Best Friends

Training Playbook:
Volunteer Program Overview

Introduction

This playbook provides a general understanding of how to implement a robust volunteer program or enhance an existing program at your organization. Volunteer programs allow agencies to accomplish more each day and achieve higher end goals by adding community support to an organization's foundation. Volunteer programming is a community-based initiative that is an instrumental component to saving more animals' lives. A well-run volunteer program can exponentially increase community engagement, the shelter's workforce, and the overall quality of life for animals.

Organizations all over the country, in varying geographic locations and with a range of demographics, have successfully implemented robust volunteer programs that dramatically increase their lifesaving capacity. By utilizing shared experiences, standard operating procedures, and best practices, you can start to develop ways to leverage community members as volunteers and increase the well-being and positive outcomes for the animals in your care.

Program Overview

By offering unique opportunities for the community to get involved many agencies have effectively increased the number of their life-saving initiatives directly through their volunteer programs.

Simply put, with more trained hands you can accomplish more, all while relying on the community to be part of the solution. Whether you already have a volunteer program or are hoping to start one, how do you encourage your community to become more involved with your organization?

The following describes foundational needs, internal/external resources, and other additional steps that should be taken into consideration for successful program implementation:

- The first step to creating or enhancing a volunteer program is to make sure you **have a clear mission and can communicate** how the volunteer program fits into your mission. Provide the impact that the program will have not only in saving and enriching lives, but also the long-term impact of providing resources for the community.

- The second step is to **evaluate your operational needs** and decide what volunteer opportunities your organization can create to achieve your daily and long-term goals. You'll need to look for existing gaps in your operations and determine what positions best help cover those gaps. Consider what trainings your organization will need to better prepare staff for working with volunteers. Having staff buy-in is a critical piece to building and maintaining good relationships with volunteer team members.

- **Identify a key staff member or volunteer who will take the lead** on overseeing the implementation and management of the volunteer program. You need someone who is self-motivated, people oriented, well-organized to oversee this role. You need a project manager who can effectively ensure the impact and continuation of the volunteer program. If putting a staff member in that role is a barrier for your organization, could a trained volunteer fill that gap?

- **Create a volunteer agreement** that includes a comprehensive liability waiver. We highly recommend having legal assistance with this task. While drafts have been provided in the last section, it's important to check laws for the specifics of your locality and organization or agency.

- **Develop standard operating procedures and a handbook for staff and volunteers.** Ask yourself if they cover these essential components:

  - What roles do you offer volunteers? Most agencies have found that using position descriptions is an easy way to outline and document the requirements for each opportunity and the exact expectations of the role.

  - Who is responsible for the training and daily management of volunteers? The easy answer is everyone involved in the organization. While there should be a reporting structure just as there should be with staff, everyone in the organization can benefit from a volunteer program so everyone should be willing to help train and direct volunteers. *Staff should be trained on how to engage with volunteers and how to effectively communicate organizational needs.*

  - Who should volunteers contact if they have questions, ideas or concerns? As previously mentioned, volunteers should have an identified program

manager. Supervising, supporting and evaluating your volunteers will assure them that they are just as valued as your employees. Making sure to include all accessible contact information in your handbook is ideal.

- To recruit volunteers, **create marketing materials** for social media, your organization's website, radio spots, news outlets, and print distribution (e.g., flyers to hand out). Community members are willing to volunteer, but they often don't know when, where, or how and it's up to the organization to get that information out into the community. Be specific about what your needs are. You should already have detailed position descriptions identifying what your organizational needs are, so utilize them to help target community members who have the skills and time to help. Don't forget to utilize free websites such as volunteermatch.org to assist in your recruiting needs.

- Bring potential volunteers on board through an **open house** that gives them general insight into your organization and its mission. Consider including a tour of the facility and/or an overview of the roles they can fill. Keep in mind that an open house should allow the community to come and learn about your organization with no further commitments required. **Volunteer applications** should be taken after the open house to give potential applicants a chance to see if the program is the right fit for them.

- **Training should be ongoing** and should provide volunteers with guidelines and skills to perform their role. Many agencies find that online courses are a speedy and cost-efficient way to train volunteers. It also allows for more flexibility in the hours of training available, which in turn can mean more buy-in and participation. Volunteers and staff should be performing duties in the exact same ways, so when building any training courses make sure **they are consistent with how staff are trained.** Volunteers are essentially an unpaid workforce and when we approach their training with as much importance as we do staff members', we invest in their development.

- Organizations should provide ongoing engagement that goes beyond training or developing volunteers' skill sets. **Your volunteer engagement plan should include how you communicate with volunteers about needs, feedback,**

kudos, impact, and progress. It should reiterate what your expectations are of volunteers as well as their expectations of you and how you plan to show appreciation, expand opportunities, and make changes.

- Monitoring retention in a volunteer program is one way to ensure the success of the program. **Volunteers want to be deeply engaged in exchange for their time. They want to feel that their time is well spent and they want to know the impact their volunteering has with the overall mission**. A poor retention rate may signal that you need to examine the volunteer roles, training, development, and engagement to discern what factors have reduced or ended a volunteer's commitment.

Program Composition

Volunteer programs can vary greatly, depending on the needs of the organization and the response from the community, and can include both on-site and off-site opportunities. Here are a few examples:

- **Fostering assistance:** Many community members who love animals are willing to open their homes temporarily to pets in need. Fostering is a volunteer-based program that increases a shelter's capacity, reduces stress for the animals, promotes their health and often increases adoptions, all while reducing the costs of care. For more information on foster programs, see our operational playbook [here](#).

- **Animal care assistance:** Providing optimal care for the shelter population is often a daunting task for staff because there is so much to do each day. Volunteers can easily fill the gaps in operations for all species of animals by helping with cleaning, feeding and enrichment. Using volunteers for animal care not only allows us to enhance the level of care, but it does so at a nominal cost, all while deepening community support and engagement.

- **Adoption assistance:** Trained volunteers can easily assist with adoptions, whether it's by providing feedback or insights about the animals or counseling prospective adopters. Having volunteers in this role can save time and money and it directly contributes to increasing the number of positive outcomes for the animals in an agency's care.

- **Animal Control Assistants:** Don't forget every department could always use some extra hands! Think about creating a ride along volunteer position for your officers or having volunteers help out in dispatch. Trained volunteers can go on calls with ACOs and enter all case information in the databases for the calls. This volunteer opportunity allows ACOs to get on the road to their next call much faster and allows

for more animals to be assisted. This opportunity also helps showcase the needs of the communities and provides learning opportunities on outreach for the volunteers.

- **Community awareness, fundraising and advocacy assistance:** It's a lot of work to build community awareness, develop partnerships, solicit donations, and change public policies and laws. As community members, volunteers are often some of the best individuals to assist with these endeavors. They can garner their peers' support in significant ways at minimal cost to the organization.

- **Assistance with transport and transfer operations:** Transfers and transports are often a key source of positive outcomes for the animals. As with adoptions, volunteers can easily play a significant role here, directly contributing to positive outcomes while often reducing costs.

Sample Procedure and Program Information Documents
Now that you have a general understanding of the foundations of a volunteer program, the following documents may act as templates/guidelines to assist you in building some of the key components. Keep in mind that there is no perfect form of implementation. Using the considerations and recommendations above, you should use the following resources only as building blocks when creating your own standard operating procedures or documents (both internal and public). If you need further assistance or clarification, please do not hesitate to reach out to your regional strategist, regional director, or the Best Friends national shelter support team at team2025@bestfriends.org.

- Volunteer Staffing - How to Fill the Right Seats on a Half Empty Bus Webinar
- Foundations of Volunteer Engagement - e-Learning Module
- BFAS Volunteer Recruitment Webinar
- BFAS Remote Volunteer Engagement Webinar
- Best Friends Volunteer Handbook
- *Humane Animal Control* manual, Volunteer Programs
- Maddie's Fund Webinar: Animal Shelter Volunteer Management by Laura Frank
- ASPCA Advocacy Volunteer Program: sample