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Effectively Using Volunteers in Community Economic Development

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What elements or traits lead to successful community economic development efforts? There are many answers and opinions related to this question. A frequent response refers to local leadership and/or local ownership of community efforts. Successful communities typically have a strong vision of the future and wide community “buy-in” for the vision. This buy-in leads to community involvement in various initiatives with local volunteers providing the necessary labor and support.

Communities want to involve volunteers in local economic development efforts for many reasons, including the fact that economic development is a complex task, and volunteers bring many forms of expertise to the table. Volunteer efforts save money which is key in many cash-strapped communities. Volunteers also lighten the load of paid staff, if any, allowing this staff to focus on more specialized areas of work. The

volunteers also provide an important link to the community. Businesses, banks, schools, and other organizations or groups can have ties to economic development efforts through the work of volunteer associates.

A common complaint in small communities is that the “same ten people” or STP always show up and volunteer their time and efforts. This situation can lead to burn-out and limited successes. Small communities have scarce resources, and volunteer time is one of those critical resources.

This report reviews the role of volunteers in community economic development and discusses methods that can be used to identify, recruit, and retain volunteers. But first, a brief review of community economic development principles or practices and available options for job creation will be helpful.

Economic Development Options and the CARE Model

Defining Economic Development. Many professionals agree that state agencies, universities, governments, the private sector, and others must be involved in successful economic development efforts in a community. A problem arises when discussing what economic development means. Often, each group has a perception of the problem or issue based only on its own point of view. Thus, the resulting definition may involve only agricultural activity or only industrial recruitment rather than a broader definition that explores all options.

In its basic form, an “economy” is a system for meeting the needs and wants of people in a specific geographic area (e.g., community, region, state, nation, etc.), and

“development” can be defined as the improvement of well-being for residents in this area. Thus, development can include such measures as expanding the economic base, improving services, or providing equality of opportunities. Actual development activities, therefore, depend on the goals and needs identified by residents in the region of concern.

The term “economic development” refers to an expansion of the economic base through efficient allocation and use of available resources. A working definition for economic development could be any activity that increases jobs and incomes above a given community’s standard or quality of life.

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In its broadest sense, economic development is a concept that suggests at least the maintenance of and, more likely, improvements in the standard of living identified by residents. The community inserts its will into this ongoing and dynamic process, but quality of life certainly plays a key role.

The CARE Model. The term “CARE” provides a useful approach and summary for economic development options. Specifically,

Creation refers to all local efforts to encourage the formation of new business.

Attraction refers to the traditional industrial recruitment efforts many local governments and states pursue. Community preparation, tax incentives, and other attraction strategies are familiar tools. This is a highly competitive arena because only a few businesses relocate every year, and thousands of local development organizations are seeking a business relocation or expansion.

Retention refers to activities targeted towards maintaining existing firms. Retaining 100 existing jobs in a community is just as important (or more so) as attracting 100 new jobs.

Expansion advances the concept of retention one step further. Expansion encourages the growth of existing firms.

Creation. New businesses often need support in several areas, including capital financing, labor supply, technology and assistance, and management assistance. A healthy climate for business formation addresses all these elements. New businesses capture additional income for the local economy and provide often-needed diversification.

Attraction. Industry and business recruitment is perhaps the best known economic development option and, at the state level, receives a great deal of attention. Business recruitment is also a viable local option. Local communities, however, should realistically assess their chances of recruiting an industrial or manufacturing employer and set appropriate goals.

Major metropolitan areas typically attract most large employers. Factors that influence larger employers include labor supply, transportation, location of related businesses, water or other resource constraints, and community attitude and/or preparedness.

Retention and Expansion. Most consumers purchase basic goods and services in more than one community

because of perceived differences in prices, quality, selection, or service. Leakages occur in a community or area when local residents purchase items outside the community or area. The leakages represent a loss of potential income, but steps can be taken by local merchants to capture more (not necessarily all) existing income.

Surveys of consumer shopping habits can identify potential areas for improvements. Special events and promotions can lead to more local shopping to retain income in the community, and this strategy is one in which most existing local merchants are interested. Careful analysis of various techniques will guide merchants in determining the “best” approach. The emphasis should be to help communities and regions become more competitive.

Much new job growth comes from the expansion of existing firms that often also results in higher local incomes. Retaining existing small businesses also ensures a more stable local economy. Training programs, financial assistance, and a supportive local attitude can greatly aid existing firms. Training programs are available from universities, the Cooperative Extension Service, Small Business Development Centers, and other sources regarding such topics as financial analysis (e.g., cash flow or profit forecasting), personnel management, how to develop a business plan, and other management or marketing concerns. These programs are designed to increase efficiency of resource use in existing firms in order to make them more competitive.

The CARE Model, therefore, refers to creation, attraction, retention, and expansion of local jobs. These are the principal methods or avenues for bringing new jobs to a locality. Of course, local areas can target specific sectors such as tourism, retirees, mainstreet businesses, manufacturing, or home-based business. Depending on local circumstances, a community may choose to create, attract, retain, or expand across these specific sectors.

Roles Played by Volunteers. Volunteers play important roles in all of the options. Creation efforts, for example, often include entrepreneurial support networks. Information, training programs, and technical support can reduce “red tape” and enhance the potential for success, and both volunteers and professional service providers can play key roles. In fact, current entrepreneurs who are helping and mentoring emerging entrepreneurs in a local community may be one of the most significant examples of volunteerism.

Attraction efforts in a community often involve a host team that markets the community to business prospects. Again, members of the host team may include local volunteers with specific expertise in finance, labor, infrastructure, or other specializations.

Finally, the role of volunteers in retention/expansion efforts is well understood. Often business visitation efforts and surveys are the initial step in a retention/expansion program. Volunteers, trained to contact and visit local businesses, collect pertinent information, express community support, and identify areas for improvement.

Communities have limited resources (both volunteer/professional time and funds). It is critical that some form of strategic planning is used to incorporate these resources in the most effective manner. The CARE Model offers alternatives, but community leaders must decide which of these represent the greatest opportunities). A more detailed discussion of strategic planning for economic development is available in the resources section (Woods, Frye, and Ralstin 2002).

Volunteers as Community Leaders. Preparing an economic development plan of action requires many resources, including the time and effort of volunteers. One

of the more difficult steps in planning involves establishing a steering committee or leadership team. It is important to realize that these people volunteer their time and energy for the betterment of the community, and when used correctly, volunteers can be highly effective.

Economic development plans take the time and effort of many people. Some communities have staff members who help coordinate and lead economic development plans; however, these plans have many components and often there are not enough people on staff to accomplish what needs to be done. Many communities have no paid staff working in economic development and, therefore, everyone involved is a volunteer. Whichever the case, having volunteers helps strengthen ownership in the task, leading to a greater communitywide acceptance, understanding, and credibility of the economic development plan. The more people involved, the easier it becomes to obtain the community's support and interest. The remainder of this report discusses identifying, attracting, managing, and retaining successful volunteers.

Identifying and Attracting Volunteers

Identifying and attracting volunteers requires careful planning beforehand to save time in the long run. Before searching for volunteers, the community should develop individual volunteer plans. This approach allows a community to better understand the purpose of a volunteer and, consequently, the community is better equipped to answer questions posed by potential volunteers.

Why Do You Need Volunteers? Volunteers are needed for several reasons, but a primary purpose is to provide support for the economic development plan being adopted. Economic development plans can include many options and approaches. Once the community focus areas have been determined, people are needed to implement the plan. Volunteers are important because of their expertise and experience in the community.

Implementing economic development plans might involve planning events, informing the community, making necessary contacts, raising funds, and various other tasks. Determining specific reasons why volunteers are needed will help attract volunteers because details about volunteer-oriented tasks can be clearly defined. With this information, volunteers can determine whether this is something of interest and determine if they have the necessary time to commit.

How Many Volunteers Are Needed? Establishing the number of volunteers needed avoids recruiting too many, which can lead to volunteers giving their time with no workable

projects. If too few volunteers are recruited, the recruitment process may have to be repeated. Setting a goal for the number of volunteers needed will lead to better achievement of the task set to be accomplished by a volunteer group.

Personal Qualifications, Physical Demands, and Skills Needed. Jobs may require certain personal qualifications, physical demands, or specific skills. The necessary attributes must be identified before recruitment begins in order to obtain the volunteers best suited for the work.

Plans for Orientation and Training. All volunteers will need an orientation to become aware of the community's economic development plan and to take ownership (buy into it). Some tasks may require additional training. If training is necessary, deciding beforehand what type and how it will be handled is important. Volunteers need to know before they commit what orientation and training steps they will undergo. Orientation and training sessions should be well planned and presented to make the best use of volunteer time.

Once a plan is created to identify and attract volunteers, the recruitment process can begin. Consider current community leaders and their respective roles when identifying potential volunteers,

Search diligently for volunteers; the best volunteer may not be immediately the most obvious. Sometimes it helps to

look for specific qualities that individuals possess. People who are group problem solvers, group decisionmakers, and advocates for a cause are often the most qualified volunteers. Identifying potential volunteers allows the best selection.

Recruitment – Individual Approach. If specific individuals are identified as potential volunteers, then an individual approach should be used to attract those individuals. This approach involves a direct appeal at a personal level. A solid description of the community economic development plan as well as an outlined summary of why, when, and for how long the volunteers are needed, helps when approaching potential volunteers. Often, a direct appeal is followed by a letter with promotional materials. An invitation requesting an individual's presence or involvement in a project can bring closure to a direct recruitment appeal.

Recruitment – Mass Media. If specific people are not identified, other approaches can be taken. First, the

mass media is an excellent approach because it reaches a large number of people. Advertisements through the press, television, and radio are ways to attract volunteers. Second, newsletters, organizations, schools, brochures, and window exhibits may be used to get the attention of potential volunteers.

Recruitment – Delegating. A third method involves delegating recruitment to a local organization. A local civic group may take on the task as a community service project. This method allows the community economic development plan to gain more communitywide exposure; it also gives the delegated organization pride in being a part of the community's efforts. A comprehensive list entitled "50 Techniques for Recruiting Volunteers" is available in Appendix A at the end of this publication. These techniques may be useful in the recruiting process.

Managing Volunteers

Once the volunteers have been recruited, managing them effectively is vital to the success of the community economic development plan. A significant element in managing volunteers successfully is making sure their job is rewarding. The following items help ensure a rewarding experience:

1. **Make sure the volunteers have responsibilities.**

Volunteers who know their responsibilities and know they will directly affect the community economic development plan are more likely to be satisfied with giving their time and effort and are least likely to become burnt out.

2. **Make sure volunteers have the authority to think as well as do the job.**

Allowing volunteers to have more control over the job in which they are involved gives volunteers a sense of ownership. Ownership strengthens the volunteers' commitment to the overall plan. Volunteers tend to lose ownership if they have started a task and someone new steps in to direct their work.

3. **Develop a work structure that encourages excellence, and make sure volunteers are held responsible for achieving results.**

Volunteers who only perform tasks and never become a part of the "big picture" or the end results

often lose interest in the plan. Therefore, creating needed jobs that require volunteer responsibility increases the volunteers' satisfaction with their work for the community.

4. **Decide how to measure whether the results are being achieved.**

It is important to evaluate the plan to see that set goals are achieved. Continual monitoring of volunteer work helps identify problems and recognize other opportunities. Monitoring the progress also lets volunteers know how they are performing. Positive results are self-motivating and help prevent burn-out and retain volunteers.

Training and Orientation. The training and orientation process should begin as soon as volunteers are recruited. The purpose of training and orienting the volunteer is to familiarize them with the goals of the community since newly recruited volunteers may be somewhat unfamiliar with community efforts. Special meetings for newcomers may be held to help with volunteer orientation. Some one-on-one training may also be necessary. As soon as new volunteers are aware of the goals and strategies in the community economic development plan, they should be shared with the entire committee so they can observe how the committee works together. A checklist for orienting volunteers to the committee or organization is provided in Appendix B.

Simply training and orienting volunteers to the community economic development plan is not enough to achieve the best results possible. Volunteers need the motivation that promotes in them a desire to contribute to the plans being undertaken.

Enabling volunteers involves coordination, motivation, encouragement, and recognition for tasks completed. Volunteers must be highly motivated to put forth their best efforts. Lack of motivation often is a cause for a failure of community economic development plans. Several steps can help ensure that a job is motivating.

Set High Standards of Activity. Make sure all tasks have purpose and meaning. Menial tasks will quickly kill the motivation of volunteers. Having all volunteers involved in important tasks and allowing all volunteers to contribute to the cause provides a sense of being needed. This, in turn, motivates volunteers to continue to give time to the committee.

Set Challenging Goals. Setting obtainable, yet challenging, goals motivates volunteers to work harder. Many volunteers are accustomed to facing challenges and, when they face a challenging task, they are motivated to give their time and energy to the community.

Have Enough People to Do a Job. Overworking volunteers is a sure way to burn them out because many, if not most, volunteers have other jobs and careers. If a volunteer has too much work, sees no tangible results, or spends too much time volunteering, enthusiasm for the community economic development plan usually suffers.

Make Sure Volunteers Know Their Job. Providing an accurate description of the job assignment prevents volunteers from

wasting time working on something that may have already been accomplished or that isn't needed.

Make Participating Worth the Volunteers' Time. It is important to remember that volunteers' time is not unlimited. Holding organized meetings with a set agenda makes the meetings flow smoothly and represents an effective use of time. Volunteers will continue to attend meetings that are run efficiently and accomplish clearly stated objectives.

Encourage Group Efforts. People are often motivated by friendly interaction with other people. Also, the more people doing a task, the faster it is usually completed. Several minds working together often creates more ideas and advances the process. Volunteers should feel that their job is important and that they belong to the "team." Volunteers working in groups creates a sense of belonging to the "team."

Pay Attention to the Job the Volunteer Is Doing. Paying attention to the progress that volunteers are making is important for two reasons. First, volunteers who make good progress and accomplish goals must be recognized. Second, when things go wrong, or do not meet the standards set by the committee, they must be addressed. If activities go in the wrong direction and are ignored, they take longer to correct than if it is recognized early that a volunteer's work does not meet expectations. If a volunteer is off track with an assignment, it may be necessary to reassign jobs.

Recognize and Reward Good Work. Volunteers must know that they are appreciated. All volunteers need some type of recognition, whether small or large. One of the best ways to motivate volunteers is to show they are making a difference. Good work by volunteers can be recognized at meetings, in person, or with a letter of thanks.

Volunteer Retention

Often volunteer programs experience costly, high-turnover rates. If volunteers leave, new ones must be recruited and trained. It takes time to begin again and can delay activation of the community economic development plan. The easiest way to retain volunteers is to manage them in a way that encourages them to stay involved. Although it may sound simple, it takes time and planning to establish a successful committee comprised of volunteers. The steps taken during the recruiting phase are often the most important. Recruiting the right person(s) for a job raises the chances for success and avoids possible problems.

Many communities search for solutions to the ever-increasing challenges in rural areas. Creating an economic

development plan can help revive small communities, but many important steps should be followed in this effort. One important step is recruiting and managing volunteers in a way that promotes success for the community.

Communities can recruit and manage volunteers in several ways; however, key points will add to the success of volunteer work and contribute to a community economic development plan.

Points to remember to successfully retain volunteers:

- Volunteers work better in well-planned and well-organized programs.

- Volunteers want to be a part of a team that includes all members involved, including the chairman and paid employees (if there are any).
- Volunteers must be assigned meaningful jobs.
- Volunteers must be recognized for jobs well done.

Volunteers provide the human capital that is often necessary to successfully implement a local plan for economic development. Techniques for volunteer identification, recruitment, and retention are offered to enhance your local economic development efforts.

Appendix A: 50 Techniques for Recruiting Volunteers

1. Place ad in local newspaper.
2. Do a radio or TV spot (Public Service Announcement).
3. Have current volunteers appear on radio, in action in the local newspaper, or on TV talk shows.
4. Get coverage in local newspaper (stories to potential volunteers about your work, individual volunteers, etc.).
5. Hold volunteer recruitment parties at your office.
6. Have open lunches.
7. Have invitational lunches.
8. Give presentations to community groups.
9. Be on the emergency speaker's list of local community groups.
10. Share your program and its needs before local boards and commissions.
11. Send out flyers.
12. Put flyers on "key posting areas" around town.
13. Put flyers in appropriate shops.
14. Put ads where likely volunteers congregate:
 - Supermarkets
 - Community and Senior Centers
 - Churches
 - Unemployment offices
 - Student Unions
 - Libraries
15. Encourage volunteers to recruit friends.
16. Put together a film or slide show.
17. Start a Speaker's Bureau (train volunteers to give presentation for you).
18. Pass out recruitment brochures.
19. Put ads in membership newsletters.
20. Contact local organizations.
21. Ask your local politicians for names of prospective volunteers.
22. Utilize Student Associations.
23. Try recruitment booths at local schools.
24. Plan a telethon.
25. Set up a Volunteers Fair.
26. Get news articles with photos of volunteers.
27. Send personal letters from current volunteers.
28. Hold teas and dinners.
29. Make phone calls to potential volunteers.
30. Contact local unions.
31. Make contact with public relations departments of large industries about getting ads in their periodicals.
32. Contact local corporations about getting executives to donate their time.
33. Contact professional societies for names of likely volunteers.
34. Follow examples of other successful volunteer organizations.
35. Hold press parties.
36. Train representatives from corporations, unions, and other organizations to recruit for you.
37. Hold recruitment drives with other organizations in the community.
38. Hold recruitment parties.
39. Set up booths at local community gatherings, festivals, fairs, sporting events, etc.
40. Send brochures home with schoolchildren requesting volunteers.
41. Challenge current volunteers to recruit more volunteers (hold a competition).
42. Challenge local businesses to see which can recruit more employees to volunteer.
43. Put displays in local retail establishments for large exposure.
44. Put requests for volunteers on billboards, movie theatre displays, or digital bank displays.
45. Put stand-up flyers on tables at local restaurants.
46. Have your request for more volunteers announced over the intercom at local sporting events.
47. Have flyers placed in shopping bags at local stores.
48. Place flyers on car windshields around town.
49. Have local churches place an announcement in their bulletins.
50. Participate in local parades and events to promote the organization's need for volunteers.

Source: Taken from *38 Techniques for Recruiting Volunteers* by the Public Management Institute (1979b), with additions by Woods and Freeman (2003).

Appendix B: Orienting Your Volunteer: Things Volunteers Should Know About Your Organization

1. The benefits of your organization
2. The goal/mission (purpose) of your organization
3. How and why you are unique
4. How you relate to other organizations in the community
5. The role of volunteers in your organization
6. Your organizational structure
7. Your funding base
8. The basic budget of your organization
9. The history of the organization
10. Who is on your Board of Directors
11. Who is the Executive Director
12. Who are the key staff
13. Activities of each division of your organization
14. How do clients come to your organization
15. What a typical client is like
16. Basic organization staff relations policies (whom to call if sick, dress code, etc.)
17. How a volunteer “survives” in your organization:
 - Parking
 - Coat racks
 - Coffee
 - Check-in procedures
 - Mail boxes
 - Place for handbags
 - Working space
 - Restrooms
18. How this particular volunteer job helps the organization reach its goal
19. Emergency procedures and telephone numbers
20. Confidentiality procedures

Source: Public Management Institute (1979a)

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