

VOLUNTEERS



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VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering is an enormous industry in Canada. One study showed that 5.3 million Canadians do volunteer work¹. They put in more than a billion hours a year, or the equivalent of 650,000 full-time jobs. People between 35 and 44 years of age volunteer more than other age groups, as do the employed more than the unemployed and women (30 per cent) more than men (24 percent).

Why do people volunteer?

People volunteer for a variety of reasons². The most common reasons are to be able to:

- help others and contribute to the community
- use skills in a new setting
- learn new skills
- gain work experience
- find new friends and new relationships
- develop a sense of accomplishment and self-worth
- meet the requirements of a course or programme
- challenge one's self
- work for a cause
- gain recognition for one's abilities
- help improve the quality of community life

¹ Mitchell, Alanna, "Family portraits" *The Globe and Mail*, March 11, 1994.

² Muegge, Jane and Nancy Ross. "Volunteers: The heart of community organizations". *Ministry of Agriculture and Food Factsheet*, February 1992.



Volunteers and Friends of the library

A Friends of the Library group is a community-based support group whose aim is to further the goals of the library in the community. Depending on the community, Friends of the Library groups can be involved in any number of areas from fundraising to advocacy and volunteer work in the library. While Friends of the Library could be involved as volunteers in a library, it is not necessary to have a formal Friends group to use volunteers.

A very helpful publication from the Library Trustee Development Program about Friends of the Library groups has been reprinted as an appendix at the end of this *Sourcebook*. It explains the roles and functions of a Friends of the Library group in greater detail.

As this publication covers the topic of Friends groups so well, this *Sourcebook* covers volunteers in the library in general, focusing on situations where there may not be a Friends of the Library group.

Volunteer programmes have appeared in libraries for a variety of reasons. A library may have originally been established by volunteers. Volunteers may also have been used to expand or enhance a library service when resources were limited. Such programmes are also a means of involving members of the community in the library and providing good public relations.

While volunteers can not and should not make up for inadequate staffing, they can be used by existing staff to ease the burden of the daily workload, enabling the staff to perform their duties in a more efficient manner. It is difficult to think of a library building project which has been undertaken without some volunteer time and service. It is also hard to imagine any kind of capital fundraising campaign which could operate without some community volunteer effort. Libraries that enjoy the financial support of a Friends of the Library group are indebted to the volunteers that comprise the group. Most Library Board members are volunteers.

**USING
VOLUNTEERS
IN THE LIBRARY**



What volunteers do

A very common use of volunteer time is the shut-in or visiting library services. In this situation, volunteers are used to deliver books and other materials to shut-in patrons. Patrons may either telephone the library to request specific materials or have the materials selected by the volunteer. The material is signed out through the circulation system and then delivered to the patron by a volunteer driver.

Volunteers have been used to help take care of library collections by shelving, sorting, straightening, mending, and covering books and other materials. Volunteers have been used to help maintain library-owned equipment such as microfiche reader/printers. Volunteers could be involved in a special library project, for example, helping with local history research or a local genealogy collection.

With automation, volunteers have been known to help with a retrospective conversion of the library's collection into a machine-readable form. Before adding material to the computer database, volunteers could be used to help with a physical inventory of material in the collection. Volunteers have been used as computer-instruction aides in helping patrons to learn how to use a new computerized public-access catalogue.

Some volunteers enjoy working on programmes in the library. Volunteers can be used to work on pre-school storyhours, craft programmes, reading clubs and even tutoring of students.

Volunteers have even been used to help maintain the building and the grounds around the library. For instance, volunteers have been known to plant and maintain flower beds around the library.

Other volunteer activities are described in "Should our library form a 'Friends of the Library' group" found in the appendix to this *Sourcebook*.



What volunteers do not do

What library volunteers do not do depends on a number of factors including the size of the library, the community, the goals of the library, and the volunteers themselves.

The presence of a union in a library will influence what volunteers do not do. In unionized settings, volunteers are not assigned tasks that are usually assigned to regular paid staff. This is to avoid potential union grievances.

Insurance regulations may also dictate the kinds of tasks which volunteers can do. For instance, because of insurance, volunteers cannot drive the library's delivery vehicle or the bookmobile.

Many people in the library community feel strongly that volunteers should not work directly with the public. While it is advisable to use regular paid staff at a service desk, in some circumstances, it may be necessary to use volunteers at a public service desk. The service desk area can involve a number of important skills which regular staff are trained to handle. Regular staff are trained to work with the public and to deal with a variety of customer service problems.

Most volunteers are not involved in administrative tasks such as the development of the collection, making policies regarding the use of the collection, budgeting funds or scheduling. Volunteers are generally not involved in detailed reference work or on-line searching.

In general, while volunteers can enhance the staff and the ability of the staff to deliver a service, volunteers should not be used in exchange for the regular staff needed to run a library. Even though it is true that volunteers typically take jobs that someone could be hired to do, it makes more sense to ensure that volunteer jobs support the work of the paid staff and allow library service to be expanded or enhanced.

Volunteers should not be expected to do very menial tasks that no one else would want to do.



Issues

The secret to a successful volunteer programme is planning based on a clear understanding of the advantages and disadvantages involved.

Management issues associated with a volunteer programme include cost, unions, insurance, conflict of interest and staff morale. These issues can be difficult to isolate from the general workings of a volunteer programme and are described throughout this *Sourcebook*.

Cost

Volunteers are not free labour. A great deal of effort must be spent by paid staff in terms of recruitment, training and supervision. Whereas regular staff are paid to be at the library, volunteers sometimes may lack commitment and the sense of obligation to be at the library for the appointed time. Volunteers may cause disquiet among staff, particularly if it is felt that the volunteers represent a threat to paid positions. Furthermore, use of volunteers may lead to unrealistic assessment of the real cost and complexity of providing good library service.

It is quite unpleasant to correct and criticize the work of a sub-standard employee but it can be even more difficult to criticize the quality of work done by a volunteer. The work of a volunteer is usually considered to be a gift and no one wants to be in the position of telling someone that such a gift is actually a burden to the library!

Unions

The existence of a union does not automatically prohibit a volunteer programme. Job descriptions, for existing paid staff and for potential volunteer staff, are very important in a unionized setting. If descriptions of volunteer jobs are clearly in support of paid jobs, or describe jobs not being done by anyone, volunteer or paid, there should be little conflict.

Insurance

It is important to check on insurance coverage when using volunteers. A particular problem can be liability. Check (and recheck) to see the extent of a library's responsibility for a volunteer's welfare. A number of library boards have liability statements on a contract which must be signed by the volunteer before starting to work.



Conflict of interest

A policy for conflict of interest with regard to volunteers must be established. For example, are relatives of board members or staff allowed to volunteer in the library?

Staff morale

Staff members may feel threatened by volunteers. This feeling can be minimized by involving staff members in the process of planning and establishing the programme. Staff members may need to be assured that volunteers will help them where assistance is required.

It is also possible that there may be confusion about responsibilities. If left untouched this confusion might result in tension between staff members and volunteers. Duties of both volunteers and staff should be clearly defined at the beginning of the programme. For example, that staff members are in charge of the library and only in exceptional circumstances are volunteers left in charge of the library.

The concerns about the use of volunteers in libraries are valid but should not necessarily discourage the use of volunteers altogether. The most important reason for developing a strong and active volunteer group is to get the help you need to meet the library's goals for service. Volunteers are perfect for taking some of the burden from very busy staff members whose first priority is serving the patron in front of them, for instance, by shelving books, covering books and collecting material left around the library. If all the needed regular staff are in place, volunteers can be a resource for expanding the programmes currently being offered.

Some points to consider before involving volunteers are:

- what will volunteers do in the library?
- volunteers do not replace or supplement the paid staff, they help and support them
- determine why volunteers want to work in the library and try to ensure that the programme is structured to fill those needs
- an individual should be assigned responsibility for the volunteers programme. This person could be a staff member, trustee, volunteer, or paid individual on a short-term special grant. The person should be someone who can establish and maintain a good climate among volunteers and also staff members.



WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS

Volunteer programmes in a library just don't happen on their own. The people who work in the library make the programme happen.

Planning

There are many volunteer programmes, especially in smaller libraries, where informality seems to produce good results. In these situations, there are no regulations or criteria and the volunteer comes into the library prepared with one question -- "What can I do to help?"

There are, however, many libraries which suffer because of the lack of planning or structure in the volunteer programme. No matter why a programme is being established or revamped, a certain amount of planning is the best option. Planning details will vary depending on library size, the complexity of the job to be done, and the number of people expected to be involved.

If a volunteer programme is just getting started in a library, it is a good idea to gather as much information as possible about how other libraries are using volunteers. Consider the question: what do you hope can be realistically achieved through volunteers?

Policy

The library board should decide on a policy for the volunteer programme. A sample policy appears below and another appears at the back of this *Sourcebook* (Sample 1: Policy for Volunteers). A written policy can be supplemented by a mission statement, goals and measurable objectives for the volunteer programme.

The Trillium Public Library is committed to the utilization of all available resources to further its goals. We believe that volunteers can enrich library services and inform the public about the library, and that under an effectively managed programme volunteers can perform tasks efficiently.

Therefore, a volunteer programme will be initiated at the Trillium Public Library keeping in mind that volunteers only enrich, and do not replace, regular library service.



With the programme in place, tasks for volunteers must be established. Volunteers for the programme must be recruited, interviewed, oriented and trained. Volunteers must also be scheduled, supervised, rewarded and (sometimes) terminated. In addition, there must be a hierarchy established for the programme, in other words, who is in charge?

Responsibility for the programme

In any library programme, the person ultimately in charge is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). In small and medium-sized libraries, it is usually the CEO who has day-to-day responsibility for volunteers. As libraries get larger, volunteers may be supervised by a volunteer coordinator. The volunteer coordinator may be a full-time or part-time staff person or, in some cases, actually a volunteer. The coordinator's job is often taken by a full-time staff person who is relieved of some duties so time can be spent on volunteers.

Volunteers are free in the sense of not requiring a great deal of cash outlay but they may be expensive in terms of recruitment, training, co-ordination and supervision time. Someone must be in charge of the programme and be ready to recruit and train volunteers.

Recruitment of volunteers

Information about the volunteer programme can be spread in different areas of the community, for instance, through church groups, community organizations, service clubs, newspaper articles, or flyers. A representative from the library should be prepared to go and speak to groups about the volunteer programme.

In some libraries, flyers placed at the service desk, municipal office or community centre and posters on the library bulletin board are used to draw people's attention to the programme.

Another way to attract volunteers is to prepare a news release for the community newspaper or newsletter. The news release should be short and to the point, but should be very specific about the kind of work to be done and what skills the volunteer would need. It should also explain how the reader can get more information about the volunteer programme.



Another approach is to ask specific individuals if they are interested in working in the library. Personal contact with volunteers often recruits new volunteers. In some situations it is not necessary to recruit at all -- people come to the library and ask to help. Volunteers may be looking for a part-time paid job in the library, but unless it is a real possibility, it is wise to tell the volunteer that a paid job would not necessarily be available.

The number of volunteers recruited to work in the library should be kept to a manageable number -- go for quality not quantity. The best form of recruitment is to actually keep the present volunteers. It is easier, cheaper and better for the library to keep its good volunteers than to begin again with new volunteers. The challenge is to make the volunteer programme so good that the volunteer will not want to move on!

Application procedures

Quite a number of libraries with a volunteer programme use some sort of registration or application form. Depending on the size of the library and its volunteer programme, application forms can be short and simple, or can be several pages in length and very detailed. On many application forms, interested individuals are asked to list relevant skills such as a love of children, knowledge of literature, book repair skills, etc.

Another approach is to list the kinds of talents needed and have the applicant check those he/she feels would be appropriate. In this way, those who could not perform a particular task for health reasons, such as loading a book cart, would be able to indicate this. A sample application form is printed at the back of this *Sourcebook* (Sample 2: Volunteer application form).

A well-thought-out application form, neatly typed or computer-processed and neatly printed, makes a good first impression on the volunteer applicant. The individual will get the message that the volunteer programme is a serious operation and that working at the library takes commitment and time. The completed application forms should be kept on file along with work records.



Interviewing

In some libraries, part of the application process involves interviewing the prospective volunteer. In small communities, the interview can be as simple as a chat at the library's service desk or in the general store. The more structured the volunteer programme, the more formal the interview will likely be.

The purpose of the interview is to find out more about the applicant and to allow the applicant to find out a bit more about the library. Topics covered in the interview might include information about the library, what the volunteer programme is and what is expected of the volunteer, details about procedures and a general description of the kinds of jobs that volunteers do.

Contract

It is a good idea to develop a contract between the library and the volunteer. The contract should outline exactly what is expected from the volunteer and what the library will offer in return. Although volunteers may feel threatened by the idea of a contract, they will be reassured when they understand that there are obligations on both sides.

A simple contract can be printed at the bottom of the application form and can include this type of information:

<p>I agree to volunteer my services to the Trillium Public Library. I will work on a regular schedule and will provide friendly library service in the task I am assigned. I realize that service to the public depends upon my volunteering and will do my best to represent the library.</p> <p>Signed, _____</p> <p>Date: _____ Length of contract: _____</p>
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More formal contracts usually cover issues such as the fact that the volunteer is not an employee, will not be paid for time spent at the library and that the volunteer will not be forced to do any work he/she does not want to do. Some contracts list not only the responsibilities of the volunteer but also the responsibilities of the library. A sample formal contract is printed at the back of this *Sourcebook* (Sample 3: Contract between the library and the volunteer).



Scheduling

The best approach for most volunteer programmes is to work out an optimal unit of work. In many libraries, the three-hour stint, one day a week seems to work well -- two hours seems too short and four hours too long. Other volunteers prefer to be scheduled for specific, short-term projects, such as vertical file weeding.

In some libraries, the year is divided into volunteer seasons of two or three months each. In this way, certain seasons when many people in the community are away, can be quite distinct from the rest of the year. Sometimes, the first three-month period is used as a probationary period after which either the library or volunteer can terminate the agreement without a problem.

Volunteer job descriptions and training

The success of each volunteer in making a contribution to the library and enjoying the experience, depends on appropriate placement and training. All volunteers should be placed in jobs to which they are suited. The person responsible for volunteers should attempt to match potential volunteers with positions which are their choice in terms of interest and location. A volunteer must be motivated enough to do the job assigned and it is much easier if the work given to a volunteer is work that the volunteer wants to do.

Job descriptions

Job descriptions can be included in a general volunteer handbook or in a separate listing of the job descriptions. Short versions of volunteer job descriptions are helpful in recruiting volunteers. More formal job descriptions can be used during interviews or for assigning tasks.

A well-written job description not only tells the volunteer what is expected of him/her but it clarifies the position for all concerned. A job description should be developed for each volunteer position to be filled. A sample job description is printed at the back of this *Sourcebook* (Sample 4: Volunteer job description).



Guidelines, manuals

Most volunteers will need written and/or graphic instructions. In some libraries, a volunteer handbook is written to cover general information about the library and the volunteer programme. For example, a volunteer handbook can provide:

- details of library hours and holidays
- information on where to leave valuables
- when and where to take breaks
- what kind of clothing to wear
- instructions on how to use the telephone
- instructions on how (and how not) to handle questions from patrons
- a caution about confidentiality of patron information
- information about who to notify in case of anticipated absence
- instructions about recording hours of work at the library

Other volunteer handbooks tell the volunteer what type of work there is to do in the library and even include volunteer job descriptions. Some are quite detailed about how to do the work that needs to be done and include written procedures for each job. It is helpful to describe in writing how to do a task, if for no other reason than to have a reference to go back to. At the same time, written descriptions are quite tricky to write. It is easier to actually show someone how to check a book in or out, than it is to write about it. At that point, orientation and practical training are appropriate. A sample handbook is printed at the back of this *Sourcebook* (Sample 5: Volunteer handbook).

Training

The best way to ensure that a volunteer's performance and contribution to the library are as good as they can be is to provide good initial training as well as continuous evaluation and on-going development opportunities throughout the time at the library. Volunteers will not feel comfortable, skilled or proud of their jobs unless they are properly trained. A volunteer needs to know what to do, how to do it and be able to do it. A formal training period should be established according to the needs of each job and the time commitment of each volunteer.

Volunteers can be trained individually or in groups. Some volunteer programmes require that each volunteer also attend an orientation session before doing any work in the library. Training and orientation can take many different forms. In a three-hour formal session, for example, the volunteer(s) can be shown around the library, introduced to other staff and volunteers, and provided with a description of the job.



Depending on what the volunteer will be doing, the volunteer can be given practical lessons on the use of the catalogue, the photocopier, and telephone. An observation period during which the volunteer and trainer work together can follow. Any method of training should stress the importance of asking questions and seeking clarification if necessary.

Even the best volunteers need other training opportunities from time-to-time, particularly if jobs or policies are changed. For example, if a decision is made to add music CDs to the collection, the volunteer who helps to prepare material for circulation would need to be shown how to work with CDs. It is wise to let a volunteer know why changes are being made and how the changes will affect the job.

Record-keeping

In most libraries with volunteer programmes, at least three kinds of records are kept:

- A **log book** or chart gives the volunteer a place to check in, to record what was accomplished, and to sign out. The log book can be as simple as a schedule of who is expected at the library, with the volunteers marking that they came as scheduled. The log book could also be quite detailed asking the volunteer to record the actual time of arrival and departure as well as to indicate what tasks were accomplished.
- Confidential **personnel records** can be kept for each volunteer. Such records can include the original application form, notes of any interviews, cumulative hours worked and records of awards for service. Copies of letters of recommendation written on the volunteer's behalf can be included in the file.
- **Statistical records** of the volunteer programmes as a whole should be kept. In summarizing the programme, statistical records might include the number of volunteers, volunteer hours, and the average number of hours per volunteer. Statistical records might include the number of new volunteers and number of volunteers leaving the programme.

Statistical records allow the staff to estimate the dollar value of volunteer contributions as well as the estimated time required to train and supervise the volunteers. Records can be kept to show that there is a need for more paid staff or to show that the library is using community resources.



Supervision

A volunteer programme involves planning and policy making, and issues such as recruitment, placement, and the training of volunteers must be resolved. The management of the volunteer programme in a public library also includes the on-going supervision of volunteers.

Assessing the relationship (How is the job going?)

Throughout the programme, there should be some means of regularly assessing the level of satisfaction from the point of view of both the library and the volunteer. How well has the volunteer been doing the job assigned? What degree of satisfaction is the volunteer deriving from the situation? How can the job be improved? This assessment is essential for keeping the volunteer and for improving the work experience of the volunteer. This is especially true for those volunteers who are having some difficulty adjusting to library work.

Volunteers come to the library with different skills and levels of interest. Some can quickly master several tasks, perform them with great efficiency, and usually require very little direct supervision. Others will require constant retraining, and some will start things they never finish. When an adequate training time has passed and a volunteer is still having difficulty performing the assigned tasks without an inordinate amount of assistance from either the supervisor or co-workers, it makes sense to reevaluate the situation. Before approaching the volunteer with the concerns, consider the aspects of the task that give this volunteer the most trouble and think about other volunteer job possibilities.

Inappropriate behaviour

Some volunteers may exhibit inappropriate behaviour while on the job. If it becomes necessary to reprimand a volunteer, the timing is quite crucial. The reprimand should take place as soon after the problem occurs as possible. This meeting must not take place in the presence of people who are not concerned with the problem, especially library patrons. In telling the person what behaviour was wrong, be specific. At the same time, it is wise to praise the good qualities of the individual.

Dismissal

Dismissal may be the only solution if a volunteer is not satisfactory or the inappropriate behaviour has not ended, but it can be very hard to fire a volunteer. It is up to the person in charge of volunteers to explain clearly what behaviour has led to the termination of the contract (i.e., absenteeism, poor relationship with staff or other volunteers, etc.) Dismissal should be handled courteously and tactfully. Be sure to thank volunteers, preferably in writing, for their donation of work and time in the library.



RECOGNITION

Volunteers are special people whose donation of time and effort warrants special consideration. They need to know that their work is appreciated. Volunteers can be recognized in a formal way through press releases or at a tea or party in their honour, perhaps during Ontario Public Library Week or Volunteer Recognition Week. In many communities, various organizations join together to recognize the work of volunteers in the community in a 'grand' event.

Informal recognition is even more important. It takes place on a one-to-one basis and is done through personal meetings, telephone calls and letters. In some libraries, rewards are given after certain milestones in volunteer hours. For example, after 200 volunteer hours, individuals would receive a gift of stationery and a certificate of appreciation; after 500 hours, a volunteer pin; and after 1000 hours, a plaque.

Volunteer Service Awards

The Ontario Honours and Awards (OHA) office (in the Ministry of Citizenship) administers a number of major provincial awards including the **Ontario Medal for Good Citizenship** which recognizes exceptional examples of voluntarism and community service. The OHA office also administers awards for voluntarism as they relate to the Ministry of Citizenship and/or Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Recreation including the **Volunteer Service Awards** for length of service and **Outstanding Achievement Awards** for precedent setting examples of voluntarism.

RESOURCES

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Appendix

“Should our library form a ‘Friends of the Library’ group? *Trustee Tips*, Winter 1993-94, Issue no. 8 (A publication of the Library Trustee Development Program)

Samples

1. Policy for volunteers
2. Volunteer application form
3. Contract between the library and the volunteer
4. Volunteer job description
5. Volunteer handbook