifts, books, and ideas to recognize and reward volunteers.
 - <http://www.positivepromotions.com/>
- **The Thanks Company**
 - *Thanks* started about 23 years ago when a friend who was the director of the local Abuse Prevention Council couldn't find appropriate thank-you cards for her volunteers. We decided that there might be other agencies with the same problem, and perhaps there was a need we could fill.
 - <http://www.thanks-a-lot.com/>

- **VolunteerGifts.com**
 - Iris and Rick Hyman founded the company in 1994 after spending 15 prior years working with fund raising for hospitals and nonprofit organizations across America. VolunteerGifts.com has specialized in manufacturing essential products for organizations and with custom logo imprints for some of America's best known nonprofits, associations and corporations for over 28 years now.
 - <https://www.volunteergifts.com/>

Associations and Professional Development

- **Developing and Managing Volunteer Programs**
 - From the Free Management Library
 - <https://managementhelp.org/staffing/volunteers.htm>
- **Points of Light Foundation**
 - Serving the social sector through Volunteer Engagement, Partnerships, and Thought Leadership.
 - <https://www.pointsoflight.org/for-nonprofits/>
- **Association of Leaders in Volunteer Engagement (ALIVE)**
 - ALIVE serves to enhance and sustain the spirit of volunteering in America by fostering collaboration and networking, promoting professional development, and providing advocacy for leaders in community engagement. ALIVE works with colleagues in volunteer engagement to provide networking, professional development, mentoring and advocacy for our peers.
 - <https://volunteeralive.org/>
- **Southwest Idaho Directors of Volunteer Services (SWIDOVS)**
 - SWIDOVS is a nonprofit organization where volunteer management professionals in Southwest Idaho work together to become great leaders and effective employees.

- <http://www.swidovs.org/>
- **Examples of Volunteer Application Forms**
 - New York Public Library:
https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/volunteer_application_0.pdf
 - Springfield-Greene County Library District:
https://thelibrary.org/donate/volunteer_application.pdf

ICfL Staff

Please touch base with Colleen Clark, the ICfL's Volunteer Services Coordinator with questions about volunteer management. You can contact Colleen at Colleen.Clark@libraries.idaho.gov or at 208-639-4169.