

## Making the Most of Your Volunteers

**Volunteers, what a resource!** By bringing their enthusiasm and energy into our projects, they can lighten our load, expand our reach into the community, and extend our grant dollars at the same time.

On the other hand, sometimes they sign up for activities but don't show, fail to follow directions, or sop up scarce staff time and resources.

To find out how to avoid these pitfalls, we talked to several project directors about how to recruit, retain and utilize volunteers, especially youth.



Youth volunteers bring energy to projects

### Finding Volunteers

Coalitions and like-minded organizations are great places to recruit adults, but getting youth volunteers is more complicated. Because of the permissions involved with signing up minors, Jay McCubbrey, Project Director of Tobacco-Free Humboldt found that "the best way to recruit teens is by recruiting adults that are in contact with those teens -- teachers, club leaders or parents." He continued, "We put out fliers for our program at other county offices and that's where we got some of our best recruits."

Dawn Dunn, Project Director of the Tobacco Prevention Settlement Program in Santa Barbara, taps existing groups for volunteers. "The youth [who get involved] are already in some sort of club, so it's their club leader who says, 'Can you work this weekend? Can you help with this project?' We don't organize the youth, we let their adult [or youth] leader [do it]."

### Retaining Volunteers

Once you've recruited a pool of volunteers it's important to keep them motivated in working on program efforts. They need to feel like being involved is enjoyable but also is accomplishing something worthwhile.

Make it fun. "You have to make it a good time," Jay advises. "That goes with everything, I think, but especially working with the kids. Make it fun and show them how it can serve their interests, as a good opportunity."



Educating the public with a smile and jar of cigarette butts

Marjorie Lee, the director of the Tobacco Education Program in Trinity County, tries to deliver important content in an engaging way. "We'll do some type of game where they can win something and then at the same time we'll talk to them about [the task]."

Same thing with training them as data collectors. "If we're doing a training on how to conduct surveys, we usually do some type of fun warm-up game, something that they're going to enjoy. Then we do the training part of it."

Reward them with things they need and want. All three directors mentioned the importance of feeding volunteers and also taking the time to celebrate the completion of data collection or community education activities.

While food is always appreciated, other incentives can do the trick too. Dawn suggests asking the organizations you recruit from about the best incentives. "Find out what's in it for them and try to provide that. Maybe your agency has free meeting rooms and you can let them use your space."

Jay emphasizes the valuable experience that volunteers can gain. "We tell them, 'If you have your community service papers for the high school, we'll sign those so you can get that done. And it's also something that looks great on a resumé!' However, he believes that the youth often value the experience as much or more than the reward. "I think they liked [the \$25 gift certificate] but I think they would have done it without [that]. They wanted to try something out and they enjoyed it."

"After they have done so much for us, we try to make the incentive [something that] pertains to them," Marjorie explains. "In our community, we only have a movie theater in the one town. So here, a lot of kids really like to get the movie passes because they can walk to the movies. In the other community, we pick something in their [area], maybe a gift card to the local variety store. So we really try to personalize it."

### **Maximizing the Utility of Volunteers**

Some practical suggestions: Make sure you'll have enough volunteers to accomplish the task! While 20 may sign up, plan on only about half actually showing up. Then you won't get caught short.

Seek out volunteers' ideas and give them opportunities to take on responsible roles (once you've laid out what your project needs from each activity).

Marjorie finds that flexibility enhances the kids' enjoyment of their task. "We're not slave drivers, so we let them have some say in how they're going to do it. Instead of just standing at our booth with a survey, they said, 'Hey, could we walk around and get these filled out?' We said, 'Sure, go ahead and do it that way.'"



Friendly volunteers staff information table at Cancer Fair

That being said, don't hesitate to be directive when needed. Provide thorough training with enough practice and oversight so that you ensure that everyone can demonstrate what they need to do. Otherwise, the quality of your data collection or community presentations can suffer, making everyone's effort a waste of time.

Dawn has some specific advice for making interactions smoother and more productive:

- Get everyone's contact information.
- Remember that cell phones are a must for staying in touch, especially out in the field.
- Assign one adult leader and, if you can, a youth leader.
- If you only have a little money, incentivize the kid who is willing to call all the other kids to make sure they're going to be there. "It's certainly cheaper than county staff!"

Volunteers can be a valuable resource for programs, so manage them well and keep them motivated!

*Photos by: Grace Brosnahan, Dawn Dunn and Whitney Hawkins*