

Volunteers (noun, plural): one of the greatest resources that exist in the nonprofit sector. While volunteers are not, in fact, “free labor” due to their hidden costs (recruitment, training, monitoring, etc.) they are still an incredible asset to a nonprofit, particularly if an organization is strategic. To fully appreciate the impact of volunteers and how they interact with nonprofits, the following questions must be addressed. How do volunteers contribute to the mission of a nonprofit? What are the issues that may arise with volunteers and how can an organization circumnavigate those issues?

Volunteers come in many forms, but the main categories outlined by Anne E. Preston in *Financing Nonprofits* are: skilled (volunteers provide specialized services), unskilled (a misnomer that indicates that the specific role does not require any specialized training), substitute (volunteers can replace the work output of a paid employee), and complimentary (volunteers can bolster the work output of a paid employee). While people volunteer for a variety of reasons, “values is always the most important motivation” (Preston, 2007, p.199). Well, that, and even more importantly, *being asked to volunteer*. Once integrated into a nonprofit’s system, the impact a volunteer can have is only limited by the imagination of the organization. Lincoln Park Community Services (LPCS), is an example of an organization that has successfully tapped into the imagination of its employees and volunteers alike.

Throughout its history, LPCS has leveraged its volunteers to cook meals for the guests of its shelter, teach daily life skill classes, staff its front desk, and provide overnight support. The food donated and cooked by volunteers has sustained guests of the shelter throughout the years, reducing LPCS’s programmatic expenses. Furthermore, volunteer teachers complement the work of the interim housing manager while the front desk/overnight volunteers are cost-saving substitutes for the organization. As a former volunteer and associate board member of LPCS, I

can say that I've happily fulfilled nearly all these roles and then some. Over the course of my two years as an associate board member, I worked closely with a fellow board member to innovate and execute the documentary theatre project - "The Homeless Monologues." Aside from raising awareness of LPCS's mission, we raised over \$20,000 in two years from ticket sales and donations at the event, all with a minimal involvement of LPCS staff and resources. Such is the power of volunteers.

As stated before, volunteers are not free. The time spent recruiting, onboarding, and retaining volunteers can be seen as a cost to the organization; however, there may be more efficient ways to approach these endeavors. For instance, can't recorded virtual training videos be used to streamline the process and reduce this cost? Furthermore, what if a board member (or a committee) was designated with the specific tasks of volunteer recruitment, training, and retention (by designing nonpecuniary benefits), effectively taking this off the plate of paid staff?

References

Anne E. Preston, "Volunteer Resources" in Dennis R. Young (Editor), *Financing Nonprofits: Putting Theory into Practice*, Altamira Press, Co-published with the National Center on Nonprofit Enterprise (Lanham, MD., New York: 2007), pp. 339-372.