

NEIGHBORS
BUILDING
Neighborhoods

CREATING NEIGHBORHOODS OF CHOICE

Neighbors Working Together

Recruiting and Retaining Resident Volunteers

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead, American cultural anthropologist



Your neighborhood is a product of the efforts of the individuals who use their talents and skills to sustain it. The key to improving or sustaining efforts is to continually find ways to mobilize the skills, capacities and talents of the people living in your community. This can be a big task! How and where do you start?



Getting resident involvement is not a process of persuading neighbors to do something they don't want to do. Rather, it should be seen as a process of showing neighbors they can do something they already want to do. To help you get started, create a communications plan (see NBN Academy curriculum *Creating a Neighborhood Communications Plan: Bringing Neighbors Together*).

This first step will be instrumental in guiding you through the process of identifying your target audience(s) and crafting the right messages to successfully attract the right persons for the right jobs with the right skills.



- In 2008, 61.8 million Americans - or 26.4 percent of the adult population - contributed 8 billion hours of volunteer service worth \$162 billion, using Independent Sector's 2008 estimate of the dollar value of a volunteer hour (\$20.25).
- Despite the challenges of a tough economic situation, the volunteering rate held steady between 2007 and 2008, while the number of volunteers slightly increased by about one million.
- Over 441,000 more young adults (age 16–24) volunteered in 2008 than 2007, presenting an increase from about 7.8 million to more than 8.2 million.
- Neighborhood engagement levels have risen sharply since 2007, with a 31 percent increase in the number of people who worked with their neighbors to fix a community problem and a 17 percent increase in the number of people who attended community meetings.

The Basics

Why Recruit?

Of course having neighbors volunteer their time and energy will help get the project done, but recruiting has other benefits as well. Bringing neighbors together builds a sense of shared purpose and collective action to improve their neighborhood. A study conducted by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation entitled “Soul of the Community” explores what brings people to a community and what makes them stay. An important finding was “a significant relationship between people’s passion and loyalty for their community and local economic growth.” A diverse group of residents working together will help with creating new ideas for future projects, retain neighbors who will feel invested, and keep the neighborhood invigorated.

Why Residents Participate

People volunteer for all kinds of reasons. You’re already a step ahead because you have a common interest: your neighborhood. Neighbors will be interested in maintaining or improving the quality of life in their community. Other motivations can be more personal and understanding this can help manage expectations and identify ways to retain volunteers.

People participate for:

- Personal growth and achievement
- Recognition and feedback
- Giving something back or to help others
- To set a good example
- To gain work experience



Recruiting

One of the most important steps for volunteer recruitment is planning and design. A volunteer program is a two-way street. It must meet the needs of the neighborhood while meeting the needs of the volunteer. So before you begin to recruit, gain an understanding of your neighborhood history, culture and needs.

You should be able to answer the following questions:

- What is the overall goal for the project?
- How are you going to communicate the goal and project in your recruiting?
- How have residents typically been utilized in prior volunteer projects?
- Do you have the right tools to get the job done?
- Which prior projects have been successful? Which have not?
- Can you speak about your neighborhood's ideas and plans?
- What skills and interests are appropriate?

The assignment or job function for each who are volunteering must be clearly defined. Create a document that outlines the scope of duties for each task that is assigned. This type of document serves for keeping the project on target and the volunteer focused. In addition to developing a well-planned project, look at how to measure volunteer impact. Your neighborhood's successes will be a great tool for marketing and PR to stakeholders for future recruiting and retention of current volunteers.



Neighbor Recruitment Worksheet

Neighborhood Project Description: _____

Project start date: _____ Approximate # of volunteers needed: _____

Project length and time commitment that will be needed: _____

List of duties to be performed and/or skills needed: _____

Which of these duties could youth and seniors do? _____

Identify project teams: _____

List team leaders with contact info: _____

Ways to Recruit

Neighborhood organizations initially can attract members through well-publicized meetings and by directly involving people in group projects. However, many groups inadvertently restrict their numbers by making volunteer announcements and membership forms available only at meetings. Taking the time to create a communications plan will help dramatically in identifying the *who* and the *how* in recruiting. Tactics to look at include:

- Targeted mailings
- Welcome packets for new residents
- Neighborhood brochures
- Posters, signage, A-frame sign board, banners
- Offer a business membership category in your organization
- Recruit local businesses to advertise/promote their services in your group's newsletter
- Hold a community open house to inform and present neighborhood goals and accomplishments

Approach local stakeholders to display information on the neighborhood project or event for recruiting volunteers, and for getting in-kind donations.

- Churches
- Grocery stores
- Doctors' offices
- Real estate offices
- Schools
- Hair salons and other local businesses
- Military bases/retired military groups
- Parent groups
- Restaurants

And don't forget the power of a face-to-face approach. According to a University of Texas report on volunteering, 85% of people who are asked to volunteer, do! As affective as websites, flyers and social media may be, the best way to get a core group of residents to the table is going door-to-door and asking neighbors in person to participate.

Motivating and Inspiring

Once you have identified a core group of volunteers, it is important to motivate and inspire active participation. Some volunteers will be interested in using skills they already possess while others will want to learn new skills.

As a neighborhood leader, it is important that you communicate and balance the needs of volunteers with the needs of the neighborhood. The more the volunteer feels valued, the more likely they will have a sense of ownership. The more they have a sense of ownership the more they will participate. Treat volunteers with respect, give guidance and make sure there is two-way communications. And, celebrate and have fun!



Retaining Volunteers

Obtaining new participants is only half the battle. Volunteer retention is the other half! For every member who is active in the organization, there are at least two who would have stayed involved if they had been properly motivated. So how do you properly motivate? As mentioned earlier, developing a list of activities that include job functions and approximate time commitment for each task will help keep volunteers focused. Feed their passion by identify projects and causes they really want to participate in. Ask what the volunteer would like to do, and match with a task accordingly. Show respect by giving them responsibilities by delegating tasks and being in charge of something.

Communication is also key in retention. Prompt and thorough communication before, during and after the project will keep them motivated especially when you highlight the work they are doing and the impact they are making. As part of communication, make sure to say “thank you” often. Think of creative ways of thanking the them. It will go a long way to bringing them back.

Activities and meetings should be fun. Making neighborhood activities a constant drudgery will quickly burn out volunteers and organizers. Have parties and celebrations to enjoy neighboring and have

participants wear name tags to get to know each other. Be careful about giving the appearance of cliques. New members who see the same people running every project may feel excluded and may decide participating is not worth their time and effort. Make an effort to involve everyone at your social events, including children and the elderly. Everyone’s support and talents are essential!



Involving the youth in your community is vital in creating a sustainable and cohesive neighborhood. As part of your general recruitment efforts, ask around to see if there is an adult in the neighborhood who would like to head up a youth group. You may have a neighbor who is a teacher, coach or other youth related professional that would be a great asset in developing programs and events for youth.



For youth program and volunteer ideas check out www.dosomething.org or visit the Department of Recreation, Parks and Open Spaces, Youth Services: www.norfolk.gov/rpos/youth_services.asp

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