

Volunteer Reporting = Accountability

Susan J. Ellis

Volunteer resources managers commonly struggle with getting volunteers to submit written reports about their work, even if such reports are "required." If an organization routinely receives only a small percentage of monthly information asked of volunteers, something is wrong. But the problem is not the volunteers; it's with the agency that has not cared enough to enforce its own requirements.

An organization **MUST** be informed of what is being done in its name anywhere -- not only for quality control, but also to protect both clients and volunteers. This is especially vital for volunteers who work remotely, whether in the field or online. Therefore, a volunteer who does not report is unacceptable in that role. Does this sound harsh? No, it reflects that the work the volunteer is doing is important to everyone and cannot be unreported.

First, state clearly and specifically in all volunteer position descriptions what the reporting requirements are and reinforce these expectations in all early contacts and training.

Then, design a reporting procedure that is *simple in content* and easy to *submit*.

- Give volunteers a *form* to complete! Don't expect essays...but leave room for them to *add* whatever they want.
- Ask *questions* that make sense and have meaning! Such as: some statistics/data to monitor "activity"; some indicators of *impact* or *results* - which will vary with each assignment; benchmarks or *milestones* that might be observed
- Offer *options* to report on paper by mail or drop-off, by fax, by voice on a dedicated answering machine line, by e-mail, or online via a tool such as SurveyMonkey or SurveyGizmo.

Equally important, determine who will **look at and respond to** the reports...**and follow up** when reports are not submitted.

If you do not follow up the *very first time* a volunteer does not submit a report, you send the message that it doesn't matter! Stress that you expect and will look at all reports *every time*. If you start out right, volunteers will soon comply.

A few more hints:

- If you cannot respond to reports as soon as they come in, at least thank each volunteer (automatic e-mail is fine) and promise to get back soon.
- Share non-confidential information in the reports *cumulatively* with all the other remote volunteers, so that they see how together they are making a difference.

- If you have many remote volunteers, create one or more *team leader* positions, assigning a volunteer to specifically follow up with off-site volunteers and then work closely with you.
- Remember to report to the volunteers on what you are doing, too. It's two-way communication that will help them feel in-the-loop about what is going on.

Here's a thought: If you do not look at and use the reports volunteers give you, stop asking for them!

Showing that you read and act on what volunteers tell you in their reports reinforces that reporting is useful to everyone. And many volunteers *like* to submit reports as a way of sharing what they feel they are contributing. So an effective reporting process is a form of *volunteer recognition*.

Think about *that* as you celebrate National Volunteer Week.

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. (www.energizeinc.com), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the Tip of the Month for April 2014.