



16 tips in recruiting adult volunteers

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Recruiting the right people for the right program requires a commitment of time, energy, creativity and persistence, as well as a well-considered plan.

According to the Center for Intergenerational Learning at Temple University, effective practices include:

1. Decide on the characteristics you want your volunteers to have

Think about the goals of your project, the strengths and needs of the population it will be serving, and the activities the volunteers will be engaged in with families and youth.

Consider the physical and time demands of your program. Factor in the requirements of grants that may be funding your program, including possible time limits on age, gender or place of residence.

2. Develop a checklist of the most important requirements

The checklist you develop for your volunteer requirements will probably contain similar categories. When writing the volunteer job description, you might not choose to include all of the items you have checked off on your list. However, you should develop an application and interview process that helps you assess whether potential volunteers meet all the requirements.

3. Identify the barriers that may deter people from volunteering, which may include:

- Cultural myths and perceptions that old age is a time for relaxation, not learning or contribution.
- Lack of confidence in their ability to contribute -- inability to translate their life experiences and skills to a particular program's needs.
- Fear about safety, such as having to use public transportation, go into a stranger's home, and concerns about drugs and crime associated with teens or low-income populations.
- Physical limitations, such as illnesses or lack of energy.
- Financial issues, including concerns that expenses associated with volunteering may strain their already limited financial resources.
- Difficulties with transportation.
- Competition for volunteers is yet another obstacle; it is likely that many other organizations are trying to recruit the same "volunteer-minded" older adults that you are targeting. In addition, baby boomers are staying in the workforce longer, or returning to it after retirement, thus limiting the time they have available to volunteer.

4. Think about what could motivate elderly people to volunteer for your programme.

Identify ways to address some of the barriers and encourage older adults to volunteer. For example, they might be interested in volunteering because it will give them the opportunity to:

- Increase their satisfaction with life by participating in an enjoyable and rewarding experience.
- Increase their sense of connection to the community.
- Feel productive.
- Address a social issue in a way that is consistent with personal values.
- Use their skills and share their experiences, interests and knowledge.
- Learn new skills.
- Learn more about youth.
- Make new friends through the volunteer experience.
- Leave a legacy for the younger generation.
- Also identify ways to address logistical barriers such as transportation and the perceived expense of volunteering. Will volunteers be serving in a location that is easily accessible to their homes? Can the program provide any financial incentives to help cover the volunteers' out-of-pocket expenses?

5. Develop a recruitment message that "sells your program."

What is it about your program's mission, goals and population of participants that you can "sell" in order to attract volunteers? In developing your message, consider:

- Motivations for volunteering.
- Volunteers' roles and responsibilities (including the length of time they will be expected to participate).
- Benefits of serving in your program. These could range from benefits to society (making a difference, strengthening a community) to the volunteers' self-interest (learning new skills, acquiring new knowledge, meeting new people) to stipends (if any). Be sure to include information about the training and ongoing support volunteers will receive.

6. Create recruitment materials that will catch people's attention.

A recruitment message can be adapted for a wide range of materials, from flyers and brochures to videos and websites. Be sure your print and other media materials reflect the feel and quality of your program:

Make sure all materials convey the sense of professional expertise and purpose appropriate to the project. Use attractive graphics that draw attention to the materials, and include your agency logo.

Consider the audience when creating materials. Use language that is familiar to them. Make sure fonts are large enough for older adults to read comfortably. Choose colors that will be inviting to your target recruits. When appropriate, translate posters and materials into languages other than English (and be sure someone carefully checks the translation).

When possible, use photographs and narratives to convey a sense of the program participants and volunteers. However, don't use images or stories that are sad or discouraging. Portraits of your program should be inviting, and convey a sense of excitement, hope, and purpose. Be sure the photographs reflect the diversity of the pool of potential volunteers.

To ensure that your materials are appropriate and appealing, always have someone who is representative of the people you are targeting for recruitment review a draft and give you feedback.

7. Plan presentations that put a personal "face" on your programme.

When giving presentations to recruit volunteers use some of the following strategies to make your program less anonymous and the potential recruits less able to "hide" behind their own anonymity.

Let people see the problem their volunteer work will address. People want to make a difference and are often motivated by their heart to volunteer. Use videos, success stories, and photographs to show the social problems the volunteers will address.

Bring along an articulate, older volunteer who can share his or her experiences. If your program is just starting up, but is modeled after another program, you may be able to have a volunteer in that program accompany you to some presentations and convey his/her excitement.

Conduct smaller, more intimate presentations. Though in some ways less efficient, presentations to small groups (less than 20) often work better than large group presentations because they reduce the possibility of anonymity among members of the audience.

Actively involve your audience. Engage potential recruits in dialogue, asking questions such as "How many of you are parents or grandparents?" "How many of you have ever known a child with a disability?" "How many teens in this city, would you guess, can't read a newspaper?" You can also engage the audience in brief activities, perhaps an example of one you use in training. This kind of interaction helps get people away from the "anonymity trap."

Have materials that people can take home with them. These should include volunteer job descriptions, flyers/posters, application forms, general agency literature, and copies of any local or national news articles about the project.

Allow time after presentations to interact informally with the people who have attended. Have refreshments available -- it encourages people to stay and talk.

Give people something to remember you by. For example, a pencil, key chain, or refrigerator magnet imprinted with the name of your agency or organization.

Never walk away from a meeting where you have given a talk without getting the names and contact information of those who are interested. Pass around an attendance sheet for people to sign who want to receive more information.

If possible, take applications and ask those who know they are interested to complete them on the spot. Be sure you get back to interested applicants within a week.

8. Use a range of recruitment strategies to reach volunteers.

- Strategies for recruiting range from the uncomplicated and cost-free to the more complex and relatively inexpensive. These include:
- Word of mouth.
- Direct mail. Have personal letters written by your agency, sent through other organizations such as local civic associations, community groups, and local chapters of the AARP (American Association of Retired Persons).
- Information tables at community events.
- Presentations to community groups.
- Recruitment meals. These could be potluck dinners or breakfasts that include presentations about your program.
- Flyers, posters and brochures. Be sure the flyers are 8 1/2" by 11" so that they can be easily mailed or posted on bulletin boards.
- Articles or press releases in local and community newspapers. Take advantage of the fact that community newspapers are understaffed and are looking for good copy. Write a one- or two-page press release describing your program and the need for volunteers, and include a high-quality black and white photograph.
- Other organizations' newsletters. Ask religious institutions and relevant local agencies and organizations to run your press release in materials they send out to their members.
- Presentations on local cable television shows. Look for programming that is aimed at the particular audience you are trying to reach.
- Public service announcements (PSAs). Send television stations a ready-made clip, 30 seconds to one minute long. Create radio PSAs that are 20, 30, 45, or 60 seconds in length, and send them to stations or programs that your potential volunteers or their relatives are likely to listen to.
- Web pages. During recruitment drives, have your message posted on websites that are likely places to be visited by older adults or their relatives. Possibilities include the AARP website or a local daily paper's sites. Be sure your recruitment message is marked "New!"

9. Start with what's in front of you.

Recruitment is all about relationships. Think about who you already know. Brainstorm with co-workers about strategies for recruitment. Survey staff, board members, and volunteers to find out what organizations they are or have been involved with -- as members or board members or in some other capacity -- that might be a good connection for your recruitment efforts.

Think of everyone connected to your program as an assistant recruiter. Staff, volunteers, board members, trainers and consultants all have seen the program at work, and, with prompting, will translate their enthusiasm for the project into recruitment of senior friends and family members.

Current volunteers can be your most effective recruiters. Ask them to talk to their peers about the benefits they have received by being part of the program, and make sure they have the resources (such as extra program materials) they need to recruit. You can formalize this approach by giving them "assignments" such as generating one new volunteer applicant every six months.

You can also find recruiters outside of your program. Have the clergy at your church, synagogue or mosque -- or the clergy of your volunteers -- make a statement of support for the program. Use your wider social network. Enlist your relatives, friends and professional acquaintances, especially those who work at social service agencies or those who have connections to your desired group of volunteers.

10. Cast a wide net.

Do broad outreach to raise awareness of your program in the community. Developing connections with organizations that have credibility with the groups you are targeting can help your program gain visibility and access to those groups.

11. Target your recruitment efforts.

Identify the specific community agencies, institutions, and other groups that are most likely to help connect you with potential volunteers. The following steps can help you build on these initial contacts:

Take the time to establish relationships with the most promising agencies and institutions. Request assistance from appropriate agency staff on the best way to publicize the project to their older constituents. One way to get them actively involved is to obtain commitments from them to provide a certain number of volunteers from their membership and to identify them as "partners" in all publicity. This approach can help you recruit groups of volunteers, but be aware that some "turf" issues may surface if your agency or program is "competing" with your potential partner agency to provide similar services.

Meet with formal and informal community leaders, including block captains, activists, clergy and local politicians. "Sell" the program to them. Invite them to an event or to be part of the program advisory

board.

Target geographically to neighborhood senior centers or high-rises and housing projects where many seniors live. Offer to give a talk as part of a committee or governance meeting.

Request that a church or synagogue "adopt" your program. If that occurs, and a significant percentage of your volunteers are from that congregation, you can hold trainings and program events in its building. Be sure to give the church or synagogue public recognition for its "adoption."

In addition, target mailing and outreach efforts to populations that are already interested in doing the work of your program or working with the population you are serving, or are generally interested in volunteering.

Other Issues to Consider:

12. Recruit more people than you actually need.

Assume that approximately 25 percent of the people who show some interest in your program will not follow through, that a significant number of those who do will not be appropriate for the program, and that some of those who are appropriate will drop out during training.

13. Pay attention to timing.

Recruitment may need to be ongoing throughout the duration of the program if attrition is high. (Some attrition is normal in all volunteer programs.) However, most recruitment is likely to be accomplished during one or two major drives each year. Fall and spring are usually the best times for recruitment drives, but what is most important is to minimize the lag between recruitment and program start-up -- otherwise you may lose interested applicants. Once people are recruited and screened, begin training with little delay, and get the new volunteers involved in program activities as soon as possible.

14. Be sure your agency is ready to provide good customer service.

- While recruiting volunteers, be sure your organization is ready to respond to the people who are interested enough to contact you for more information or to apply. Your agency should always be prepared to respond to inquiries from potential volunteers, even during periods when you may not be actively recruiting. Therefore:
- Have someone on your staff who is specifically responsible for responding to initial telephone inquiries.
- Develop guidelines for the staff member to follow.
- Have materials ready to mail to people who call.
- Be ready to follow up. If a caller completes and returns an application, be prepared to take the next steps.

15. Avoid the first "warm body" syndrome.

It is tempting to accept every applicant who wishes to volunteer for your program, but it would be a mistake. Not everyone will meet the requirements you have identified as necessary for serving effectively. Use a screening process that includes tools such as:

- A written application
- A face-to-face interview
- References
- Criminal record and child abuse checks (required in many states for anyone who works with children or youth)
- Some programs also use their training sessions as a part of the screening process, particularly because the trainings present an opportunity to see how potential volunteers interact in a group setting. Depending upon the project, a physical examination might also be part of the screening. When the screening process reveals that an applicant is not appropriate for a particular project, offer that person another volunteer assignment in your agency, or encourage the volunteer to apply at a partner agency that would welcome the person's particular skills.

16. Be patient and persistent.

Recruiting is almost always a challenge -- talking to dozens or even hundreds of people may only result in a few recruits. Don't take the frustration personally. Continue to be diligent and creative in your recruitment efforts. And also be sure to get support for yourself from other staff and peers.

Context

The decision to volunteer is usually a two-step process -- a person thinks generally about becoming a volunteer and then a "trigger event" transforms this general thought into concrete action. The "trigger" is

often something very simple: someone they know asks them to volunteer in a specific role, or they learn about an opportunity through an organization to which they belong. This two-step process suggests that it is important to create broad local visibility and name recognition, so that when people are ready to volunteer they will know who you are, and to target your recruitment, so you are asking people who are ready to volunteer.

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