



Chapter 10

IMLA Volunteer Section

Recommendations

Volunteers benefit shelter operations in a number of ways. Having the community involved in operations in Municipal shelters is the best way to save money, foster good will, garner more positive support and is a direct display of an organization being transparent with their community. The other reason for having volunteers involved is to augment operations and to have more hands to help implement or improve programs. Example of jobs for volunteers that we see many shelters have: Dog walkers, Dog trainers, Cat cuddlers, Laundry helper, Animal Care support, Adoption staff, Community liaison, Greeter, Animal Control/Field officer helpers, Community Cat Helper, Veterinary assistant.

If you have a job or a need, there's a good chance that a volunteer can help. And just as good a chance that a volunteer will step up who wants to.

Engaging citizens to resolve animal-related issues in the community has been used by some municipalities for many years and this approach is increasingly gaining popularity. When you bring the community in and treat them as part of your team, you will find they will be your biggest supporters and your greatest asset to saving lives and helping to keep costs under control.

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Barriers or Concerns

There are many localities that feel they can't allow volunteers for several reasons. Below are the ones that most common:

1. Liability concerns – afraid of a volunteer getting bitten, or injured that would cause a lawsuit
2. Negative PR around operations or internal issues
3. Staff time to train and supervise
4. Volunteers might cause “problems” or become whistle blowers
5. Volunteers might do something wrong and create a problem for operations or leadership

Solutions

We know there are some fears around allowing the public to help in a shelter environment. But there are easy steps, strategies and tools you can employ to set up volunteers for success.

1. Determine needs, create applications, jobs and job descriptions
2. Create program procedures, documents, forms and training. A code of conduct or ethics will be important to have to set expectations
3. Recruit and train volunteers
4. Administer the program

To learn more about how these solutions are implemented and examples please continue reading.

One of the most important ways to improve shelter volunteer involvement is to identify the needs and areas where volunteers can assist. Each department should make a list of jobs that could use extra help, the jobs that aren't getting done currently, and professional roles that could help the organization improve. Then each job should have a job description, requirements, who they report to, goals and expectations of time.

Example of jobs for volunteers¹

Overview of volunteer positions

- Administrative
 - Assist adoption and front desk staff.
 - Assist with educational and children's programs.
 - Data entry.
 - Social media, pet photographer, adoption writeups
- Dogs
 - Dog walking.
 - Dog adoption attendant.
 - Assisting with play groups, training classes, etc.

It's important to remember that most people who come to the shelter to volunteer have honest intentions to help the organization and the animals. The chances of finding a volunteer with an animal cruelty or neglect conviction on their record are so low it is not worth the amount of resources utilized. These types of checks can create an untrusting environment with the public and lessen their involvement, as well as bottleneck receiving badly needed free help being offered.

- Adoption Event help
- Cats
 - Cat adoption attendant.
 - Petco/Petsmart Care.
 - Cat socialization.
- Pet Care
 - Morning cleaning.
 - Spot cleaning.
 - Laundry/dishes.
 - Prepping medicine meatballs.
 - Prepping treats and enrichment tools.

Job descriptions²

Job Title

Reports to: (*position title, department or division*)

Organizational Impact: (*How is this position helping the animals and/or supporting the mission of BF? 1-2 sentences*)

Position Function/Goals/Deadlines:

Time Commitment and Location of Work:

Core responsibilities:

(Use as many bullet points as needed, listing brief action-oriented duties)

Qualifications/Requirements:

Treating volunteers like staff regarding having proper training, guidelines, reporting structure, expectations and confidentiality agreements is critical to successfully having volunteers.

[Here is a case statement](#) from the Arlington, Texas Animal Services division that is a great resource on these steps.³

Recruiting Volunteers

The first thing that animal lovers who visit a shelter want to know is this: “What must I do to become a volunteer at your facility?” Many of our volunteers joined the program after asking staff or current volunteers about it, either at the shelter or during off-site events. However, each organization has its own specific wants and needs for volunteerism.⁴

- **Easy Targeted Recruitment:** targeted recruitment may be required because specific skill sets are needed, for example, Arlington Animal Services recruited volunteers with specific skills for our new photography studio. A “How to Become a Volunteer” information card, containing frequently asked questions and answers along with contact information, can be a helpful tool in recruiting volunteers both on location and off-site. Distributing the information cards to interested customers allows staff to immediately capture them as potential volunteers.
- **Recruiting Group Volunteers:** Volunteers may also come in groups, such as high school or college students or workers from local businesses. Groups can assist with special projects designed to be completed within a specific time frame, or the shelter may have simple duties assigned to these volunteers, such as cleaning, greeting guests and washing dishes. These types of volunteer opportunities are usually short-term (e.g., one day) and require

a special short-term project waiver rather than the regular volunteer approval process.

- **All ages:** Your volunteer pool can, and should, include all ages, from children to mature adults. Specific tasks will require age restrictions, of course, so these concerns should be addressed during the design of protocols for each area of volunteer opportunity. Younger volunteers can attend educational programs and assist with limited-duty projects such as sanitizing doorknobs, cleaning windows, or sweeping and mopping. Many times, their youthful enthusiasm leads to them becoming adult volunteers or employees with hopes and dreams of helping animals. Volunteers 18 years or older can receive specialized training within your organization that could possibly lead to a career within the animal welfare field. In all cases making sure you have your liability forms signed by parents or guardians in cases where the volunteers are younger than 18 will be an important step in your process.

Application Ideas⁵

Application Do's

- Logo/branding of your shelter.
- Mission and brief impact statement.
- Personal information such as name, phone, email, address, employer.
- Emergency contact(s).
- Availability of the individual.
- Areas of interest - this should connect to your mission and roles needed at your organization.
- Selection of skill-sets the individual has outside of direct animal care - this is a great way to identify and leverage help for current and future needs.
- How did they hear about the volunteer program?
- Why do they want to volunteer at your shelter?
- Any allergies or other limitations that may require accommodation or may restrict volunteer activities.
- Agreement and/or waiver to volunteer with your shelter.

Application Don'ts

- Don't make the application too wordy.
- Don't use jargon or shelter-specific language.
- Don't just file the application and ignore the details from the applicant.
- Don't just have one type of application - be sure to customize for adult, minor, group, community service and foster volunteers.
- Don't forget skills-based volunteers! (*See ideas in the resources section below*)

Background Checks

It's important to remember that most people who come to the shelter to volunteer have honest intentions to help the organization and the animals. The chances of finding a volunteer with an animal cruelty or neglect conviction on their record are so low it is not worth the amount of resources utilized. These types of checks can create an untrusting environment with the public and lessen their involvement, as well as bottleneck receiving badly needed free help being offered. Plus, the time

and cost associated with background checks is not worth the results you obtain.

If you do decide to go this route, we suggest that you track it and see how many people end up not being able to volunteer as a result of background checks and then re-evaluate to see if it is worth the time and cost.

Concerns of injury

We understand that being in a shelter carries certain risks, such as the potential of animal bites or injuries, and other types of potential liabilities. Every shelter that allows volunteers has them sign a release or a contract before volunteering. This can help mitigate many of the legal risks. The key to limiting liability lies in the specific language of the release. In *Biscamp v. Special Pals, Inc.*, an Appeals Court in Texas affirmed the trial court's finding that the waiver that Appellant signed prior to volunteering with Special Pals expressly released it from "all liability caused by its own failure to ensure a safe environment for volunteers with respect to the risk of injuries from dog bites that might occur."⁶

Here is one example of a release statement.⁷

Release

I understand that the handling of animals and other Volunteer activities on behalf of the LHS may place me in a hazardous situation and could result in injury to me or my personal property. In consideration of the premises, the mutual promises herein contained and LHS allowing me to donate my services to the LHS, and on behalf of myself, and my heirs, successors, personal representatives and assigns, I hereby release, discharge, indemnify and hold harmless the LHS and its directors, officers, employees, volunteers, and agents, and their successors and assigns, from any and all claims, causes of action and demands of any nature, whether known or unknown, arising out of or in connection with my activities and the donation of my services as a Volunteer for the LHS.

** If you are under 18, we must have your parent or legal guardian's signature.

Training Volunteers

First and foremost be clear with volunteers on what is expected of them. Have clear code of conduct will go a long way to establish the appropriate manner in which volunteers should behave in the shelter environment.

Code of conduct⁸

As a volunteer you are an ambassador for our organization. We ask that you do your best to represent us and our pets well, and in order to do that, we ask that you adhere to the following policies and procedures:

- No possession or use of drugs, alcohol, or weapons will be permitted
- Harassment of any kind will not be tolerated
- Abusive behavior, racist or discriminatory behavior, verbal or physical, toward LHS staff, other volunteers, or visitors will not be tolerated
- Any negative posts on social media will not be tolerated,

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please be encouraging and point people to LHS with questions or concerns

- If for whatever reason you are no longer able to volunteer at LHS, you must notify the volunteer coordinator. You will be asked to fill out a volunteer exit survey that is meant to help improve our program.

A well-trained volunteer has the skills and knowledge necessary to be an asset to your organization.

Sometimes we might be tempted to simply throw the volunteer into a new situation. “Just watch Susan. She’ll show you what to do,” or “Just help out however you can.” After all, training takes time, and time is a resource we never seem to have enough of, right? But inadequate training can result in a variety of negative outcomes.

1. Safety risks increase for both volunteers, staff and the animals in your care.
2. Volunteers feel uncertain and uncomfortable. They may feel that their time is being wasted.
3. Staff is frustrated with having to answer the same questions repeatedly. They worry about volunteers getting hurt or causing damage. Their workload actually *increases* due to the constant demands on their attention and the need to fix mistakes made by untrained volunteers.

[Here is an entire module](#) on setting up training for your volunteers so they will be successful and safe. Remember that training staff on expectations, why volunteers are needed and how to properly train them, is important for the best results all around.⁹

Confidentiality concerns

When you hear of volunteers being whistle blowers or communicating negatively on social network channels it can be very concerning. These incidences are usually few and far between with most volunteers seeing themselves as part of the operational team and are great defenders of the organizations they help. Keeping good relationships with volunteers is a matter of setting them up like staff with a clear avenue to discuss grievances, to make them feel heard and to communicate the “why” behind your decisions.

Example of a Confidentiality statement¹⁰

- I agree I owe duties of loyalty and confidentiality to the Organization at all times during my volunteer work and following the conclusion of my volunteer work, whether voluntary or involuntary, and agree to hold in the strictest confidence all Confidential Information, unless disclosure is required by law, and further agree that I will not use such Confidential Information for my own benefit or to the detriment of the Organization and/or its Board of Directors and/or Officers during my work with the Organization or anytime thereafter. “Confidential Information” shall mean any information, including but not limited to, internal Hu-

mane Society activities, proprietary Organization information, personal information of any donor, adopter, customer, volunteer or any individual obtained at the Lynchburg Humane Society, data of any kind, animal care techniques, vendor lists, operating methods, trade secrets, costing, pricing and financial data, financial statements and projections, project results and tests, Organization business plans and proposals, data and information the Organization receives in confidence from other parties, personnel matters, or confidential matters of the organization.

Have a grievance policy to reduce the potential for things to go wrong for your shelter. This can be a tool to help address problems that arise in a quick and fair manner and to keep focus on the mission.

Different organizations handle grievances in different ways – some factors that can influence how organizations create procedures include size, culture and structure. In a municipal environment there is likely a protocol for involving the Human Resource department and it is always good to involve them in setting up your procedures.

Grievance procedures might include:

- Designated grievance “contacts” in your organization. More than one grievance contact will help to minimize potential conflicts of interest. Grievance contacts should act as a source of advice for informally clarifying the nature of grievances.
- Staged process - this is consistent with timeliness and solving problems close to their source. This would include the different stages if the grievance is not resolved at first.
- Guidelines for documentation - both informal and formal.
- Guidelines with withdrawing grievances.
- Guidelines for alerting senior leadership to grievances that include threats to physical safety or potential criminal behavior; so that all appropriate parties such as police, legal, and HR can be looped in.

Releasing or terminating a volunteer¹¹

When most of us think about releasing a volunteer, we often worry about negative repercussions. Will the terminated volunteer go to the board? Will they bash the shelter on social media? Will they call up the local TV news? Well *maybe*. On the other hand, if you keep them around, here are some things that will almost certainly happen:

- Staff frustration will grow and result in a negative attitude toward volunteers.
- There will be conflict with other volunteers.
- New volunteers will begin to think that the volunteer’s inappropriate behavior is acceptable.
- There will be negative interactions with the public.
- There will be situations with the animals that are unsafe or disruptive to their routine.

So, look at the big picture and figure out what is the best

option for your organization.

Releasing a volunteer does not always mean they are released from the organization entirely; it could mean they are reassigned to a different role.

When and how do you release a volunteer?

- Multiple small issues, such as attendance, failure to adhere to policies/procedures.
- One big issue, such as hurting an animal, being under the influence, theft.

In either case, be sure the steps to provide sufficient & timely feedback, support and warnings have been provided. And always keep accurate and timely records to create a record.

Communication with Volunteers¹²

It is important to communicate with volunteers as you would with your paid staff. Sending regular emails, posting notices on volunteer boards and having a point of contact on staff for them to go to with questions and concerns will be important.

- What do volunteers need to know about?
- Policies and procedures: What to do and what not to do. Let them know about changes that are being made, preferably *before* they happen.
- Staff roles and responsibilities: Sharing an organizational chart can be helpful. Let them know about staff comings and goings. Make sure they know who to go to in various situations.
- Special events: When are they happening? What are they about? How will they impact the volunteers? If elements change (date, time, location, etc.) provide updates.
- The animals: What is their backstory? Do they have any special health or behavioral issues? Have they been walked today? Have they been fed? Do they need to be groomed? Are any animals in quarantine? Are there any outbreaks (RINGWORM!) going on that volunteers should be watching out for? What successes have been had for adoptions?
- Media attention: Whether it's good news or bad news, give volunteers a heads up if your shelter is about to be in the spotlight. Tell them as much information as is appropriate. And be sure to give them guidance on how they should interact with the media and/or public regarding the news story.
- Facility happenings: If you know that there is going to be construction, remodeling or repairs going on at your facility, give volunteers as much notice as possible. Maybe the water or AC will be off, or they will need to walk dogs on a different route, or access to certain areas of the shelter will be closed off. This is all information that should be shared.
- Volunteer program: Of course, you need to share volunteer-specific news. Are you looking for mentors? Is there a new position they might be interested in? Is your quarterly volunteer/staff potluck coming up? Has there been a shift schedule change? Do they need to be reminded of a policy that isn't being followed? How can they share their constructive feedback?

Conclusion

A leader of a shelter once explained how he thought things should be. He had realized that he was *never* going to have a budget to hire enough staff. He realized the only way he would ever be able to make progress would be through a strong, thriving volunteer program.¹³



He came up with a new vision for the role of volunteers at his shelter. This is what he envisioned: a volunteer program that was at the core of everything the shelter did. One that would reach out to support operations, programs, services and departments throughout the shelter.

Including the community in your day to day operations will only make your agency stronger and more efficient.

Example Reference Documents

- [Example of a Volunteer Contract](#)
 - [Best Friends Animal Society Code of Conduct form](#)
 - [Miami-Dade Animal Services Volunteer Application](#)
 - [Williams County Animal Services Code of Conduct](#)
 - [Indianapolis ACS Volunteer Application](#)
1. [Volunteer Manual](#), Lynchburg Humane Society
 2. [The Foundations of Volunteer Engagement](#), Best Friends Animal Society
 3. [The Appendix on Volunteers](#), Best Friends Animal Society's Animal Control Manual.
 4. *Id.*
 5. [The Foundations of Volunteer Engagement](#), Best Friends Animal Society
 6. *Biscamp v. Special Pals, Inc.* (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2020)
 7. [Volunteer Manual](#), Lynchburg Humane Society
 8. *Id.*
 9. [The Foundations of Volunteer Engagement](#), Best Friends Animal Society
 10. [Volunteer Manual](#), Lynchburg Humane Society
 11. [The Foundations of Volunteer Engagement](#), Best Friends Animal Society
 12. *Id.*
 13. *Id.*