

# Implementation Guide Series Coordinating Volunteers

## Inside:

Every community has volunteers who make it a better place to live, work and play. They are often ready and willing to tackle even the most difficult jobs if given the right tools and encouragement. You can tap into this valuable community resource for an organization or project that needs help, if you start with a few simple steps for volunteer management.



# Volunteers

## Identify specific volunteer activities

Before you ask anyone to help with a project or join an organization, make a list of tangible ways in which they may be able to contribute. Have a brainstorming session with others already involved to create this list. Some needs will be project-specific, such as staking and mulching newly planted trees; others, like record keeping, will be ongoing in nature. Be open to the suggestions of interested volunteers- they may have skills you had not previously considered that could be a great asset.

## Identify and recruit the volunteers

Anyone in the community can be a volunteer, but every volunteer has different interests in mind. People may be looking for work experience in a certain area, the chance to help change something in the community for the better, or even an opportunity to socialize while being active. Be aware of the different motivations and needs of volunteers when you are recruiting; you may be helping them as much as they will help you.

Finding volunteers will take some legwork. Contact local service organizations and ask if you could give a short presentation at their next meeting. Let teachers at schools and colleges know that you can provide service-learning opportunities. Network with youth group leaders to find out what activities their groups can participate in to earn their merit badges. Talk with everyone you know! Word-of-mouth is the best way to find interested volunteers. Ask current and past volunteers who are committed to your organization to bring a friend to the next project or meeting, as they are your best advertisement. Use social media too!

## Organize!

Regular meetings should be scheduled ahead of time and publicize in the community. Have an agenda of items to be addressed during the meeting, identify people to lead and take notes, and do your best to start and end on time. In the meeting notes, highlight any actions that need to be taken, the person(s) who will follow-up and the deadline. Review these items at the next meeting to be sure plans are moving along or find out if someone needs help.

Project work days require a great deal of forethought and planning, but this effort will make the day go smoothly for everyone involved. When volunteers are recruited, make them aware of what will be expected on the workday, the start time and places, appropriate dress for the work and anything they should bring. Have a check-in table where volunteers can register, turn in any required registration forms, make name tags and receive information about their assignment. Designate a few volunteers, who can show up early to run the check-in table, talk with the media and run last-minute errands.

## Provide Training and Education

No matter the activity, provide training for the volunteers and help them to understand the importance of their impact. Many people will show up ready to get their hands dirty, but may not have the technical knowledge to do the job properly. Invite a trained volunteer such as a Trees Forever TreeKeeper, community arborist, or Master Gardener to demonstrate planting techniques. Arrange to have a naturalist lead a walk at an established prairie following and prairie seeding to show volunteers what to watch for at their work site. If the project involves large numbers of volunteers, train crew leaders in the necessary skills before the event and assign each one to a group of volunteers.



Provide training to volunteers so they are equipped with the technical skills to do the job.

## Food for thought...and hungry workers!

Some sweet treats always seem to provide motivation! When arranging snacks for the project, consider your volunteers and the work they will be doing. A light snack may suffice for a short project, but long days and strenuous work will call for heartier snacks or even a meal. Try to offer a variety of options for those who may need more than a sugary donut and soda. Why not cookies and granola bars, water and juice? Also consider how the weather will affect the needs of volunteers. Ice cold water is great on a summer day, while coffee and hot chocolate hit the spot on a chilly morning. Check with local merchants and service groups that may be able to donate the food for a volunteer project, and be sure to thank them for their contribution to the success of the day.



*Provide treats to your volunteers to show your appreciation.*

## Safety first!

Keep the personal safety of volunteers in mind during the project planning phase. Contact all stakeholders, such as landowners, utility companies, contractors and the city. Address any safety concerns they express. Arrange for special equipment, like safety vests and gloves. Determine if there is any equipment that should only be operated by experienced professionals.

Bring a well-stocked first aid kit to the project site and let everyone know that it is available. It may be helpful to designate one person to be in charge of the kit. This person should also have a cell phone in case of emergency and know the exact location of the project site. You may wish to set up a hospitality station that includes the first-aid kit, cell phone, sunscreen, extra water and cups, and a message board.

## Preventing Volunteer Burn-Out

Volunteers are busy people with many concerns besides your project. Get to know your volunteers and be sensitive to their concerns and time constraints. Dividing up the work and keeping good written records will make it easier for long-term volunteers to shift and share responsibilities as their personal commitments change. Keep all volunteers up to date on activities, even when they are not able to participate so they will continue to feel connected to the group and able to step back in when they are ready.

## Recognition

Volunteers deserve to know how valuable they are to the community. There are many ways of recognizing their skills, time and commitment. Write personal thank-you notes. Publish a group picture in the newspaper with a thank-you. Send a letter to the editor of the local newspaper commending their work. Listen to suggestions and implement when possible. Ask the mayor or city government to recognize volunteers at a meeting or city festival. Nominate outstanding volunteers for awards. Hold an annual volunteer recognition event, whether it's a formal banquet or a pizza party! Provide merit badges or patches associated with the work to scouts. Arrange free or discounted tickets to a local museum or event. Be creative and draw on the strengths of your community. Recognize volunteers through social media outlets too.

Accomplishing a project with the help of community volunteers is a rewarding experience for everyone!



rev 6/2020



## About Trees Forever

*Our mission – to plant and care for trees and the environment by empowering people, building community, and promoting stewardship – is fulfilled through cutting-edge programs and innovative practices. Through these, our trained and experienced staff has assisted community leaders and landowners across Iowa and Illinois with thousands of planting projects. Each year, on average, we work with and engage more than 7000 volunteers who give generously of their time and talents. To date, they have helped us plant more than 3 million trees and shrubs throughout Iowa and Illinois.*