
The *Care and Feeding* of *Volunteers*

BY MICHAEL MCKEE

As with many nonprofits, the organization I helped found thirty odd years ago, Tenants & Neighbors, relies heavily on volunteers. We are a statewide (New York) membership organization that engages primarily in organizing, advocacy, and policy work to promote tenants' rights and affordable housing at the federal, state, and local level. We also provide technical and organizing assistance to tenant associations, especially those in government-subsidized developments at risk of conversion to market rents.

We recruit volunteers in different ways: from speaking engagements, by soliciting for volunteers in our newspaper, and above all from our organizing and advocacy work.

We encourage our members and supporters to become volunteers. In fact, we rely on our volunteers to carry out our fundraising and programmatic goals.

It seems to me that many nonprofits unnecessarily limit their thinking about volunteers. They tend to see volunteers as people who either fold and stuff or who assist with fundraising activities, such as helping produce special events, participating in phonathons, or sponsoring house parties. But do nonprofit staffers see volunteers as players with a stake in the organization? Too often, I fear, the answer is no.

At Tenants & Neighbors we try to develop a relationship with our volunteers. As a result, many of our volunteers help carry out programmatic activities and support our programmatic work as well as our fundraising efforts. Some volunteers function in more than one capacity. Many have also participated in focus groups we have organized or filled out surveys about the organization, giving them an opportunity to influence our programs and goals.

About ten years ago we decided to get serious about grassroots fundraising. At the time, our membership comprised about 1,500 individuals and 90 organizations, and our budget had ranged from \$40,000 to \$90,000 per year. Using direct mail and telemarketing, we grew dramatically — to a high of 20,000 individuals and 160 organizations. (When we are not in campaign mode and our issues are not in the

headlines as often, the individual memberships decline.) You will no doubt understand that the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal* became our bible in this endeavor. We also received invaluable technical assistance from some experts, foremost among them Kim Klein and Stephanie Roth.

Raising foundation funds for statewide organizations is difficult at best, nor is tenant organizing high on the list of priorities for many funders. Our grassroots income helps insulate us against downturns in grants. In any given year

we raise between \$250,000 and \$500,000 in gifts from individual tenants, tenant associations, labor unions, and other individuals who support our work.

Despite our growth, like most nonprofits, we never

have enough staff. So we spend a good deal of effort to recruit, develop, and cultivate volunteers. In effect, their work augments our staff resources and, to a degree, substitutes for additional staff that our budget doesn't allow us to hire.

At any given time, we have a pool of about 200 members and supporters we can call on for help. We also have a smaller "core" group of 30 to 40 volunteers who offer their time on a regular basis, including two volunteers who are, in effect, half-time staff members.

These two most committed volunteers for the past few years are a loft tenant, who produces our weekly cable television program, and a retired political director of a labor union, who is a rent-stabilized tenant and serves as our liaison to the labor movement.

In times when we are in campaign mode, for example when we're organizing to pass legislation, our volunteer pool becomes larger, as does our grassroots income. During campaigns dozens of volunteers staff phone banks as we call targeted voters in a particular legislator's district or call our "active members" list to turn people out for a rally. We have volunteers who go out on speaking engagements as well as volunteers who come to weekly mailing parties and help out with office work.

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newspaper, and above all from our organizing and advocacy work. Some volunteers find their way to us. Quite a few are recruited by other member-volunteers. Many of our volunteers are involved in their own tenant associations, where they also put in long hours.

The rest of this article provides some ideas for nurturing volunteers so that they will want to keep on working with your organization and for dealing with different kinds of volunteers so that both you and they have a productive experience — or minimize a negative one.

MAKING SURE YOUR VOLUNTEERS COME BACK

Over the years I have made some observations about working with volunteers which, when translated into practice, help with volunteer retention.

- ***The volunteer's time and work are a gift to your organization, just as checks from donors are a gift.*** Most of our volunteers are dues-paying members, but some of our best volunteers are very-low-income people who can't make financial contributions but who invest hours of their time in the organization. We consider these volunteers as much members as people who write checks, and we give them all the benefits of membership. Since appreciation is the most important key to retaining volunteers, this is one way you can show appreciation for your volunteers.

- ***Always thank your volunteers every time they pitch in.*** Beyond any other recognition, thanking volunteers for their time and efforts each time they work for you is crucial. Even though the volunteer donates time because he or she believes in your organization, people like to be thanked.

- ***Just as you exercise caution in hiring staff, apply some judgment in "hiring" a volunteer.*** Don't make facile judgments about a potential volunteer's abilities. Some time spent interviewing a potential volunteer might reveal talents that are not initially apparent. Of course, you don't have to exercise the degree of caution you need in hiring a salaried staff member, as it's generally easier to "fire" a volunteer if things don't work out. In fact, most volunteers fire themselves when the relationship doesn't gel.

- ***Match the volunteer to her ability.*** People who are comfortable talking to strangers on the phone are a valuable resource, whether doing fundraising or programmatic work. Someone too shy to talk on the telephone might love being part of a mailing party. Someone else might find folding and stuffing boring. It might not be immediately apparent what role a volunteer can fill, but go over the variety of tasks needed with someone who has shown an interest in volunteering to see which ones she might find interesting or rewarding.

- ***People often have more abilities than they recognize.*** Every June there is a national conference of HUD tenants in Washington, D.C., and every winter we offer workshops on fundraising strategies to help tenant associations raise enough money to send one or two representatives to the national conference. The tenants often come up with their own ideas. One tenant association, after two or three

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years of unsuccessfully soliciting contributions door to door and at building-wide meetings, hit upon the idea of sponsoring a series of social events once every month or two. No one is asked to contribute or pay dues. Rather, tenants pay a modest fee at the door of the event, enough to cover the cost of refreshments, and once inside can buy chances or tickets on various games and contests. One of this tenant association's most successful fundraisers was selling tickets allowing the purchaser to guess the number of jelly beans in a giant glass jar, gussied up with ribbon. This was run as a 50/50 raffle, with the winner pocketing half the sales and the tenant association the other half. It was a fun evening and the association netted \$400, two-thirds of the cost of sending a representative to Washington.

- ***Volunteers reinforce each other.*** Working together helps folks more readily overcome their doubts and get into the spirit. A few years ago we asked our board members to sign up for one evening a week for three weeks in November to make calls to major donors soliciting year-end contributions. It probably won't surprise you that some board members were hesitant. We prepared a script and did a brief training.

Once the calls began, however, it became a friendly competition, with phoners trying to see who could solicit the largest gift. There was a great deal of excitement the first evening when a board member secured the first \$200 pledge. The other board members crowded around to examine the pledge form, then went back to their phones determined to match or better the goal. Those who had been uncomfortable about asking for money really got into it. To my astonishment, when we stopped the calls at 9:00PM two board members said, "That was fun," and asked if they could come back an additional evening the same week. Fortunately, we had enough phone lines, although on a couple of nights we had to use the fax line to accommodate everyone!

As Kim Klein says, no one likes asking for money, but people sometimes surprise themselves. So don't let board members off the hook too easily — give them enough

support and a comfortable atmosphere and they will often rise to the occasion.

- **Your volunteers are not robots.** People don't appreciate being treated impersonally. Spend some time with your volunteers. As you get to know them, you will hear interesting life stories and occasionally observations about your organization. When we have a mailing party, I try to spend at least 15 to 20 minutes sitting with the group and helping fold and stuff, no matter how busy I am. The conversation is time well spent and reinforces the relationship.

We also recognize some volunteers at our annual meeting or other events and in our newsletter.

- **Volunteers are messy.** Volunteers put half-empty coffee cups in your recycle bin, leave dishes unwashed in the sink, and commit other sins. After all, until they become regulars, they don't know your office systems. If you can't put up with a bit of untidiness, you might find it hard to work with volunteers, but this is a trade-off worth learning to live with.

- **Make your volunteers comfortable.** Offer them a soda, or coffee or tea. Make sure they know where to find the water cooler — and the restrooms. Many people are shy and won't ask. Some might even think they're not allowed to use the water cooler.

- **Honor your volunteers occasionally.** At the end of a campaign, whether we win or lose, we have a party just for our volunteers. We also recognize some volunteers at our annual meeting or other events and in our newsletter. By honoring one or two special volunteers each year — and making sure it is different ones every year — you show all volunteers that you are aware of their efforts.

VOLUNTEERS COME IN ALL VARIETIES

Volunteers come with different qualities, different skills, different tolerances for specific jobs, and different levels of commitment. Here are some of the kinds of volunteers you'll find and how best to work with them — or when to cross them off your list.

Special Volunteers with Special Skills

If you find a volunteer who has a skill that you might otherwise have to pay for or do without, count yourself lucky. Over the years we have benefited from the services of Jeff, a professional graphics artist who designed our newspaper for three years; Russell, a retired costume designer who established and maintained a newspaper clippings file; Eric, a computer-savvy attorney who designed a new relational database for us; Judy, the retired

political director of a labor union who helped us reach out to labor unions and develop relationships with several of them, eventually gaining their financial support as well (and who still serves as our labor liaison); and Joan, an executive secretary who sat for hours at a time doing data entry.

Dave, a retired sign painter, makes excellent posters for demonstrations and rallies. We met him at a rally during our big 1997 rent regulation campaign, and he has created our posters ever since. Tenants & Neighbors has become known for our terrific graphics on picket lines, and people now know it's us when they see Dave's signs in newspaper photos or on TV.

Three highly dedicated and knowledgeable volunteers and a group of five or six others who can be recruited occasionally are involved in our weekly call-in program on community access cable television. Two of the volunteers, including Janet, the producer, have been with this project since we began it in 1997.

Of course, there are functions that cannot be achieved without hiring staff or consultants. I fantasize about finding a volunteer to update and maintain our website on a regular and timely basis, but realistically, this is something we will probably have to pay for.

Interns

There are some programs, often affiliated with universities, through which nonprofit organizations can obtain "free" staff in the form of student interns. But be careful: some interns chew up your staff time because they don't have the knowledge or ability to perform without constant supervision.

Experience has taught me to shy away from students whose classes require them to work with a community organization for a semester, typically for a few hours each week. While occasionally you get a winner, more likely you will spend hours educating and cultivating the intern, only to scrap their work or do it over then have them disappear by the time they have learned enough to be of use.

On the other hand, if you give a finite project to a good student who only has a few hours a week, it can work out. A junior who was majoring in sociology did a telephone survey of several of our best tenant leaders, soliciting their opinions on a range of subjects. The survey was an eye opener, giving us valuable insights. The leaders told the student things they probably would have hesitated to tell us, including criticisms of our campaign strategies. Graduate students tend to be more valuable than undergraduates.

A final tip: with rare exceptions, the only ones who seem to be able to write coherent sentences tend to be journalism students.

Other Institution-Based Volunteers

For several years we have benefited from the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, through which we are assigned a full-time staff person for a year. This program has sent us one winner after another. All but one of our JVs have been young people just out of college, and all have been highly motivated by the opportunity to work for social change. We pay a \$500 monthly stipend and provide health insurance and travel money. Not a “free” additional staff member exactly but a real help.

The JVC program does a good job of recruiting and screening capable people, and what’s more, the program seems to do a good job of providing support to young people who are in the process of becoming community organizers. Communities of JVs live together in voluntary poverty while engaging each other in regular discussions on the meaning of community and solidarity and on the values that motivate them in their work. (JVC — www.jesuitvolunteers.org — is a national program with regional offices.)

We have had less success recently with VISTA/Americorps volunteers. Back in the 1970s we had eight terrific VISTA volunteers doing tenant organizing in five upstate cities, until Ronald Reagan terminated our contract three weeks after his 1981 inauguration. But our experience with the revived Americorps/VISTA program during the 1990s was negative, and after about 20 unsuccessful hires and only two successes we gave up on it. After a few years we considered trying again with a new approach based on what we had learned by examining other more successful VISTA placements. But by the time we were ready to move forward, the Bush administration was

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making it much more difficult for organizing groups to get VISTA volunteers.

There are other programs that might be worth checking out, such as those that recruit retired business executives or senior citizens to help nonprofits. But be realistic about what volunteers can and cannot do. Where is that website volunteer?

Problem Volunteers

Some people just don’t make good volunteers. Here are some obstacles I have encountered and how I dealt with them — skillfully or not.

The volunteer who doesn’t play well with others

We have had to “fire” an occasional volunteer who can’t work well in a group. I remember “Steve,” who came regularly to our weekly mailing parties (during campaigns

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we designate an afternoon a week for this activity, so that people get used to coming the same time each week). Steve was a fast and steady worker, but he was opinionated and argumentative. Good volunteers stopped showing up. The problem wasn’t hard to figure out. I had an awkward conversation with the gentleman during which I told him he needed to stop picking arguments or not come back. With that, he launched into a tirade, then stormed out of the office, never to be heard from again. Later I realized there might have been a better way to address this problem, such as suggesting he take on an individual project on a different day. After Steve’s departure, it was easy to persuade other volunteers to come back.

This experience taught me to pay attention to who gets along with whom. When we have a small mailing needing two or three volunteers, we try to match people accordingly. Be observant. Be on the lookout especially for bigots and sexists on the one hand and for friends who like to work together on the other. And remember, many people are shy and won’t complain. They will simply suffer, or more likely just stop showing up.

The volunteer who runs hot and cold

This is usually a valuable volunteer who has abilities but has to be coaxed. You have to decide if it’s worth the time. My experience is that you either work out an understanding about a task and a time commitment or the volunteer doesn’t come back.

The volunteer who won’t do “menial” work

Some people feel it’s beneath them to fold and stuff. Some even think making phone calls is unworthy of their talents. Mailings and phone banks are our life blood, so I tend not to waste a lot of time on people like this. Such a person has to be really skillful in some other capacity to be worth the time, and even then the relationship may not work out.

The volunteer who offers services you can’t use or who has “brilliant” ideas and insists you adopt them

This type of volunteer is often a variation of the “no menial work” type. It might be worth some time to consider

new ideas (of course, often these ideas are not new at all), and it's important not to dismiss someone too quickly. But if you determine that what is offered is not what the organization needs, you have to say so without equivocation. Some of these people are persistent and even quarrelsome. Don't waste too much time turning them down.

The volunteer who becomes indispensable — and obnoxious

In the thirty-five years I have worked as an organizer, executive director, and associate director, this has happened to me twice. Both instances involved extremely talented and highly organized individuals who assumed more and more responsibility, taking over important

and their contributions were valuable. But there is a law of diminishing returns with such people. If my foresight were as good as my hindsight, I would have seen the inevitable ending far sooner.

The volunteer who doesn't remember she volunteered

During campaigns, we distribute a volunteer form at meetings. This is separate from our membership application and asks people to indicate activities they might be willing to perform: phone banking, mailings, attending demonstrations, sponsoring a house party, serving as a building captain, and so on (hardly anyone ever checks the house party box). We have learned that unless you do follow-up calls soon after the meeting, many people forget that they said they would volunteer. Others just don't mean it. It's easy to check a box, but when it comes to making the trip to the phone bank, the real decision becomes apparent.

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functions, but who were also difficult personalities. One was a straight man who had a serious problem getting along with those he considered beneath him, which included just about everyone and especially women. We finally had it out over his behavior toward his office mates. He walked, and I was enormously relieved to be rid of him, although now faced with covering the bases he had occupied. The other indispensable volunteer was a gay man who, whenever I asked him to do something, answered, "Yes, my liege," usually with a sardonic curtsy. Enormously talented and capable, he was also a gossip and troublemaker. Eventually he stopped volunteering when we failed to accept his ideas for implementing a new project.

With both these men, I put up with a lot in terms of their personal behavior, as did other staff members and volunteers, because they became virtually full-time "staff"

IT'S SELF-EVIDENT

Volunteers are an important asset to a nonprofit organization. Not only do they help do the work, they help keep you from becoming too "staff-driven" and serve as a sounding board and reality check.

It is interesting that virtually all of our volunteers describe their activism in similar terms. Again and again they will say that they don't understand why anyone would not consider housing to be the most important issue facing society. For them, self-interest as tenants and compassionate belief in the value of preserving affordable housing are perfectly fused. **GF**

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