

# *Volunteers in Libraries: Friends or Foes?*

KELLY CAMPBELL

**V**OLUNTEERS CAN BE A VALUABLE RESOURCE FOR LIBRARIES. THEY CAN HELP in various areas, including serving on a governing board, providing programming, working at the circulation desk, shelving materials, and even fundraising. In seminary and religious libraries, money and staff are stretched thin. The temptation to start utilizing volunteers without thoughtfully thinking through the benefits and challenges of volunteers can result in library staff and volunteers' needs and expectations being unfulfilled. Therefore, this chapter will explore issues to be thoughtfully considered before starting a volunteer program. A successful volunteer program is beneficial to the library and rewarding for the volunteer, but it takes knowledge and planning.

## *Definition of a Volunteer*

In the past, the definition of a volunteer was quite simple. He or she was identified as an individual who helped or volunteered with an organization like a library without any expectation of payment for his or her services. The volunteer was expected to do whatever was needed whenever it was needed. Today, however, the definition is changing as people are becoming busier and living more demanding lives. The new breed of volunteers has many obligations and are often involved with multiple organizations. Current volunteers approach volunteerism with a different mindset and possess a specific set of expectations for their volunteer experience. Successful volunteer programs need to adapt to the changes and recognize the seismic shift in volunteerism and the call for an expanded definition of a volunteer.

A characteristic of the new breed of volunteers is that they demand flexibility in tasks and schedules. Rather than being recruited to “volunteer” as a need arises, libraries now ask volunteers how they want to be involved in helping the library. Volunteers are empowered to work in their own way and according to their own schedules. In the past, volunteers were recruited for the long term and expected to fit within the library’s stated needs. This practice is being replaced as volunteers are no longer recruited for a preset slot or function. The mindset that a volunteer has to fit within the library program or structure is gone. This new breed of volunteers expects the library to mold the program or structure to the volunteer’s strengths and time commitment as he or she helps the library fulfill its mission.

In addition to the characteristic of flexibility, this new breed of volunteer is interested in episodic volunteering, a trend that has increased since 1989. Episodic volunteers prefer short-term volunteer projects rather than long-term commitments. Long-term commitment volunteers are from a different generation than the present one. A study titled *Volunteer Growth in America: A Review of Trends in Volunteering Since 1974*, conducted by the Corporation for Community and National Service (2006), confirms this volunteering trend. Despite the changes expected by this new breed of volunteers, this study found that volunteering rates appear to be at a thirty-year high. The last fifteen years reflect the changes in how people are donating time and energy to libraries.

Seventy-nine percent of non-volunteers said they would volunteer if given a short-duration task (8). While this study focused on volunteer growth in America, all librarians hoping to start a successful volunteer program need to consider these growing trends and contextualize their volunteer experiences.

Many of this new breed of volunteers are successful professionals with a variety of skills. These professionals serving as volunteers want the respect afforded to professionals. They want their skills to be acknowledged—they do not want to be micromanaged. These types of volunteers are called knowledge workers. Knowledge workers want to make decisions, to be empowered, and to influence how the project assigned to them is accomplished. These professionals want to give back by volunteering; however, since they are successful in their respective fields, they are intolerant of paid staff who are disorganized, who assign them demeaning tasks, and who fail to follow through with the library's promises. Additionally, they do not tolerate unprofessionalism and working alongside incompetent volunteers. They can always find another library or organization where their skills and talents will be valued.

Many of these young professionals tend to be tech-savvy. Their skills can be applied to help a library in unique ways. This new breed of volunteers does not want just to contribute. They want to apply their skills in ways that make them feel they are making a difference, especially since they give both their time and expertise.

As the definition of volunteers has evolved, so have the principles of volunteer management. Volunteer management can take time and effort, but the hard work and time are worth the results derived from this new breed of volunteers when the volunteer program becomes a success.

## *Principles of Volunteer Management*

While it is easy to see volunteer management as getting a list of projects together and telling a volunteer “go and do this,” it is often not that simple. Volunteer management is similar to managing a business or leading a group of people. People require guidance and leadership, and so do volunteers. The knowledge

workers of today want to be led, motivated, and empowered. Influential leaders nurture and guide because they know how to empower people to use their gifts, talents, passion, and ideas to accomplish the mission. Effectively managing volunteers is the key to harnessing their enthusiasm for the benefit of the library. Presented below are some principles of volunteer management.

1. First, tap into the volunteer's motivational drives. When recruiting, interviewing, and training a new volunteer, take a moment to discover the person's motivation for volunteering in the library. Once a volunteer's motivation is clear, a volunteer manager or leader can build upon that motivation by providing the best type of reinforcement, encouragement, and recognition.
2. Second, be available. No one wants to work or volunteer without any communication or feedback. An influential leader is available to the persons they supervise. Being available is as simple as being in the library when the volunteer is there or responding to emails or texts from a virtual volunteer promptly. By being available, a volunteer manager can provide feedback, build rapport, encourage volunteers, and get projects organized, so the directions are clear or prepared to accommodate a volunteer.
3. Finally, never underestimate the power of food, fun, and laughter. Like paid staff, volunteers want to enjoy their work and have fun while accomplishing their tasks and duties. Hosting a short gathering of the volunteers and library staff to recognize a volunteer's contribution provides an opportunity to give public affirmation. Knowing the volunteers, their motivation for volunteering, and being available will allow each library to customize their volunteer management.

## *Rights and Duties of Volunteers*

Understanding the rights, responsibilities, and duties of a volunteer is critical for a successful volunteer program. Planning while being aware of a volunteer's rights, responsibilities, and

duties prepares the library as an institution to receive volunteers. This planning aligns the volunteer activities (work) into the overall library plans and organizational structure.

A library volunteer has the right to expect that his or her library duties represent meaningful work (not “make-do work”) to the library’s function. They need to know that their work contributes to the library’s mission and strategic plan, that it can be completed in a reasonable time, and that it is ongoing, with tasks and duties defined by job descriptions and supported by staff expectations. These expectations are easy to achieve, provide a foundation for the volunteer to succeed, and allow the library to benefit from his or her work.

In addition to the fundamental rights listed above, a volunteer has the right to a designated workspace, input and some control about their assigned tasks, personal respect, orientation to the library, training, access to grievance procedures and conflict resolution, and recognition. If the volunteer is physically working in the library, he or she needs a designated workspace. The workspace can be small; however, consistency and accessibility to a designated workspace are vital. Nothing is more uncomfortable than starting a job and not having a designated workspace. Having to scramble and find a workspace is uncomfortable for the volunteer, and it communicates that the library did not plan ahead of time. A volunteer has the right to some control and input over the tasks assigned to him or her. When the volunteer participates cooperatively in determining his or her tasks, the volunteer can take ownership and be more committed to the library and its mission. Identifying the unique skills and gifts of volunteers can benefit the library and the volunteers. Any human being has the right to be respected as a unique individual; this holds true for an individual who has decided to volunteer and support the library.

As with new library staff members, a volunteer has the right to a minimum library orientation and training, including safety procedures. While the volunteer orientation and training scale may not be at the same level of detail and length as a library employee, these steps are essential for laying a strong foundation for the volunteer. By being in the physical space, the volunteer has the responsibility to follow established rules and policies. Lack of proper orientation and training leaves a volunteer figuring out the rules and policies independently, leading to the next right—access to grievance procedures and conflict resolution. When

people work together, miscommunication and conflict occur. Volunteers have the right to access the library's established grievance procedures and conflict resolution processes.

Finally, a volunteer has the right to expect some recognition for his or her contribution. Recognition can be a simple spoken thank you, a handwritten note, an email, a text to the families of volunteers, or a formal luncheon or reception. The volunteer manager is responsible for knowing his or her volunteers and recognizing the best way to provide recognition.

A volunteer has responsibilities or duties to the library as well. Typically, a volunteer's responsibilities or duties are outlined in the position description, explained during the interview process, and listed on a volunteer agreement filed with a volunteer application. Examples of a volunteer's duties include:

- Performing duties as assigned to the best of one's abilities.
- Accepting guidance by the assigned staff member.
- Adhering to the appropriate library rules, policies, and procedures by wearing a name tag, dressing appropriately, maintaining customer confidentiality, and acting courteously to customers and staff.
- Reporting at the scheduled time.
- Giving prior notice to the volunteer manager if expecting to be absent or on extended leave.
- Giving notice upon terminating.
- Identifying any medical, health, or physical limitation related to the volunteer job.

Being familiar with the rights and duties helps prepare the library staff and volunteers for a meaningful experience.

## *Legal and Risk Management Issues*

The legal and risk management concerns for library volunteers parallel similar concerns for paid library staff. At first, the legal

and risk concerns can seem overwhelming, but breaking them down into specific areas of concern makes them achievable. The library's definition of volunteers will determine the areas of concern. For example, if the library decides that youth cannot be volunteers, youth volunteers' legal and risk management concerns will not apply.

For all types of volunteers, the volunteer recruiting process needs to be reviewed for any discrimination issues. Some libraries must follow the strict guidelines required for posting a paid library position, while other libraries can recruit more informally. All recruiting materials need to be professional and represent the library well. Libraries want to make sure that their volunteer recruiting process does not result in discrimination against certain types of volunteers (e.g., the disabled, specific racial minorities) that could result in a sensitive public relations problem. Each library must be aware and sensitive to local customs, laws, and cultural expectations.

If the library is willing to recruit volunteers with disabilities, library staff will need to be prepared to adapt tasks for a disabled volunteer. The umbrella of volunteers with disabilities may include adolescents and young adults who are developmentally disabled or brain-injured. In these cases, the library staff needs to have clear expectations and guidelines about the disabled volunteer's goal of volunteering. The goals of services or agencies representing disabled individuals might be quite different from the library's expectations. Planning is key in determining the library's definition of volunteers and having answers to various questions before disabled potential volunteers start showing interest.

A successful volunteer program can include recruitment of youth; however, the library staff will want to be familiar with all local employment regulations governing youth employment and the hours they may work. Many times, youth are interested in volunteering to complete their education and graduation requirements or meet a service group requirement. Another group of youth volunteers might be "youth at risk," which encompasses youth in trouble with law enforcement, youth with severe school problems, or both. These youth-at-risk volunteers will require more direct supervision, so the library staff must think through utilizing these volunteers and plan accordingly.

A final group of volunteers requiring additional planning is court-ordered workers. A local court system can use community service as part of the restitution process for individuals convicted of relatively minor offenses. This group of volunteers can be adult or youth. The formal paperwork and supervision for these volunteers will be more time-intensive.

Certain volunteer tasks determine specific types of legal and risk management issues a volunteer will need. These specific tasks include police reports, background and reference checks, driving records, and proof of insurance. If the volunteer represents the library off the premises (such as delivering books to individuals in their home), it is prudent to require a police report or background check. The library should require reference checks for volunteers, and this requirement needs to be in place for all types of volunteers. If a volunteer will be driving a library vehicle, the library needs to require a volunteer's driving record and proof of insurance.

Some final legal and risk management issues to consider before starting a volunteer program include hiring, health and safety regulations, general safety training, workers' compensation, customer confidentiality, termination interviews, de-volunteering, and a good Samaritan act. If volunteers work in the library space, the library staff must consider legal and risk management issues related to health, safety, and worker's compensation. For example, if a volunteer is watering a plant and spills water on the floor, the library is left open to a safety incident. Alternatively, if the volunteer slips and falls on the water and is injured, questions will arise. Does the volunteer provide his or her insurance, or does the library cover the medical expenses? Some countries have a good Samaritan act granting immunity from personal liability to volunteers in nonprofit and government organizations acting within the scope of their duties. Checking local laws and acts is advised. Termination interviews and de-volunteering questions are necessary as people can change their minds about volunteering. When a volunteer leaves, conducting a termination interview can provide helpful information to the library about improving the volunteer program. If the library needs to dismiss a volunteer, having de-volunteering processes and policies in place ahead of time will help in a sensitive situation.

While the legal and risk management issues can appear overwhelming, most libraries have similar policies and processes for



their paid employees. Adapting existing policies and defining what type of volunteers the library seeks makes tackling the legal and risk management issues achievable.

### *Tips for Recruiting Volunteers*

- Ask volunteers personally rather than relying on announcements. Recruiting volunteers is similar to asking someone to go on a first date. Remember that the library is not just looking for someone “to volunteer.” Instead, the library is looking for someone to commit as a volunteer for the library.
- Similar to a first date, recruiting volunteers is a series of small steps leading to a commitment. Talk with the potential volunteers. Notice how they work, observe them, gather information, ask questions, and study their strengths and weaknesses. Be prepared before asking them to become a volunteer. On the first date, provide the volunteer with a taste of what committing to the library will be like and gather information about how they work. If the volunteer coordinator likes their help, he or she can ask them on a second date—people like being asked for their help.
- Develop strategic recruiting partnerships—build a network of a recruiting team. Do not go it alone.
- Recruit short-term project teams. The more specific the time limit, the more people are likely to help with a project. Moreover, short-term commitments might open the door to longer commitments.
- Assume that a “no” means “not now” or “not this position.” Think of “no” as an opportunity to listen carefully to the reasons behind the “no.”
- Develop roles and responsibilities or a position description for each position. Do not fill any position without finding the person who matches what the library needs.

- Recruit specific people for specific roles. Ask professionals to be in charge of significant areas of the library that represent what they love doing.
- If necessary and possible, hire dedicated volunteer managers – people who know and love volunteers and are ready to devote a good portion of their time to managing volunteers. Make sure they have a “positive volunteer attitude” (McKee 2012, 61).

## *Works Cited*

- Corporation for Community and National Service. 2006. *Volunteer Growth in America: A Review of Trends Since 1974*. Washington, DC. [https://generosityresearch.nd.edu/assets/13044/volunteer\\_growth.pdf](https://generosityresearch.nd.edu/assets/13044/volunteer_growth.pdf).
- Driggers, P., and E. Dumas. 2002. *Managing Library Volunteers: A Practical Toolkit*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Lyttle, M., and S. Walsh. 2016. “The Challenge of Using Volunteers in the Library.” In *Public Libraries Online*. <https://publiclibrariesonline.org/2016/11/the-challenges-of-using-volunteers-in-the-library>.
- McKee, J., and T. McKee. 2012. *The New Breed: Understanding and Equipping the 21st Century Volunteer*, 2nd Edition. Group.
- Nicol, E., and C. Johnson. 2008. “Volunteers in Libraries: Program Structure, Evaluation, and Theoretical Analysis.” *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 2: 154–63.