

Harnessing Community Compassion – Volunteers

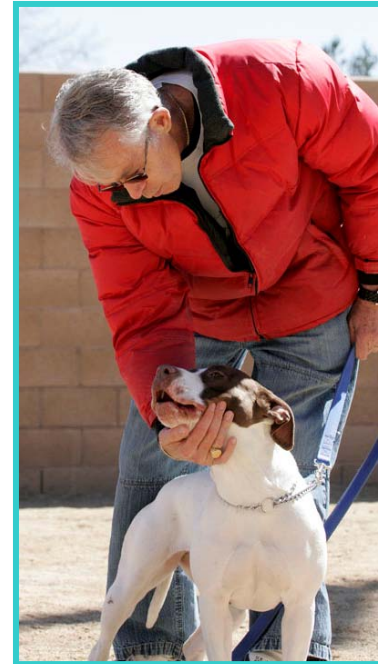
No-Kill Conference May 2009

Our Results at Nevada Humane Society

- Increased the volunteer ranks in the first year (2007) from 30 to over 1,300. In the second year (2008), the numbers doubled to 2,740.
- Expanded foster care program from a hand full of individuals at the beginning of 2007 to 757 foster families at the end of 2008.

Why is a volunteer program so important?

Volunteers can quadruple your work force, expand your presence in the community, and help you achieve your mission. You can get more done for the animals with many hands, hearts, and minds. The loyalty engendered in volunteers comes back to the organization in many ways: donations, powerful first hand testimonials to friends, family members and co-workers, and the sheer numbers that lend credibility to your efforts. Volunteers can also create some challenges, and we'll address those, too.



A special and vital kind of volunteering for animal shelters is providing temporary foster care to litters of puppies or kittens who are too young to be put up for adoption, animals who are shy, those that need a little extra TLC, or those that need special medical care. A well-developed foster program can dramatically increase your shelter's lifesaving capacity and costs very little to run.

As you develop your program, keep in mind that it can and should evolve as your organization grows and changes. Volunteers can accomplish amazing things, you just need to ask them.

Getting Ready for Volunteers

In preparation for volunteers, you will need to develop:

- Written materials about your organization – specifically they need to convey the mission, the scope of the organization's work, and the role of volunteers.
- A plan for training and ongoing management of volunteers.

We'll cover both of these in greater depth below.

Written Materials

You probably already have written information about your organization available to the general public. You also need written materials specific to volunteer recruitment and training. Make sure that these materials are clear and easy to understand. The best way to ensure that they will communicate what you wish is to have a friend who is not already involved in the program read them over for you and provide feedback.

The documents for volunteers should include:

Volunteer recruitment materials. You'll want to have this information formatted in an appealing way to help you attract new volunteers. Images of animals and people having a good

time interacting with them will really help catch the eye of your target audience. Be sure the recruitment literature includes:

- The organization's mission and goals.
- A brief outline of the organization's programs and services.
- A listing and description of the organization's volunteer opportunities.
- An application/questionnaire for potential volunteers to complete that will help you get a feel for their interests and capabilities.

Volunteer training packet or manual. This should include:



- The organization's mission and goals. (Yes, you need this information included here as well as in the recruitment information.)
 - An outline of the organization's programs and services.
 - Clearly defined organizational policies and standards as they relate to volunteers.
 - A volunteer agreement. This agreement indicates that volunteer has read and will abide by the organization's policies and provide their services on a volunteer basis (without compensation). This document is very helpful in resolving any misunderstandings or problems with volunteers later on in the relationship.
 - A liability waiver. This waiver, along with the agreement, can help to protect your organization from being held liable not only for injuries sustained by volunteers, but also for the actions of the volunteers.
- Job descriptions. While some volunteers have limited time, all of them want to make a real contribution. Volunteers need real jobs that make a real difference. Just as job descriptions help define expectations for staff, they can do the same for volunteers. The job descriptions should clearly define tasks, expectations, and timelines for completion.

Specific information and/or training materials for specialized jobs. Some jobs, such as providing foster care for animals in the volunteer's home or trapping feral cats, may require specific, detailed information and additional training for volunteers. Additionally, you might need them to agree to clearly defined guidelines in writing. For example, a foster care agreement might include the following information:

- That the organization is the legal owner of the foster animal.
- What care the volunteer is responsible for providing to the animal.
- Where the animal is to be kept. For example, will the animal be kept confined, allowed outdoors, or allowed to mix with other animals in the household?
- What to do in an emergency.
- Who covers expenses for food, vet care, and supplies.
- Who is responsible for arranging the adoption of the pets (the organization or the foster home).

Training and Scheduling

Training. Group training sessions followed by additional hands-on or on-the-job training with a staff member or experienced volunteer will help to ensure that volunteers know what to do and how to do it. Be sure you provide training specific to each volunteer's job, be it animal care, use of equipment, or office skills. Here are some tips:

- Be sure that the desired result is clear to the volunteer.
- Explain and demonstrate a task, then watch while the volunteers do it to be sure that they have it down.
- Take the time to observe even those volunteers who have had prior experience; you may learn something new or head off a potential problem.
- Allow plenty of time for the volunteer to ask questions.
- Pair up a new volunteer with a veteran for an initial period.
- If the task is complex or has many variables, it will be helpful to provide written instructions and background information on the task or skill.
- Remind volunteers that you are always willing to answer questions.
- Remember, training is an ongoing process and should include two-way communication. You'll want to keep in touch and ask them how things are going.

Scheduling. If you can be flexible with volunteers, it is optimal to offer both structured/scheduled activities while still allowing spontaneous interaction with the animals. This will involve the largest number of people. Many people do best with a regular schedule and assigned tasks. But some will be self-starters who will come in and walk a few dogs when they have some spare time. You will need to decide what will work best for your organization. Sometimes the program will need to evolve over time. Our volunteer program started out less structured. Now two years into the program we are making it more structured, recommending that volunteers make a minimum time commitment and sign up for scheduled tasks.



Managing Volunteers

To manage volunteers successfully, you'll want to appoint a volunteer coordinator (staff or volunteer) with good communication skills, a positive attitude, appropriate expertise, and adequate supplies/equipment to do the job. The right individual will be able to genuinely delegate responsibility, while providing safeguards to ensure that critical jobs are completed correctly in a timely manner. ("Trust but verify...")

If your organization is young or small, it may not be possible to hire staff, but you can still recruit a volunteer coordinator who may themselves be a volunteer.

Find the right fit. Part of the volunteer coordinator's job is to assess people and match them with appropriate jobs. Some people are seeking a challenge and opportunity to take on a major project. Others are looking for an easy, stress-free volunteer experience.

The volunteer coordinator will need to find out what the volunteer is looking for and what skills they possess to find the right job for that individual.

Get the staff bought in. It's important that staff members understand the importance of volunteers to the organization. They not only provide needed services, but also become ambassadors for the organization, helping beyond their actual volunteer tasks in the shelter. Staff members need to be familiar with the volunteers' roles and guidelines they have been given. Additionally, it helps to train staff in how to best communicate with volunteers. Ideally, the animals and staff receive needed support from the volunteers, and the volunteers receive gratitude from the staff. A simple thank you goes a long way. Of course, staff members also need to know what to do if there is a problem with a volunteer.

Address problems. It's beneficial to be tolerant of individual differences whenever possible without sacrificing the quality of care provided to the animals and the service provided to the public. That said, if a volunteer is creating problems they need to be addressed promptly. The job description, volunteer agreement and policies that you review with people when they start can provide the framework for follow-up discussions to address any problems that arise.

When addressing a problem with a volunteer, it's helpful to give a specific examples of the problem. Ask them about the incident and take time to listen to their side of the story. If you are only hearing one side of the story you may be missing part of the picture. It could be as simple as the volunteer not fully understanding the procedure. Then you can review the situation again, in light of their comments and explain specifically how and why the behavior was a problem. While the solution may seem obvious to you, it's best to clearly state the desired behavior and to give the person the opportunity to fix the problem.

If a volunteer continues to create conflict and problems after you have spoken with them a couple of times about changing the problem behaviors, it may be appropriate to let the volunteer go, as you would an unsatisfactory employee. You are under no obligation to accept volunteer help from an individual who is pulling in a different direction, and it's not fair to other volunteers and staff to keep a problem person around.

"Responsibility and trust are high motivators."

— Jonathan T. Scott

Finding Volunteers

Recruiting volunteers is not as difficult as you might expect. In fact, it's fundamentally simple. Let people know what needs to be accomplished and ask them to help. Of course, there are a few things you can do and specific strategies you can employ that will assist you.

Recruitment Tips

Be specific. Be sure to specify what the volunteer opportunities are in your recruitment literature. This is important because when most people see a notice from a humane group that says "volunteers needed," they make an assumption that hands-on help with animals is what is needed. Some people are not able to do physical work, others worry about getting too attached to animals they cannot adopt.

While you no doubt need people who want to work directly with animals, it is almost certainly not the only help you need. Could you use the services of a writer? Or someone with website design or desktop publishing experience? Maybe you could use help writing thank-you notes or

returning phone calls? Perhaps a photographer could help by taking photos of animals for adoption or a PR person could promote your work to the local media? Wouldn't it be nice if someone would organize a fundraising event? Could you benefit from free legal advice or accounting expertise?

When you write an ad, flyer, or poster seeking volunteers, if you include some of the specific skills or tasks for which you need help, you will get a much stronger response than a generic appeal for volunteers.

Make it easy and inviting. When we have committed much of our time to helping animals, it can be hard to remember that some people are in different places in their lives.

One woman who was volunteering 30 hours a week writing, editing, and distributing a daily e-mail newsletter to a community mailing list of 850 people told me how she got involved. The founder of the humane group told people that if they could dedicate "just one hour a week" that they could make a difference for the animals. She figured she could do that and started off by going to the shelter one hour a week to walk dogs. Before long, she was hooked and asked what else she could do to help. She was a professional writer and it did not take long for the savvy founder to recruit her to take over his e-mail newsletter. She explained that if she had initially been told that such a large commitment was needed she would never have become involved.

Allow people to get involved at their own pace.



Focus on fun. No one wants to do something just because they should or because someone needs them to do it. People do things because they want to feel good, to help others, and to have a good time with like-minded people. So, in ads and other volunteer recruitment literature, focus on the animals and on the fun and rewarding aspects of volunteering.

Share your successes. There's an old adage that "nothing succeeds like success," and it's true. No one wants to join up with a lost cause, but most people are happy to cheer on a winning team. Keep your messages up-beat and positive. When you present a problem, present a solution along with it.

"... Worth a thousand words." Most people who will volunteer to help animals will be attracted to a pleasing image or photo of an animal. Keep text to the minimum necessary to convey the information and allow plenty of room for a good photo of an animal or better yet, a person interacting in a fun or heartwarming way with an animal.

"There is a great untapped resource of additional potential volunteers.... Our research shows that the best way to get people involved is simply to ask them. Nearly 90 percent of people volunteer when they are asked."

— Sara E. Meléndez, President and CEO of Independent Sector

How to Get the Word Out

To find new volunteers, you need to really get the word out there to reach as many people as possible. This will require employing multiple recruitment strategies, but it does not have to be expensive or overly time-consuming.

There are several highly effective, inexpensive ways to reach people.

Grassroots Promotion

- Invite current volunteers to bring a friend (or two or three) to a special get-together.
- E-mail a list of volunteer opportunities to members and current volunteers and ask them to pass it on to friends.
- Ask board members to provide a list of potential volunteers and then ask them to e-mail or call each of them.
- Let your members know that you need volunteers through your newsletter. Include a listing of your specific volunteer needs and provide a checkbox on the donation-response form for donors to request more information on volunteering.
- Create very basic 8 ½" x 11" posters with an eye-catching image of an animal can work wonders. Be sure to include your website address, phone number, and a few of the specific volunteer opportunities.
- Create a flyer listing attractive, well-defined volunteer opportunities. Be sure to offer a variety of types of opportunities involving different skills and levels of commitment.
- Broad distribution of your flyers and posters is critical; you can have the world's most wonderful materials, but if lots of people don't see them, they won't help a bit. The distribution plan should include area vet clinics, pet supply stores, markets, health food stores, health clubs, places of worship, libraries, etc. Ask members and current volunteers to post them where they work.

News Media

- Many newspapers regularly feature a listing of volunteer opportunities from local non-profits for free.
- Place classified ads. Many papers offer a non-profit discount or multiple insertion discounts.
- Seek out online volunteer postings where you can reach out to people who may be interested in helping.
- Ask the editor or reporter of the local paper(s) if they would consider writing an article that profiles a current volunteer or one of your volunteer-run programs. Also, provide your volunteer recruitment information and list of other opportunities to the writer so they know that you are seeking additional volunteers.
- Ask local TV and radio stations to do public service announcements (PSAs) to help you find volunteers. There's no charge and all you usually need to do is supply the text for the talk show host or DJ to read. Be sure the PSA is written as you would speak, in simple



clear language. If it's fun and engaging it will be more effective. Keep in mind that it needs to be very brief – 30 seconds or less. To be sure it's short enough, time it while you read it aloud.

Other ideas for volunteer recruitment:

- **Radio talk shows.** You may be able to get on a local talk show as a guest.
- **Company newsletters.** Many companies have newsletters (electronic or printed) for employees. Request that local companies share information with their employees about volunteer opportunities with your organization. Some companies also have volunteer programs that take on specific projects.
- **Local cable access TV.** Most stations have community bulletin boards and community-oriented shows.
- **Community service organizations and civic clubs.** Offer to speak to their group or ask to distribute literature to their members.
- **Recruitment days.** Set up an information table at local pet supply stores or community events.
- **The Best Friends Network.** Visit Best Friends Animal Society Network online and reach out to members in your area to ensure they know about your group's volunteer needs.
- **Local Volunteer Center.** List your organization with the United Way and other local volunteer matching services. (Search online and in the local yellow pages.)
- **The Internet.** Post your volunteer opportunities on your organization's website and on other online volunteer sites. Some of the larger national websites include: <http://www.volunteermatch.org/>, <http://www.idealists.org/>, <http://www.servenet.org/>, and <http://www.networkforgood.org/>.
- **Professional Associations.** Seek specialized volunteers through professional associations. Search online and in the Yellow Pages for the local bar association, Accountants for Public Interest, and Chamber of Commerce to reach out to their members.
- **Public Meetings.** Host open public meetings in each of the local communities you serve. Of course, you need to promote the meeting to make it a success – list it in the local paper, online community calendars, and cable access TV, create posters, and send a post card invitation to all the people on your mailing list in the community. Plan an interesting, informative agenda and keep the meeting on time and on track. A PowerPoint presentation with photos of your organization's work is an ideal way to engage people. Refreshments don't hurt either.

Volunteer Placement

Once an individual expresses interest, you'll need to learn more about him or her to find the right job. A good way to do this is through a questionnaire which can be incorporated into your volunteer application. In addition to basic contact information and availability, you'll want to find out about the prospective volunteer's past work and volunteer experiences, any special interest or skills, and what they see themselves doing within your organization. It can also be helpful to ask why they are volunteering. In your first meeting with the volunteer be it part of a large public orientation or one-on-one, be sure to allow time to answer their questions.

Seek Out Qualified Help

For important jobs, like team leaders or an event coordinator, you'll want to exercise some care in selecting the right person. The first person to raise his or her hand in a meeting may not be the best person for the job. You can interview a prospective volunteer much as you would a job applicant. When you think you have found a qualified person with the right personality for the job, ask them to take on the responsibility. Most people will be pleased and flattered that you have selected them for an important role. And they are more likely to make time in their schedule, even if they are already very busy, because you have taken the care to select them.

"Put yourself in the shoes of a member who wants to get involved. How easy is it? Are such efforts rejected or encouraged? When a member offers to help and receives no response, the disillusion that sets in can be destructive to the relationship."

— Annette E. Petrick

Keeping Volunteers

Provide a good volunteer experience.

How can you keep volunteers motivated and involved? You'll need to invest time and resources into managing volunteers to ensure that you are fulfilling their needs. But don't worry, this will be returned to the organization many times over.

Here are some suggestions that may help:

- Place volunteers in a job that interests them and touch base with them to see how it's going. Don't assume that volunteers will be happy, talk with them periodically and make adjustments as needed. Volunteers' needs, interests, and commitment level may change over time. A volunteer may be ready to become more involved, to take on a new challenge, or she may want less responsibility as time goes on. By keeping in touch with volunteers about other opportunities and talking with them regularly, you'll be able to make the most of each volunteer for the organization.
- Provide a place the volunteers can call their own. Even if it is modest in size, it demonstrates that volunteers are a valued part of the organization.
- Share information. Keep volunteers abreast of developments within your organization. An e-mail newsletter is an easy way to keep in touch.



- Offer training opportunities. Training should be an ongoing activity. Bring in a dog trainer or show a video about cat handling that will inspire and educate volunteers.
- Provide encouragement and feedback on their performance. Always treat volunteers with respect and courtesy. Make time to listen. Since you cannot be everywhere, encourage staff to understand the importance of good relations and showing gratitude to volunteers.
- Provide needed supplies and equipment.
- Ask for feedback and recommendations. Address concerns and implement the good ideas.
- Do not waste volunteers' time. Any meeting or task should be productive and necessary.
- Show appreciation and recognition. Here are some ways to do this:
 - Thank-you notes (can be personal and handwritten or more official, e.g., on letterhead stationery and signed by the staff and/or executive director)
 - Certificates or awards
 - Parties and get-togethers
 - Sincere in-person thank-you (This can be the very best of all!)
 - Small thoughtful gifts
 - Article in the local paper
 - Mention on the website or newsletter
 - Chance to participate in educational opportunities

It's helpful to keep in mind that part of our larger mission is to encourage compassionate feelings and actions and for this reason alone, investing time in creating positive volunteer experiences is worthwhile.

"Enthusiasm is contagious. Start an epidemic."

— Don Ward

"The influence of a beautiful, helpful, hopeful character is contagious, and may revolutionize a whole town."

— Eleanor H. Porter

Resources

Points of Light Foundation

A national nonprofit organization that promotes volunteerism and provides information on training and managing volunteers.

1400 I Street NW, Suite 800

Washington, DC 20005

Phone: 202-729-8000

Fax: 202-729-8100

Website: www.pointsoflight.org

Action Without Borders

Lists local volunteer opportunities by subject, such as Wildlife and Animal Welfare.

Organizations can post volunteer opportunities and find volunteers by looking through volunteer profiles.

Website: www.idealists.org

VolunteerMatch

A nonprofit online service that helps interested volunteers get involved with community service organizations throughout the U.S. You can either find or post volunteer opportunities.

Website: www.volunteermatch.org

SERVEnet

A program of Youth Service America that provides local volunteer matching and best practices information.

Website: www.servenet.org

Network for Good

A nonprofit organization that connects volunteers and donors with charities.

Website: www.networkforgood.org