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DEVELOPING A VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK FOR A UNIVERSITY'S ARBORETUM AND LEARNING GARDENS

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ABSTRACT

The development and management of volunteers is important for extension organizations to meet their program goals and outcomes. A volunteer handbook was developed with the Chadwick Arboretum and Learning Gardens to support their volunteer management system. The handbook helps to support volunteer management in the organization, ease workloads, and address the needs of the volunteers. A volunteer management model was used to help guide the development of the handbook. How this handbook was developed can serve as an example to other organizations for creating their own resources for volunteers who are key to program success.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, many nonprofit organizations, foundations, civic leagues, and corporations provide beneficial human and social services (Rypkema, 1996). Volunteers are valuable assets for these organizations, which rely on their services to be successful. Most of these organizations are embracing technology such as blogs, social media tools, videos, and podcasts as educational and outreach mechanisms for reaching their volunteers and publics (Moore and Bradley, 2015). However, many of them lack the more basic tools of instructional or training manuals for volunteer development and management.

Chadwick Arboretum and Learning Gardens is an extensive, urban, green reserve of approximately 60 acres located within the Ohio State University campus in Columbus, Ohio (Chadwick Arboretum, 2016). More information about this arboretum and learning garden can be viewed at their website: <https://chadwickarboretum.osu.edu/>. It is a largely self-supporting organization and depends on volunteers for support in all areas of operation. In 2016, over 250 volunteers contributed more than 7000 hours during that calendar year.

A volunteer handbook would allow the organization to operate more efficiently and staff to focus on other tasks. Working with the organization's staff, we developed the Chadwick Arboretum and Learning Gardens Volunteer Handbook. It is an internal resource to use with volunteers who have been approved to serve in that role. The purpose of this article is for Extension professionals to learn about how this material was developed so they can enhance their own volunteer program efforts.

BACKGROUND

Many organizations today are becoming more aware of the challenges and legal pitfalls of poor volunteer management systems. Administrators are instituting basic screening practices related to their volunteers, including providing position descriptions and requiring applications, interviews, background checks, and volunteer orientations (Schmiesing and Henderson, 2001). Providing sound management practices and being aware of volunteer rights and responsibilities creates a foundation for effective overall management (Seevers and Graham, 2012).

As organizations work with volunteers and participants from and in diverse communities, volunteer administration requires continuous identification and application of new and modified volunteer management systems and strategies to be effective (Safrit, 2006). Commonly occurring volunteer management components (e.g., identifying, training, and recognizing volunteers) have led to various models for effective and efficient administration of volunteer programs (Hange, Seevers, and VanLeeuwen, 2002). One such model used for effective volunteer administration and management is described in the next paragraph.

The PEP (preparation, engagement, perpetuation) model (Safrit, 2006) is used by many organizations and provided the guiding framework for developing the volunteer handbook described in this article. Table 1 is a modified version of the PEP model.

Table 1. The PEP (Preparation, Engagement, and Perpetuation) Model for Contemporary Volunteer Administration

Professional Domains	Topic Area Domains
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<i>Volunteer Preparation</i>	Professional and Personal Development
<i>Volunteer Engagement</i>	Recruitment Selection Orientation and Training Coaching and Supervision
<i>Volunteer Perpetuation</i>	Recognition Retention

Note. Modified version of PEP Model from Safrit (2006).

The PEP model served as a check and balance about what content to include and how to organize the content. For issues related to recruitment and retention of volunteers, "learning new things" was a primary reason they volunteered and "lack of communication" was a top reason they quit (Boone, Payne, Boone, and Woloshuk, 2013). The PEP model includes components related to both recruitment and retention.

VOLUNTEER HANDBOOKS

Along with applying effective volunteer administration strategies, having a volunteer handbook is crucial to an organization because it provides current information about volunteer management in the organization and serves as a reference manual addressing the needs of the organization's volunteers. Volunteer handbooks are also key for establishing foundational risk management strategies, helping protect volunteers, clients, and other organizations from unintended harm by providing guidelines for acceptable conduct. Volunteer handbooks can take many forms, including hard-copy binders and digital/electronic options. Digital versions vary from PDF documents to interactive websites with blogs, video clips, PowerPoint presentations, and others (Hardy, Nagano, and Robotham, 2006).

Volunteer handbooks are often designated as the single source of documented information to provide volunteers consistent, update-to-date resources and guidance. An investigation into a dysfunctional master gardener program in Salt Lake County indicated that miscommunication was usually the cause of confusion for Master Gardeners (Wagner, 2012). In their manual for Master Gardeners that included policies and procedures, the volunteers were required to sign a commitment document to be active in the Utah State Extension (USE) Salt Lake County Master Gardner program. As a result, volunteers and USE faculty brought about clear communications for expectations, along with policies and procedures. The volunteer handbook or manual served as a key resource to alleviate communication and confusion issues.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

The PEP model for volunteer management was used to guide the development of the volunteer handbook. The first component of PEP is preparation (P). Volunteers should be prepared properly for volunteer service. We (lead author) started to develop the volunteer handbook by gathering documents essential for preparing individuals for their role as volunteers. This included manuals, grant proposals, volunteer policies, and other external sources. In addition, interviews were conducted with the arboretum and learning gardens director and program managers. The next component is E for engagement. Engaging volunteers through orientation, supervision and coaching are important for both the program and volunteer. Information to consider for the handbook in this area would be about the rights and responsibilities of volunteers in the organization, and expectations of and benefits to volunteers. The last component of PEP is perpetuation (P) for the recognition and retention of volunteers. One key aspect to consider for the handbook was helping volunteers understand their importance to the organization and using the handbook to help create a welcoming environment for the volunteers. It is significant to note that the participation of volunteers in the handbook development process was critical for its development.

DESCRIPTION OF THE VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

The Chadwick Arboretum and Learning Gardens Volunteer Handbook serves three major purposes: relaying crucial organizational information to volunteers, establishing clear volunteer expectations, and emphasizing the importance of volunteers to the organization. It provides a brief overview of the Chadwick Arboretum and important components including history, opportunities, policies, and activities. It is designed to acquaint the volunteers with the program and serve as a guide and reference, in addition to stating official policies governing volunteer activities and useful information that assist the volunteer experience. Table 2 identifies the main content of the handbook.

Table 2. Table of Contents for the Volunteer Handbook

1. Overview and purpose	10. Media policy and photo release
2. Welcome letter	11. Emergency procedure
3. Organization mission statement	12. Safety guidelines
4. Objectives/goals of organization	13. Volunteer benefits
5. Site map	14. Hours of operation
6. Organizational chart	15. New volunteer application process
7. Garden facts and figures	16. Etiquette
8. Volunteer opportunities	17. References
9. Major events	18. Appendix: forms, agreements and claims

EVALUATION

Feedback from the Chadwick Arboretum and Learning Gardens' staff indicate that the process for developing the volunteer handbook was positive. The creation of the handbook provided strategies for the organization to consider how to effectively educate and engage volunteers in the many opportunities to contribute as volunteers. The Chadwick Arboretum and Learning Gardens use cloud-based technology and social media to recruit, share, and store volunteer information for quick communication to their potential and current volunteer base. This organization is a leader in thoughtful, sustainable practices which includes using electronic and web resources rather than print material. This approach is similar to an online Pesticide Training Package developed by Washington State University for high quality, low-cost resources for the adult learner (Daniels and Miller, 2016).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Extension programs throughout the United States have realized volunteers are critical to reach program goals and outcomes. Nationwide, hundreds of thousands of volunteers contribute countless hours to assist with 4-H Youth Development, form master gardener and master naturalist groups, and various Family and Consumer Science programs. The challenge facing all extension programs is volunteer management. Management of volunteers includes vetting, training, recording hours, and determining costs among others. The development of a handbook can greatly assist with these management challenges. A handbook standardizes what is often haphazard procedures for handling the myriad of tasks associated with volunteer management. This enables managers to more effectively and consistently deal with volunteers while helping those volunteers know what is expected.

We used the PEP model for creating a volunteer handbook for the Chadwick Arboretum at the Ohio State University. All throughout the process, we worked with arboretum personnel and volunteers to ensure the handbook spelled out duties and expectations clearly. This also helped with "buy in" from all parties and greatly facilitated the development and subsequent implementation of this handbook. We successfully utilized this procedure and recommend anyone else developing volunteer manuals to follow a similar procedure.

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