

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT IN THE PROBATION SERVICE - THE CASE OF SINGAPORE

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper should be read in conjunction with the paper on Community Rehabilitation of Offenders in Singapore.

Probation, as a community-based rehabilitation programme, works only if there is community support and involvement. The community's acceptance of offenders and their potential for change, understanding of the goals, principles and methods of probation, and their commitment to support reintegration efforts cannot be overly emphasised.

Thus the Probation Service has, since the 1970s, and more so in recent years actively engaged and involved the community in a variety of ways.

II. VOLUNTEER PROBATION OFFICERS: COMMUNITY PROBATION SERVICE

The Community Probation Service (CPS), introduced in June 1971, is now 31 years old. It has over 350 active volunteers at most times. Volunteer Probation Officers (VPOs), complement the work of Probation Officers. By befriending and guiding probationers, VPOs help to steer people back to the straight and narrow path. For many cases that do well during probation, VPOs make a real difference in re-shaping the lives of offenders.

Sustaining, supporting and providing on-going training to keep volunteers continually challenged and motivated poses a big challenge. To appeal to the diversity of interests, skills, talents and volunteer aspirations, the CPS offers a wide scope of involvement to cater to the VPOs' interests, skills and training and the various stages of their volunteer life cycle. These include:

- befriending
- guide and supervise the probationer and counsel the probationer's family
- conduct time restriction checks on probationers
- conduct group work for probationers
- conduct parenting workshops for parents of probationers
- conduct social investigations and prepare pre-sentence reports
- plan and supervise community service projects
- identify and network with community resources to support healthy youth development
- help in any programmes to complement the above
- project work
- support in formulating annual workplans on volunteers' involvement in activities

A. Why is Volunteer Management Important?

1. The Rationale for Volunteer Management

In any society, there will always be people who will step forward to give their time and talent to serve the community. But there will never be enough of them. Volunteers often complement the work of professional staff in the rehabilitation of offenders.

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Volunteers choose to serve and an important element of good volunteer management is retaining them and attracting others to join. Well managed, happy and motivated volunteers enhance the service that the public and community receives. Volunteers who are mismanaged will get disillusioned or become ineffective and leave and are a loss to the community.

B. Volunteer Coordinators as Human Resource Managers

Volunteers are important people in our community who must be nurtured and developed in a systematic way to bring out the best in them. Volunteer coordinators are the people who do just that. They are human resource managers, the coaches in teams and the coordinators of skills and schedules. The multi-faceted demands of the job of a volunteer coordinator are challenging and require an understanding of what motivates volunteers, how they can best serve and how to take care of their needs.

1. Who Makes a Good Volunteer Coordinator?

While the duties of the volunteer coordinator are similar to those of a human resource manager, an important difference is that a volunteer coordinator must believe that volunteers make a significant difference in the lives of beneficiaries and to the organisation.

Volunteers are people who provide a service to the community out of their own free will and without monetary reward. Volunteering satisfies the human need to belong, to feel competent and to contribute. Volunteering benefits everyone – recipients, organisations, volunteers and the community.

A good volunteer coordinator must enjoy working with people as compared with someone who enjoys managing tasks. Being flexible and adaptable is a good start as it enables you to work with a wide range of people. Other qualities are:

- Ability to communicate and relate well with others;
- Sensitivity to the needs of volunteers;
- Creativity to think up varied and exciting volunteer opportunities;
- Enthusiasm to fan the flame of volunteerism in volunteers;
- Patience when volunteers challenge ideas, make mistakes or are absent;
- Team spiritedness to work in partnership with volunteers;
- Persistence in engaging volunteers in planning and providing services,
- Assertiveness to know when to say 'no' gently and firmly; and
- Commitment in making volunteerism a way of life.

C. What is the Role of a Volunteer Coordinator?

Volunteer coordinators wear many hats. Their role extends beyond recruitment, orientation and placement, to motivating, training and developing volunteers. They are responsible for evaluating and recognising the efforts of volunteers and helping them to defer or stop their service when the time comes. In short, they nurture volunteers through the "life cycle" of the volunteer's involvement with the organisation.

A volunteer coordinator is a people mobiliser, a catalyst, an organiser, a facilitator and a mentor. His special responsibility is to develop a climate that frees and encourages volunteers to perform to the best of their abilities.

A volunteer coordinator will ideally do the following:

- Recruit the best person for the job;
- Interview potential volunteers;
- Screen volunteers for their suitability;
- Orientate volunteers to the job, the programme and the organisation;
- Train and develop volunteers so that they "bloom";
- Supervise and support volunteers;
- Help volunteers to build bonds among themselves and with staff;
- Motivate volunteers;

- Provide “broad shoulders” for them to “cry” on;
- Give and receive feedback;
- Recognise and appreciate their efforts;
- Re-channel or discontinue their service when volunteers are no longer constructive; and
- Review and evaluate the volunteer programme to ensure relevance and to meet future needs.

In addition to managing the multiple roles, the coordinator will have to feel the pulse and be in touch with the interests, concerns and problems of volunteers. Performing this role effectively requires the ability to relate well with people and understand both their needs and limitations. Doing this well will result in retaining volunteers and having satisfying and warm volunteer relations.

D. A Good Volunteer Management System

A volunteer management system refers to a systematic way of developing volunteers. There are two crucial ingredients of a good volunteer management system. The first is having an organisational philosophy towards volunteers.

Consider these questions:

- What is the organisation’s philosophy on volunteerism?
- Are volunteers just an extra pair of hands or are they partners in service provision?

The value the organisation attaches to volunteerism affects the way they are supervised. An organisation that values volunteers recognises them as important people who can make essential contributions to the organisation. It also recognises that volunteers, too, have needs and limitations. As the volunteer coordinator, you should develop and strengthen the volunteerism culture within the organisation and direct the organisation’s philosophy on volunteerism.

The rationale for the volunteer programme should be reflected in the objectives, goals, organisational structure, mission statement or constitution. This provides a sense of purpose in engaging volunteers and their contribution in the organisation.

The second ingredient is a formalised system for working with volunteers throughout the “life-cycle” of the volunteer. A volunteer should not be treated haphazardly and made to do things because no one else is doing them.

It helps volunteers when there are guidelines on the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of the volunteers and what resources are available for them. This will set the climate for a good working relationship and at the same time provide safeguards for all parties.

E. Recruitment and Deployment

Before recruiting volunteers, consider what kind of volunteers are needed for the service. A distinction should be made between regular and ad-hoc volunteer needs. This can be done by mapping out:

- (i) the areas of work that volunteers are required;
- (ii) the time period for which volunteers are needed; and
- (iii) the skills and talents involved.

A volunteer recruitment programme would include:

Planning: What types of volunteer involvement is your organisation offering to potential volunteers. How much time and resources are expected of volunteers? What will the volunteers benefit from volunteering with your organisation – e.g. training, recognition, status, networking? What types of aptitude, attitude, time, resources and skills are required?

Promotion: How can the organisation attract volunteers? Work out appropriate messages and the different ways of delivering them. Where and when should the organisation recruit volunteers?

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1. Meeting for the First Time

Plan the first meeting. A good interview is the basis for a good placement. At the meeting with the volunteer:

- provide information about the organisation and about the volunteer opportunities;
- find out the volunteer's expectations, strengths, skills and limitations. This will help assess his or her suitability for the organisation and the tasks;
- clarify roles and expectations.

F. Orientation

New volunteers are like new members in an organisation. They need to be well-orientated to find their place and be comfortable in the organisation. Experienced volunteers and full-time staff should be involved in orientation.

The following points could be covered in orientation:

- familiarise volunteers with the organisation's mission, goals, objectives, structure and activities;
- introduce them to key staff members and other volunteers;
- inform them about the boundaries in their roles and authority in relation to the staff, management, beneficiaries and other volunteers. A clear delineation of roles and responsibilities can avoid potential conflict or misunderstanding.

G. Training and Development

1. Training and Helping Volunteers to Develop

A common misconception about volunteerism is that volunteers know precisely how to do the jobs they volunteered for. Regardless of their abilities, it is always useful and essential for volunteers to receive training. This enables them to acquire the know-how to perform their tasks effectively or further develop their skills.

For volunteers who are more committed, the organisation can even map out a "career path" for them in the organisation. It is helpful to train a core group of volunteer leaders. Give them additional responsibilities. When the need arises, you have a ready pool of group leaders.

It may not always be possible to get everyone together for a training session. On-the-job training may be the next best way. Such training also has the advantage of being timely. In such cases, match the volunteer with a staff or senior volunteer who will be the buddy and coach him or her along the way. An on-the-job training programme should be designed for this purpose. When there are more volunteers, a group session can be held.

H. Guidance

1. How is Supervision of Volunteers Different?

Volunteers need guidance to ensure that their work is heading towards the right result. They see their voluntary work as something over and above their full-time jobs. Hence providing guidance for volunteers requires a different approach from that of supervision of staff. The volunteer coordinator has to make a fine balance in overseeing and guiding the work of volunteers. It is useful for the volunteer coordinator to put the following into practice:

- Get to know the volunteers' strengths and weaknesses as their work progresses. This will help the coordinator to see how they can improve further and whether or not the assigned task is suitable for them.
- Assess how ready the volunteer is to work independently and then provide the appropriate level of guidance.
- Help volunteers understand that they are held accountable for the voluntary tasks entrusted to them.

- Those who are responsible for directly guiding volunteers in their various tasks should be approachable, empathetic and readily available to listen or provide information.

When the volunteer pool becomes too large, the volunteers can be grouped into smaller groups led by a volunteer leader. Volunteers within the group can attend to each other at a personal level while the group as a whole maintains contact with the main volunteer coordinator.

I. Review and Support

It is important to conduct regular reviews with volunteers and evaluate their performance and progress. This enables volunteers to know whether their work is on the right track and what areas of improvement can be made.

- In the evaluation, consider the volunteers' long term contributions in various areas of their work and not isolated incidents.
- During the evaluation discussion, compliment and affirm the volunteer, and share views in a constructive way.
- In certain cases, it may be necessary to exercise more discipline on some volunteers. This is not something to be avoided at all costs, since it would not be in the offender and his family's interests if what the volunteers do is not helping those they had wanted to help.
- For example, when volunteers make requests to other organisations for monetary or material aid without prior consultation, you will have to alert them firmly of the boundaries of their role and bring the matter to an amiable conclusion.

Volunteers cannot be expected to carry out their work without proper support from the organisation. Whether it is in the form of doing a simple administrative task for them or providing the information they need, the organisation as a whole should give consistent support to its volunteers.

- Demonstrate in practical ways enthusiasm to support volunteers by following up on what the organisation has committed to do to help them in their tasks.
- All staff, in varying degrees, deal with volunteers. It is the responsibility of the volunteer coordinator with support of management to ensure that the staff team as a whole has a coordinated and consistent way of working with volunteers.
- Organisational support like volunteer notice boards and volunteer corners can have a positive effect on the level of volunteer job satisfaction and enhance performance.

J. Motivation

A 'pat on the back' goes a long way

Here are some tried and tested ways to motivate volunteers:

- Build positive and meaningful relationships between staff and volunteers, as well as among volunteers by initiating activities to promote group ties.
- Help volunteers grow, learn and benefit from their volunteering experience. Make them feel involved with the organisation. Where possible, include volunteers in planning, brainstorming and decision-making processes. This instills a sense of ownership in the organisation and in its cause. It is also important to keep volunteers informed of changes within the organisation.
- Reinforce in volunteers their sense of contribution to the community. Point out how the volunteer's contribution has improved the service received by the beneficiaries.

K. Recognition

Everyone gains from being appreciated

Regardless of why volunteers offer their services, a good system of recognition is necessary to acknowledge their contributions and affirm their commitment.

- Establish a formal system of recognition and appreciation to ensure that all volunteers receive the recognition and commendation they deserve.
- Let volunteers know the importance of their contributions and the difference they make to the beneficiaries.
- Volunteer recognition should go beyond just organising an annual volunteer appreciation event. Instead, it should be on-going, from giving a simple pat on the back to providing the volunteer with a testimonial when required.
- Determine what makes each individual volunteer “tick” – what form of recognition is most rewarding to him or her. Recognition may differ from one volunteer to another, and it should, so that each one feels rewarded in his unique way.

L. Deferring and Terminating Services

Saying goodbye

Do not be discouraged at the departure of some volunteers. It is natural and inevitable that volunteers leave the organisation for one reason or another. As far as possible, ensure that volunteers part on good terms.

- Some volunteers may have been struggling with wanting to leave but feel bad about it. It is important to be able to “let go” and assure them that they can move on or return.
- The volunteer may just need a temporary break due to “burn-out”, time constraints and competing commitments. The organisation can try to re-negotiate the terms of the volunteer’s commitment.
- The reason for leaving may be dissatisfaction with the organisation. Note the areas where improvements can be made within the organisation to better retain volunteers.
- Some volunteers are unsuitable for the organisation. In such cases, provide opportunities for these volunteers to make a polite exit. Where appropriate, recommend and introduce them to other organisations that may be more suitable for them.

M. Training for Volunteer Coordinators

Volunteer management is a rewarding experience and good volunteer management is now gaining more attention. There are now courses, workshops and seminars on volunteer management. These provide useful guidance on the know-hows and skills, and are also opportunities for volunteer coordinators of different organisations to meet and share their experience.

Volunteerism provides a vital reservoir of energy, commitment and experience for the community. Volunteer management is thus an important and challenging responsibility. The organisation's ability to carry out an effective volunteer programme will play a key role in contributing to a dynamic and caring society.