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.

Let's be honest: You've never heard someone at a shelter, rescue group or animal welfare agency say, "We have too much staff" (or help). That's because most agencies recognize that with more staff or help, they can likely do more, and that's where volunteer programming comes in. This is one community engagement–based initiative that is an instrumental component to saving more animals in every community, and relevant whether the organization is a municipal agency or a 501(c)(3), and whether you run a brick-and-mortar shelter or a rescue group with no facility. Well-run volunteer programs can exponentially increase the community's involvement with the shelter, the shelter's workforce and its capacity for care of the animals.

Organizations all over the country, from large brick-and-mortar agencies to small nonprofits, in varying geographic locations and with a range of demographics, have successfully implemented robust volunteer programs that dramatically increase their lifesaving capacity. Utilizing their experiences, standard operating procedures and best practices, the following information will help you think about ways to leverage community members as volunteers and increase the well-being and positive outcomes for the animals in your care.

Program Overview

It's true that by offering volunteer programs, agencies can have positive outcomes for more animals. However, in addition to increasing positive outcomes by offering these unique opportunities for the community to get involved, many agencies have more easily or rapidly increased the number of programs, type of programs, and/or efficiency of existing programs to provide even more for their community's animals, often while reducing costs.

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 on a daily basis. 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, it does so at a nominal cost, all while deepening community support and engagement.

- **Adoption assistance:** Matchmaking is an art, but with the right training, volunteers can easily assist with adoptions, whether it's by providing feedback on 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.

- **Community awareness, fundraising and advocacy assistance:** It's a lot of work to build community awareness, develop partnerships and 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 no 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.

Program Composition

The examples above are just a few of the benefits afforded by a volunteer program, but you most likely see the theme: With more hands, you can do more, all while reducing costs and relying on the community to be part of the solution. So, whether you already have a volunteer program or you are hoping to start one, how do you get your community more involved?

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

- The first step to creating or enhancing a volunteer program is to make sure you have a clear mission and the ability to communicate clearly to potential volunteers how the volunteer program fits into your mission.

- The second step is to evaluate your operational readiness and decide what

volunteer opportunities you will offer. You'll need to look at existing gaps in your operations, think about what barriers exist to achieving your mission, and consider what you will need to do to prepare your staff for working with volunteers. Having staff buy-in is usually 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 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 volunteer fill that gap?

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

- Develop standard operating procedures and a manual for volunteers, including these essential components:
    o What roles or opportunities do you offer community members or volunteers? Most agencies have found that using job descriptions is an easy way to outline and document the requirements for each opportunity and the exact expectations of the role.
    o Who is responsible for the training and daily management of volunteers?
    o Who should volunteers contact if they have questions, ideas or concerns?

- To recruit volunteers, create marketing materials for social media, your organization's website 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. So, you'll need to get the word out, announcing why and when your organization needs volunteer help. Be specific; remember, you should already have detailed job descriptions for your volunteer roles. Also, instead of casting a wide net in your recruitment appeals, concentrate on targeted mini-campaigns. Since you already know what you need, target community members who have the skills and time to help.

- Bring volunteers on board through an orientation 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.

- Training should be ongoing and should provide volunteers with actual guidelines and/or skills to perform the job or role they've been given. Many agencies are finding that online training (e.g., videos or webinars) is a speedy and cost-efficient way to train volunteers while giving community members more flexibility, which in turn means more buy-in or participation. If you're wondering what to teach or what is the most effective way to teach, think about how you train your staff. Volunteers are essentially an unpaid workforce and when we approach them this way, we invest in their development.

- Supervising, supporting and evaluating your volunteers will assure them that they are just as valued as your employees. They want to know that you don't keep "weak links" around just to have more volunteers. A volunteer who is not performing or being helpful can slow down an event or the entire organization. Your volunteers want your organization to grow just as much as you do.

- Organizations should provide ongoing engagement that goes beyond training or developing volunteers' skill sets. A volunteer engagement plan involves much more than just creating a quality experience for volunteers. Your plan should include how you communicate with volunteers about needs, feedback and 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. Community members often volunteer because they want to help or support an organization's mission, but over the past decade, volunteer behavior has changed. These days, volunteers want to be more deeply engaged in exchange for their time. They want to feel that their time is well spent and they are making a difference. 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.

Sample Procedure and Program Information Documents

Now that you have a general understanding of running a volunteer program, the

following documents may act as templates and/or guidelines as you implement or scale up this program at your organization. Keep in mind that there is no perfect form of implementation. Using the considerations and program composition notes 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 specialist, regional director, or the Best Friends shelter outreach team at team2025@bestfriends.org.

1. Best Friends Volunteer Handbook (which shows the kinds of information you might want to include in your handbook)
2. *Humane Animal Control* manual, Volunteer Programs
3. Maddie's Fund Webinar: Animal Shelter Volunteer Management by Laura Frank
4. Maddie's Fund Webinar: Volunteer Recruitment & Engagement by Gerri Kappler
5. ASPCA Pro Webinar: Volunteer Management 201 by Hilary Hager
6. PAWS Chicago Volunteer Integration & Culture Webinar
7. ASPCA Advocacy Volunteer Program: sample
8. HSUS: Volunteer District Leader Program: sample