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WHO'S IN? ASSOCIATION
VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

Who's In? Association Volunteer Management

Written by Leslie White, CPCU, CIC, ARM, CRM

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April 11th is National Volunteer Week and Peggy Hoffman's post, Someone Tell Associations it is National Volunteer Week, got me thinking. She highlighted the differences between community-serving organizations' and associations' view of volunteers. Most community-serving organizations (nonprofits) are celebrating the week with activities and recognition of their volunteers while only a few associations are acknowledging it. Since Peggy wrote her post, ASAE issued a thank you as a part of the annual call for volunteers (you're welcome). Also the weekly Twitter "Association Chat" (#assnchat) focused on association volunteer management this week.

My risk management consulting career began working almost exclusively with nonprofit organizations. While at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center (an organization that provides risk management assistance and resources for community-serving nonprofit organizations), I spent a lot of time addressing volunteer risk management issues and solutions. I wrote articles and books, helped develop online training programs, presented workshops and training and provided technical assistance to nonprofits of all sizes.

Nonprofits view volunteer management as a profession. Volunteer managers have created international, national and local associations and at least one certification program (Council of Certification in Volunteer Administration). Because volunteerism is so important in the United States, quasi-governmental organizations and other private-public partnership such as Corporation for National and Community Services (CNCS) and Points of Light Institute were created to improve volunteer management. Through CNCS, every state has a council on volunteerism and many communities have volunteer centers that are a clearinghouse to match people with volunteer opportunities.

Formal nonprofit volunteer management grew out of concern for the safety and well-being of both service recipients and volunteers (I see everything through the prism of risk). There are risks associated with using volunteers (and program employees) that are not a consideration for associations. Nonprofit volunteers provide direct services to clients and participants who are vulnerable (youth, elderly, victims of violence, have disabilities, or sick) and need to be protected. Volunteers also have to be safe from harm by the clients or the nature of their service (construction, conservation, clean-ups). Volunteer selection (especially screening), training and supervision is key to a nonprofit's success since having the wrong person in a position can have awful consequences. Association volunteers don't face the same risks so the need for volunteer management is not being driven by risk management considerations.

Associations need volunteers to prosper and achieve their mission but few have a dedicated volunteer manager. Each department that uses volunteers is responsible for its own volunteers. Often these people have little training or experience in managing volunteers so the volunteer experience can vary greatly within an association depending upon the staff liaison.

One exception is the component or chapter relations professionals (CRPs). CRPs are responsible for managing chapter leaders most of who are volunteers. However CRPs are also accountable for how chapters operate and perform. The dual function of a component relations person's job (volunteer and program management) is challenging. In contrast, nonprofits separate volunteer management from program management.

My point is it's time for associations to professionalize (is that a word?) its management of volunteers. Everybody says volunteers are important so isn't it time for associations to commit more resources to managing this precious asset? We can learn (steal) from the nonprofit sector while developing a body of knowledge for association volunteer managers. So who's in? What can your association do to improve its management of volunteers?

And don't forget to thank your volunteers – not just during National Volunteer Week but every day as they go about the important business of your association.

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About the Author

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