VGF Best Practices Technical Recording Transcript

Jehyra Asencio ...:   Hello, and thank you for joining me here in the virtual world. My name is Jehyra Asencio Yace, and I am a research analyst and program evaluator at the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation. Today, I am here to share with you about volunteer management and engagement. Best practices that we have found are useful for any type of organization that works with volunteers and or national service members. AmeriCorps is a federal grant making agency that every year places more than $800 million in funding and more than 200,000 individuals to serve with nonprofit, faith-based, community-based, and state or local government agents. We do that through our main programs, which are AmeriCorps State and National, AmeriCorps Seniors, AmeriCorps Vista, AmeriCorps NCCC, and the Volunteer Generation Fund Program.

Our learning objectives for this session are to gain awareness of the Volunteer Generation Fund bundled implementation study conducted by the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation. Learn what AmeriCorps currently knows about the research in volunteer management best practices from the literature review and the user research conducted with state service commissions and demonstrate familiarity with identified volunteer management best practices.

The AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation has been a pioneer in the area of civic engagement and volunteering research. Each year we work with other federal agencies like the Census Bureau to look at national trends, but also provide grants to academic institutions and evaluate the work our grantee organizations are doing in the field. One of our most recent research projects is an implementation evaluation for the 2020 cohort of Volunteer Generation Fund grant recipients. In this study, we have used a mixed methods approach, including state surveys, case studies, and cross case study analysis, and have conducted a comprehensive literature review that included scholarly work, organization grant, application materials, and practitioner-based literature.

Some of the main findings from the literature reviewed showed us that there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of volunteer management practices and volunteer outcomes. Meanwhile, there is a vast practitioner knowledge base on volunteer management best practices. This literature review has been published in the AmeriCorps Evidence Exchange, an amazing repository of AmeriCorps Evidence-Based Community Intervention Programs and Research, and you can find it in the links provided with this video.

Before getting to the best practices, there are some contextual and organizational level factors that are important to keep in mind when implementing volunteer management strategies. Let's review some of the trends in volunteerism that were already happening before the impacts of the pandemic took hold. First, we have the fact that volunteers and organizations that host volunteers were already noticing the preference for episodic short-term assignments instead of affiliated regular volunteering. This means that those limited with time, but an interest in doing service on a temporary basis

are drawn to events such as Day Long House builds with Habit Habitat for Humanity, Martin Luther King Day of Service events, community park maintenance activities, or even special vacations featuring volunteer opportunities.

Second, we have the increase of use of digital tools and social media that were already rearranging how organizations interacted with their support base, including virtual volunteers that are willing to perform remote one-time or temporary services or to sign on for an extended time commitment, such as serving as an online mentor. And third, the fact that innovative engagement is needed to reestablish trust and human connection. Socially disruptive cycles and lack of trust in official institutions mean that community and nonprofit organizations are at the front lines of providing access to services and care in a complex world, and they will need to innovate in order to get volunteers in the door.

In Post Pandemic America, we have robustly documented the increase in demand for services despite declines in formal volunteering. Recruiting sufficient volunteers continues to be a big problem even when there is some data pointing that this may be temporary. In addition, there is now a documented increase in organizations recognizing that volunteers do provide significant returns on investment and that this must be better communicated both internally and externally.

Now, let's start getting into the weeds of what we mean by volunteer management and volunteer engagement. Both are essential but different. When we are talking about volunteer management, we mean the plan and processes that involve recruiting, tracking, coordinating, supervising, engaging, and retaining volunteers that support an organization. Volunteer engagement is part of volunteer management and it involves the plans and processes that ensures supporters are continually interested and actively engaged in their work. Usually there is one or more dedicated staff member in an organization responsible for managing volunteers.

Some of our organizations call them volunteer coordinator, outreach coordinator, or even volunteer connectors. But before a particular staff member can be responsible for managing volunteers, some organizational factors should be ideally put into place to ensure effectiveness. There are many factors, but the ones we will show here are part of the index of volunteer engagement developed by service enterprise program and the University of Austin.

First, an organization should have its leadership convinced and interested in the benefits of having a volunteer management system in place to achieving the organization's mission. The organization should also seek to provide the financial human space and materials necessary to engage volunteers. In complement and ideally, broad use of technology should be implemented to facilitate all aspects of volunteer engagement, including record keeping, communication, et cetera. And last but not least, appropriate planning should

be conducted based on established principles and practices of effective management.

So now let's start diving into some of the identified volunteer recruitment best practices that we have looked at in research. First, we have communicate the organization's investment in volunteers. Research has demonstrated that using marketing materials to convey that an organization in invests in and caress for its volunteers impacts participants' perception of the organization's attracts. It is then recommended that an organization may be able to effectively recruit volunteers by communicating both task oriented and emotion oriented support in recruitment materials.

Match recruitment messaging to volunteer motives. A review of studies found that matching recruitment messages to potential volunteer motives made them more likely to volunteer. Find what motivates a person to volunteer in your area of work and tailor your recruitment materials based on those interventions. Explicitly invite different populations of interest. Researchers argue that potential volunteers of a specific demographic are more interested in joining that organization when its recruitment messages emphasize that the specific demographic group have a unique added value for the work needed. For example, not all populations will relate to the term volunteer. Some organizations have provided training to their staff on the language used in volunteer recruitment and how to make that language more inclusive to diverse populations.

Provide easy entry, onboarding and remove barriers. Organizations with effective evidence-based programs have noted that providing a smooth pathway to entry makes people more likely to join your organization. Provide clear instructions and communicate what the steps of the process will be. Furthermore, keep in mind your intended demographics and its specific challenges like access to documentation, technology, internet, transportation, and even understanding of technical language. Some organizations, for example, have simplified their messaging to support those with a less complex command of English. Others have decided to have both online and in-person recruitment activities to target people that are not online. The goal is to get volunteers in the door and remove complicated onboarding tasks.

Write strong volunteer position descriptions. This practice has come up repeatedly in our study of the Volunteer Generation Fund program. Physician descriptions should demonstrate the value for volunteers even when they won't receive monetary compensation. Be specific about what is needed and expected. Also, note any requirements and trainings or other resources that will be provided. It won't hurt to highlight what the volunteer will take out of the experience. When a position requires a specific skillset, provide detailed information and target your messaging to people who have them.

Now, let's switch and go deeper into volunteer management strategies and talk about volunteer engagement and retention strategies. Remember that by

engaging volunteers, you are working towards retaining your volunteers. First strategy match volunteers to roles based on interests. Matching volunteers to their roles based on career goals has been empirically supported as best practices. In a longitudinal examination of AmeriCorps members, researchers found that members who perceive their activities to be aligned with their long-term career or job interests were more likely to complete their service terms. Based on these findings, it is suggested that organizations survey new volunteers to understand their interests at the beginning of the volunteer organization relationship to best match volunteers with roles based on those interests.

Provide training and learning opportunities. Another practice is providing orientation and training for volunteers, which not only prepares them for their role, but has been correlated with their sense of belonging in an organization. In a longitudinal examination of older adult volunteers, researchers discovered that those volunteers who felt they had adequate training and support from their organization were more likely to stay. Another study showed that volunteer perceptions of learning and development opportunities are significantly related to organizational commitment. That means feeling a strong sense of belonging and an intention to stay in the organization. This means that providing training and learning opportunities increase the chances of retaining and having engaged volunteers.

Support your volunteers professionally and emotionally. Several studies on the impact of organizational support show that volunteers' perception of both task oriented and emotion oriented organizational support were related to positive volunteer outcomes. In an examination of volunteers', general perception of these tasks and emotional oriented supports, researchers discovered that volunteers' perception of each type of support equally enhance their engagement with their voluntary work. This in turn, was positively co-related with volunteers' happiness and perceived social worth, or how one sees oneself as valued in interpersonal relationships and negatively co-related with volunteers' intent to lead.

Promote volunteer autonomy and open communication. Some studies have found that volunteer autonomy and decision making are related to service completion and retention. In the longitudinal examination of AmeriCorps members, researchers found that members who are highly involved in planning their service activities were more likely to complete their service jump. Research has also shown that volunteers who perceive that they can provide input into the decision making process is associated with positive outcomes. According to the research volunteer organizations that promote ways for their supporters to voice their opinions to leadership may promote retention and mitigate any intentions of quitting.

Clearly define volunteer roles. Role ambiguity was found by researchers to be related to feelings of burnout and increased endorsements of intentions to quit. Based on these findings, the researchers suggest using practices such as forming

written guidelines, formally outlining roles to decrease the likelihood that volunteers will feel burnout and therefore want to quit.

Foster relationships between volunteers and organizational peers. The research has shown a positive correlation between volunteer relationships with their peers, mentors and supervisors, and other positive outcomes such as intent to remain in higher satisfaction. One study showed that volunteers access to social support relating to their feelings of connectedness, which was also correlated with positive outcomes, including volunteer satisfaction and determination to continue. Therefore, to improve their retention rate of volunteers, studies that organizations promote activities that reinforce bonds among your supporters and the organization staff.

And last but not least, provide recognition and feedback. Research shows that volunteers who perceive that their organizations provide them with feedback and show them appreciation are more likely to endorse and intend to continue volunteering within an organization. There are many public free resources available that can help an organization to have a system in place to provide consistent recognition and feedback to their supporters.

In this short video, we have quickly walked through what AmeriCorps knows about current research on volunteer management and engagement, including researcher and practitioner based best practices. Let's not forget that there is wide evidence to the claim that volunteering brings out the best in America. 60.7 million people firmly volunteered with organizations between 2020 and 2021. Service continues to be a priority for millions of Americans. This means that organizations need to be ready to engage those who want to give back. AmeriCorps is the federal agency that helps organizations do precisely that, supports those who want to give back. I thank you for having stayed with me until now and encourage you to check out our resources linked to this video and in the americorps.gov/impact website. Have a great rest of day or night. Thank you.