

# 5 Tips for Successfully Engaging Volunteers

By Betsy McFarland **ADISA**

Volunteers can be wonderful assets to your organization. They can work within and beyond your shelter or rescue’s walls, raising needed funds, providing administrative support, fostering animals, counseling adopters, and socializing animals. They can also be a vital link between your organization and the community you serve.

As ambassadors for your organization, they reach a lot of people in the community—their family, friends, co-workers, and others. However, volunteers are not simply free help; they require an investment of valuable staff time. The success of your volunteer program relies on a strong foundation. Engaging volunteers thoughtfully and strategically can dramatically increase your results.

## 1 **DEVELOP IMPACTFUL VOLUNTEER POSITIONS – IN WRITING!**

Volunteers want and deserve meaningful jobs, not just busy work that staff doesn’t want to do. Volunteer positions should be needs-driven, addressing the most pressing concerns of the organization. Having volunteer positions in writing also provides clarity for everyone involved and sets the stage for holding volunteers accountable for the work they have agreed to do for the organization.

## 2 **RECRUIT VOLUNTEERS STRATEGICALLY**

Ensure the right volunteers are placed in the right roles, and don’t accept just anyone into your program. Just as you screen and interview candidates for paid positions to ensure a good fit of skills and culture, you should do the same with volunteers!

3

**SET EXPECTATIONS FOR THE ENTIRE TEAM**

Sometimes staff feel supervision of volunteers is an “add-on” or keeping them from doing direct work themselves, rather than seeing it as part of their work, helping them to achieve their goals.

To help staff see the benefits of and embrace supervising volunteers, it’s critical to integrate volunteers fully and involve the staff at every step. Ask yourself:

- Have staff been involved in developing the positions volunteers will fill?
- Is “working with volunteers” included in staff job descriptions?
- Are expectations for working with volunteers covered in new staff orientations?
- Are staff provided training in how to work with volunteers?

4

**TRAIN YOUR VOLUNTEERS FOR SUCCESS**

After they’ve been screened and accepted into the program, all volunteers should receive training. The goal of any good training program is to help volunteers perform their jobs well, confidently, and independently, without having to constantly interrupt the staff to ask questions. Untrained volunteers are less productive, demand more staff assistance, and make more mistakes, costing you much more time in the long run. You’ve taken the time to properly screen and orient volunteers, so don’t drop the ball now!

5

**GIVE AND RECEIVE FEEDBACK**

Tell volunteers how they’re doing and get their feedback on their role and the overall volunteer program, too. Praise volunteers for a job well done. If they did a great job counseling an adopter, tell them so. Reinforce good behavior by noticing and acknowledging it. Doing so will build volunteer confidence and commitment to the program. Additionally, it’s important to address problems with volunteers immediately.



**BETSY MCFARLAND** Betsy has 20 years of experience in animal protection – much of it with The Humane Society of the United States – including serving as Vice President of the Companion Animals section for the last five years. Passionate about engaging the community, Betsy was the first to launch comprehensive volunteer engagement training for the animal sheltering field, authoring the book *Volunteer Management for Animal Care Organizations*, and publishing research on staff-volunteer relationships. Betsy is a Certified Animal Welfare Administrator (CAWA) through the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators (SAWA) and holds a degree in psychology from George Mason University.