

Advancing Cultural Diversity in Volunteer Management (519 and 905 Areas)



Group Discussion at the Guelph Community Dialogue

April 2009
In this issue...

- *Learning from the Literature (cont'd)*
- *National Volunteer Week*

Learning from the Literature: a continuing series

In this month's issue, we continue to look at the learnings from five specific resources (see January 2009 issue for more information on the five resources).

Volunteer Management Programming

During the Community Dialogues, participants identified several issues that affected more than just one aspect of the volunteer management cycle. Some – but not all – of these were addressed in the literature.

Expenses

Several publications stated that economic barriers to volunteering need to be dealt with in order to make it easier for New Canadians to volunteer; however, most didn't provide any solutions beyond a suggestion for organizations to start covering these expenses. The Pillar study suggests virtual volunteering¹ as a way to reduce some of the economic barriers.

Language

In the *Building Caring Communities* report, the point is made that fluency in English increases with practice so there is a return for the investment when organizations help volunteers with their language skills. One of the ways of doing this, recommends the report, is to pair up volunteers learning the language with a more experienced and fluent volunteer or staff. Assessing the English fluency and skills of a volunteer over time (as well as at intake) is important as language

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Cathy Taylor, E.D. of the Volunteer Centre of Guelph/Wellington presenting demographic information at the Guelph

Learnings from the Literature cont'd

skills improve and the volunteer may be ready to take on a new volunteer role within the organization.

The U.K. study lists the following strategies for involving volunteers with limited English:

- Help people to assess their language skills realistically
- Match language capacity to role
- Provide support with filling in application forms
- Have practical tasks that make use of non-verbal skills
- Use practical demonstrations when appropriate
- Have more fluent volunteers act as interpreters or "buddies"
- Translate basic information
- Train staff in use of plain English
- Develop lists of useful vocabulary
- Provide training in relevant technical or colloquial language
- Provide volunteer English tutors
- Encourage people to ask questions
- Offer patience, attention, energy and inspiration so people feel enthused and able to try new things

Volunteering Australia is very clear that limited English does not have to be a barrier. They provide several additional suggestions; however, they also re-emphasize that success will only happen if there is continuous support and dedication from the entire organization:

- Make good communication everyone's responsibility
- Use symbols
- Involve cultural leaders in the orientation process
- Focus on explaining the essentials and introduce new information as needed so there isn't information overload
- Identify key organizational information and procedures that need to be explained
- Provide take home material so volunteers can review at their own pace
- Use activity-based training or modeling

Negative Process

Community Dialogue participants identified that the process of being a volunteer in this country can be a negative process. This is a primary theme in the *Questioning Volunteer Management* position paper written by Jennifer Woodill. In the process of formalizing and professionalizing volunteer management best practices, are we creating a negative process that *excludes* rather than *includes*? Woodill challenges us to consider the possibility:

While volunteerism has been recognized as a powerful tool for civic engagement and community development

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Learnings from the Literature cont'd

in the big picture theoretical discussions, this discussion has not been translated into how volunteer management is practiced on the ground. There is a serious disconnect. Under the increasing pressure to professionalize volunteer management, there has been very little to no critical reflection on practice, and how the endorsed "best practices" ...play a role in limiting opportunities for citizen engagement and social inclusion. I believe that the main underlying principles behind the endorsed volunteer management 'best practices' are the principles of efficiency, resource development and control. I believe that social exclusion is an inevitable result of doing volunteer management from these principles. (p 2)

In Appendix A of Woodill's document she compares traditional volunteer management against volunteer management from a social inclusion perspective to provide specific examples of how the volunteer management process can be approached differently and, therefore, remove the negativity. For instance, traditional volunteer recruitment is based on the agency's need for volunteers. In contrast, a social inclusion approach would mean meeting with community members, finding out their strengths and creating space for them to volunteer within the agency. According to the traditional model, volunteers need to fit the needed qualifications in order to be accepted as a volunteer. That can mean that a New Canadian with poor English skills would not be appropriate as a children's tutor. However, a social inclusion approach encourages exploring options like "three-way volunteering" that partners a New Canadian with another volunteer to be the children's tutor. (Watch the May issue for the final instalment in the "Learnings from the Literature" series).

Happy Volunteer Week!

National Volunteer Week (NVW) was first proclaimed in 1943 as an initiative to draw the public's attention to the vital contribution of women to the war effort on the home front. In the late 1960s, the focus was revived and broadened to include all community volunteers. The NVW website (nvw-sab.ca) features hundreds of photos and videos submitted by individuals and organizations. Users can browse through them by typing in keywords on what volunteerism means to them.

Advancing Cultural Diversity in Volunteer Management is an Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (MCI) funded project. The Social Planning Council of Peel is coordinating this project in selected communities in the 519 and 905 areas.

Advancing Cultural Diversity in Volunteer Management is a three-year initiative developing the organizational and community capacity of local partners in the 519 and 905 areas to engage and support a more culturally diverse volunteer base.