



Volunteers in Medicine, Bend



St. Vincent de Paul, Eugene



Hacienda CDC, Portland

VOLUNTEERING IN OREGON:

Volunteer Engagement Brief

The Volunteering in Oregon project, conducted in 2016 and funded by The Oregon Community Foundation, sought to explore key questions related to volunteering in Oregon among nonprofits in the state. The VIO project included a statewide electronic survey with nonprofit organizations, an electronic survey with volunteers within these nonprofits, interviews with representatives from nonprofit organizations and case studies of three organizations with robust volunteer programs. Ultimately, the aim of the VIO project was to identify recommendations and action steps for how OCF and its partners might best encourage and support effective volunteer engagement and service in Oregon. To read the full report, please visit oregoncf.org/VIO2016.

This brief is one of three from the VIO project, focusing on specific and/or innovative practices of Oregon nonprofits to engage volunteers, e.g., the various ways that organizations involve, utilize and retain volunteers through meaningful service. The other two briefs focus on volunteer recruitment and recognition. What follows is a summary of key volunteer engagement practices, described by organizations and volunteers involved in the VIO project.

Building Strong Relationships

This was described by VIO participants, both volunteers and organizations alike, as the most important element of volunteer engagement. This is important in terms of volunteers feeling known within and connected to the organization, as well as being able to identify at least one staff person (or other volunteer) they can turn to for questions and support.

"We have long-term relationships with volunteers and they come back every year. It's maybe not unique, but it's special."

"Across our organization our work is built on relationships and the notion that relationships matter."

As one example, an organization described that it schedules quarterly one-on-one coffee talks to build and sustain relationships between volunteers and the volunteer coordinator.

Individualizing Volunteer Opportunities

Although most organizations reported having specific types of volunteer roles they seek to fill, organizations also emphasized the importance of being open and flexible to individualizing volunteer opportunities. Although organizations should not have to meet the needs of every potential volunteer, they recognized that there can be benefits for both the organization and for volunteers as a result of individualizing a specific volunteer role or experience. Examples included organizations being able to conduct research, advocate for policy change or complete other special projects. Additionally, volunteers have been able to develop funds, create materials, engage underrepresented communities and implement new programming as a result of their individualized volunteer experience.

Providing Orientation and Training

Organizations described benefits of providing general orientation to new volunteers. This often includes a history of the organization and its mission and vision, as well as general orientation to volunteer procedures. Training specific to a volunteer's role was also seen as important to preparing the volunteer to be able to carry out his or her specific responsibilities.

Ensuring that these expectations are clearly understood by both the volunteer and organization was seen as critical for success. The investment of organizations in volunteer training varied widely, depending on the nature of the volunteer's work. In one example, extensive training was required of all volunteers:

"The senior health benefits assistance group, which takes 20 hours of training, is followed by mentoring one-on-one with another volunteer before meeting with clients on their own. They go through another eight to 12 hours per year of training to be recredentialed on changes in Medicare."

Utilizing Social Media

In addition to using social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter to recruit new volunteers, these were also described as effective tools to engage current volunteers. These tools facilitate communication between the organization and volunteer base. One organization illustrates this:

"We reach out through Facebook ... volunteers are responsive if we're clear about our needs; people really want to help."

Blogs and electronic newsletters are other tools utilized by organizations to engage volunteers. One organization described its blog as both a tool for communicating with volunteers and a means of engaging them, by involving volunteers in the writing of it:

"We have a newsletter team comprised of volunteers to do journalism, editing and graphic design. It helps to keep ourselves and the community knowledgeable about sustainability and social justice."

Supporting Staff to Work With Volunteers

Organizations largely agreed that volunteer engagement is most effective when everyone in the organization views it as a shared responsibility. However, staff voiced a need that, in order to work well with and support volunteers, they too need to feel supported. This includes helping staff feel comfortable training and supervising volunteers, establishing shared expectations for volunteers' work, and providing feedback to volunteers.

Asking for and Responding to Feedback

Most organizations shared that they ask for feedback from volunteers in informal or formal ways. Informally, this occurs through regular or periodic check-ins between organization staff and volunteers to ask what's going well and if anything needs improvement.

"It's a constant open-door policy for feedback, ideas, stuff like that."

Organizations also ask for feedback from volunteers in more formal, structured ways. One organization has suggestion boxes in each location where volunteers serve. Volunteers are encouraged to fill out suggestion forms at any time. Suggestions are reviewed on a quarterly basis, and the results are communicated throughout the organization via an electronic newsletter.

Other organizations hold focus groups with volunteers to explore specific questions or elicit feedback about

program or operational issues. Annual volunteer satisfaction and feedback surveys are utilized by other organizations, where the results are reported back to board members, staff and volunteers as part of a continuous improvement process.

"[Volunteers are] able to see things from a different perspective ... so taking in their feedback and implementing it will help improve your organization and make them feel that they have value in your organization."

Select Resources for Organizations

Nonprofit Membership Organizations

- Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration www.cvacert.org
- Network of Volunteer Administrators Central Oregon www.volunteerconnectnow.org/volunteer-administrators.html
- Mid-Valley Volunteer Managers Association www.mvma.org
- Nonprofit Association of Oregon www.nonprofitoregon.org
- Northwest Oregon Volunteer Administrators Association www.novaa.org

Foundations

- Meyer Memorial Trust www.mmt.org
- Oregon Community Foundation www.oregoncf.org
- Taproot Foundation www.taprootfoundation.org
- The Ford Family Foundation www.tfff.org

National & Community Service Organizations

- Corporation for National & Community Service www.nationalservice.org
- Oregon Volunteers! www.oregonvolunteers.org
- Points of Light www.pointsoflight.org

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