



Recruiting, retaining, supporting volunteers for Long-term Social Change

Organizations that involve volunteers in long-term social change initiatives may face special volunteer management challenges. These initiatives typically aim for sustainable change over a generation and do not produce tangible results for many years. Because of this, organizations may need to use special measures to recruit the appropriate volunteers, keep them motivated over the long term, and provide them with the right support.

The Calgary Children's Initiative (CCI), a project of the United Way of Calgary and Area, is a long-term social change project that aims to have a positive and lasting impact on the lives of children up to the age of 18. It has identified the following six long-term objectives: all babies are born healthy; all children and youth are well cared for and safe; all children are ready to learn; all children and youth practice healthy behaviours; all children are successful in school; and all youth are successful in making the transition to adulthood.¹

As part of a research project undertaken for the International Year of Volunteers, interviews and focus groups were conducted with volunteers and staff involved in the CCI. Individual interviews were conducted with six members of the CCI's volunteer Council of Champions and with six CCI staff members. Focus groups were conducted with five other groups of volunteers involved with the initiative: three "working" groups, one "action" group, and one group of community agency representatives. This research led to the following recommendations on recruiting, retaining, and supporting volunteers who are engaged in long-term social change initiatives.

¹ For more information on the Calgary Children's Initiative, see "Volunteerism and social change: A case study of the Calgary Children's Initiative," available online at www.nonprofitscan.ca.

Recruitment

There are two general approaches to volunteer recruitment. Targeted recruitment is best used when seeking volunteers with specific skills. Non-targeted recruitment is best used to attract interested people who do not need to meet any special requirements.

Targeted recruitment is most appropriate for long-term social change initiatives that seek to involve: influential community leaders; people with ties to specific organizations and populations; and individuals with expertise on specific issues.

To ensure that targeted recruitment does not exclude volunteers with different points of view or backgrounds, organizations should use an open and transparent recruitment process. They should:

- Clearly spell out the qualities they are looking for in volunteers.
- Advertise volunteer opportunities widely in the community.
- Set up a formal interview and selection process for prospective volunteers.

Retention

Volunteers often feel motivated to continue volunteering when they see the concrete results of their efforts. But in long-term social change initiatives, change often takes many years to become apparent. Volunteers involved in such initiatives may express frustration at not being able to see the difference they are making.

To help volunteers feel that their efforts are making a difference, organizations involved in long-term social change initiatives should:

- Clarify the nature of the social change they are seeking. This gives volunteers a common vision of the long-term goal.

Retention (cont'd)

- Develop clear milestones, or short-term goals, along the road to the desired outcomes. This allows volunteers to see the progress they are making.
- Communicate the initiative's accomplishments widely. This allows the contributions of volunteers to be recognized by the larger community.

Support

Volunteers typically need support in the form of: orientation to their assignments and to the organization for which they are volunteering; training to equip them to tackle their assignments successfully; and recognition so that they feel their efforts are valued and appreciated. Volunteers who are working for long-term social change may need special support in these areas.

Orientation

Long-term social change initiatives usually involve a large number of volunteers, many of whom are professionals who have been recruited for their influence, contacts, and expertise. To ensure that these volunteers are all working towards the same end, they should be given orientation packages that include:

- A clear, concise description of the initiative and its purpose, structure, and plans.
- A clear description of what is expected of volunteers.
- Clear, concise reports of processes and what the initiative has accomplished to date.

Training

Unlike traditional volunteers, long-term social change volunteers are generally not motivated by a desire to experience personal growth or

acquire new knowledge. Instead, they participate as leaders to bring about complex, lasting change. As a result, they may benefit most from training that is directly relevant to fostering social change and that takes into account their busy work schedules. This could include:

- Government relations training to help them engage in dialogue with politicians and policy-makers at all levels.
- Training on how to foster change in communities.
- Training on how to solve problems.
- Workshops on social marketing.

Recognition

Acknowledging the contributions of volunteers through special recognition activities is often important to making volunteers feel that their efforts matter. These activities typically include personal thank-you notes, small gifts, and events that celebrate volunteers. However, research on CCI volunteers suggests that these types of recognition are not important to volunteers in long-term social change initiatives. These volunteers are motivated by the desire to bring about change. They feel that their efforts are recognized when they are:

- Participating in making a change in society.
- Making meaningful and significant use of their knowledge, skills, and time.
- Associated with a major initiative.
- Moving the agenda of their own agency forward through participation in the initiative.

CCI volunteers also appreciated it when their contributions to the initiative were communicated to their employers.

Dawne Clark
Mount Royal College

Rena Shimoni
Bow Valley College

INTERNATIONAL
YEAR OF
VOLUNTEERS



For more information on
this and other research
projects visit

www.nonprofitscan.ca

For more information on the International Year of Volunteers, visit www.nonprofitscan.ca.

The Community Engagement Division of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) provided financial support to this project. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of HRDC, the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, or Volunteer Canada.

© 2002 Canadian Centre for Philanthropy



Canadian Centre for Philanthropy™
Le Centre canadien de philanthropie™



VOLUNTEER
BÉNÉVOLES
C A N A D A

Research Program, Canadian Centre for Philanthropy
425 University Avenue, Suite 700
Toronto, Ontario M5G 1T6

Tel: 416.597.2293 Fax: 416.597.2294 E-mail: ccpresearch@ccp.ca