

# Volunteers: Partners in Programming

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When volunteers and paid staff are partners in programming, they plan and manage programs together. Partners work together toward a common purpose.

In some ways, volunteers already plan and conduct events, set policy, recruit other volunteers, teach youth and adults, develop materials and evaluate programs. Volunteers work as individuals and on committees.

*Are volunteers and paid staff working as program partners to the greatest benefit of everyone in our organization?*

## Who Benefits

All participants — paid staff, volunteers, the program and the community — benefit from a successful partnership between volunteers and paid staff. The benefits of involving volunteers in managing programs include:

- Provide greater visibility for the program.
- Be a communication link between participants, volunteers and staff.
- Improve the overall quality of the program.
- Enjoy personal growth.
- Have a wealth of talent and experience to share.
- Understand participant needs.
- Encourage participant ownership of the program.
- Coordinate efforts with staff to strengthen programs in time when resources are limited.
- Promote teamwork.
- Offer support, challenges, opportunities and role models for other volunteers.

## Volunteers Say It Best

"What would you recommend to other organizations or counties planning to expand volunteer involvement as partners in program management?" Forty-five volunteers who are partners in managing 4-H programs were asked to respond to this question. Their comments reinforce eight recommendations that emerged consistently.

## Recommendations

1. Begin with a small number of carefully identified volunteers and move slowly toward greater volunteer involvement in the total program.

*Develop a game plan . . . then be flexible . . . grow each year from there.*

*Volunteers need to be successful . . . they need to be respected by their peers and in the community. Identify someone who works well with people and will be vocal about the program in order to promote it. Those initial (volunteers) can build a strong base foundation on which to build the volunteer program management system.*

*Needs to be a self-starter; committed to the program; enjoys people and is enthusiastic.*

2. Recognize that volunteers have valuable experience to use for developing ideas, formulating plans, teaching others and evaluating progress in the program.

*Past experience on the local level is recognized as valuable and respected among other volunteers.*

*Ideas should be planted, not forced upon volunteers. Experience is the best teacher — to be shared with other volunteers too.*

3. The staff role should focus on providing education, resource materials, challenges for volunteer growth, positive reinforcement, interpretation of policy and guidance.

*Help (volunteers) set their own implementation plan, identify what tools they need to accomplish this task and what training they need.*

*Offer new challenges . . . to grow and experience greater satisfaction.*

*"Staff simply needs to provide the spark to ignite the potential that is already there . . . and watch that conditions remain good for the enthusiasm to continue burning."*

4. Paid staff need to allow volunteers to function to the full extent of their abilities.

*Allow volunteers to accept responsibility in programs that are even the staff's favorite so the volunteers can develop the program to their needs, not the staff's needs.*

*(Volunteers) need to have both the authority and the responsibility.*

5. Communication is key between staff, volunteers and participants to ensure the success of volunteers in program management. Role descriptions, personal contact, workshops and/or newsletters are important aspects of communication.

*Must have a very open relationship where (volunteer and paid staff) can call on one another, challenge one another, question one another . . . to keep a check and balance.*

*I call regularly just to ask how things are going.*

*It's important to have something written down. Develop a job description together. Always use 'we' as a team effort to approach tasks.*

6. Strengthen the program and maximize available resources by networking with experts, community organizations and other volunteers.

*A volunteer network enables all parts of the organization to work together better.*

*The more people that can be involved, the more ideas can be generated, the greater chance of success occurs.*

*Try to align programs with subject matter experts because these people have the background, experience, facilities and equipment. These are the people we need to focus on. They are committed to getting others interested and trained (in this program area).*

7. Don't hesitate to ask for program assistance from individuals in local communities, schools, agencies and organizations.

*When adult participants see work being done that they can benefit from, they often like to become involved and cooperate too.*

*The only way to begin is to ask someone to help.*

8. The organizational structure (councils/committees) can reinforce the need, initiate the plan, provide support and identify resources for volunteers in program management roles.

*Enabling a committee to be in charge . . . keeps it a people-based program.*

*A (council or board for the organization) should be involved in the development of a volunteer program management system. Their support will accomplish the task.*

## **What Paid Staff Partners Can Do**

All partners are essential to a program. Partners work together to accomplish common goals. Volunteers identify resources, support and learning opportunities they need from paid staff.

### Resources volunteers request

- Job description to clearly define role expectations
- Personal and program evaluation tools
- Teaching ideas and guides
- Audio and visual materials
- Materials specific to volunteer responsibility
- Opportunities to share ideas with other volunteers or experts
- In-depth information specifically related to a volunteer role

### Support volunteers request

- Listing job responsibilities into manageable tasks
- Recruiting volunteers to assist and prevent burnout
- Boosting volunteer confidence to accept new challenges
- Communicating among partners
- Encouraging the support of other volunteers and staff
- Trusting the volunteer to fulfill a role
- Discussing evaluation of individual responsibility and program
- Recognizing successes and accomplishments

### Learning opportunities volunteers request

- To understand overall organizational structure and purpose
- How to manage time and energy effectively
- Improving skills necessary for current role
- New skills necessary for new challenges
- How to recruit and prepare other volunteers for future roles
- How to work cooperatively with paid staff and independent of paid staff

Summarized by Marilyn Lesmeister, leadership and volunteer development specialist, from materials developed by Wisconsin's *Identifying, Supporting and Growing with 4-H Volunteers in County Level Roles*, February 1987, a summary of research done through a grant to the National 4-H Council from W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

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North Dakota State University Agriculture and University Extension  
Dept. 7070, Morrill 7, P.O. Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050