



Toronto Neighbourhood Centres
Community Development Renewal Initiative

Transferable Strategies & Case Studies
December 2008

Reframing Volunteer Coordination as CD process

Issue:

What would happen if an organization approached volunteer mobilization as a community development process?

Background:

As part of an attempt to integrate community development more deeply into existing programs of their agency, St Christopher House has been exploring ways they can redefine volunteerism as a community development process. A primary goal of this shift is to transform how agencies relate to residents.

This process, led by the volunteer coordinator, requires staff and volunteers to shift how they view volunteers and their expectations of how they contribute. From this new perspective volunteers are not just recruited to fill a role but to make a valuable and unique contribution to the organization at many different levels.

Solution:

The volunteer coordinator at SCH made small changes to agency practice that helps redefine volunteer recruitment and coordination as an integral part of the community engagement and development process. Staff and volunteers are encouraged to think more creatively about volunteer involvement, to understand this relationship more broadly, and to consider a participant-driven volunteer model.

Staff members involved in community engagement, mobilization and leadership development programs are encouraged to see these as volunteer activities. As well, staff are encouraged to explore the strengths of residents interested in volunteering and create spaces for volunteers to be involved.

The volunteer coordinator seeks to understand and balance agency needs and volunteer talents and expectations for involvement. This is in contrast with the standard “volunteer management” models that seek primarily to fit appropriate volunteers with agency-determined opportunities.

Through these shifts in perspective staff are encouraged to understand volunteerism as a way of identifying residents' assets and determining the best way to use them to benefit the wider community.

Results:

- Formerly marginalized residents experience increased self-esteem, reduced social isolation and have an opportunity build new relationships.
- Residents feel empowered through having the opportunity to exercise and enhance their skills and gain experience in areas that interest them.
- Agency plays a facilitative role in building community and social capital.
- Newcomer residents have a space to share their skills and expertise and become involved in their community while developing Canadian work experience.

Analysis:

Engaging volunteer recruitment and coordination from a community development perspective will help to foster citizen engagement and build relationships with volunteers. Through continuously creating spaces for involvement that meet the needs of both programs and volunteers, agencies can involve residents in ways that empower them.

Reflections/Conclusions:

In identifying roles for volunteers it is important to also consider higher-level responsibilities beyond administrative or frontline staff roles. This can be achieved naturally by reflecting on the skills, experience and expertise that volunteers have which can positively shape an agency's work.

Key indicators of successfully engaging in participant-driven volunteer coordination are: the majority of volunteers live in the catchment area, many volunteers are participants in programs, and volunteers feel they are connected and contributing to others in their community.

Resources:

- Volunteerism and Community Development Workshop notes. CD-R workshop delivered on July 19, 2007.
- Questioning Volunteer Management. Jennifer Woodhill, past Coordinator of Volunteer and Community Relations, St. Christopher House.

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