

PARTNERSHIPS AND VOLUNTEERS IN THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE

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Abstract.—The U.S. Forest Service often relies on volunteers and partnerships to help accomplish agency goals, particularly in its recreation and heritage programs. Data from agency records and a staff survey suggest that volunteer involvement is a developing area. Ongoing efforts to improve the agency's volunteer management capacity (VMC) would benefit from more attention to the administrative tasks, advantages, and challenges that make partnership-based volunteer programs successful. Partnerships are a significant, but not dominant, part of the agency's volunteer program and involve VMC issues that are similar to those reported for other types of volunteer management, both in this agency and in the nonprofit sector.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Most natural resource agencies rely on partnerships and volunteers to assist with many tasks for which they lack the expertise, authority, or budget to accomplish. An important part of agency operations and success includes turning to the local community for help in mitigating these deficiencies. However, neither partnerships nor volunteers are “free money” to be added to dwindling budgets. Both depend upon community goodwill and close working relationships. Often, U.S. Forest Service (USFS) employees do not manage volunteers directly, but work with a group or organization that provides volunteers through an event-based or longer-term partnership. Examples include hiking clubs, Scouts, government entities, and community nonprofit organizations that assist the Forest Service in carrying out agency duties, especially in natural resource management and recreation

programs. Nevertheless, the USFS is ultimately accountable for volunteers and the outcomes of its programs.

It is precisely for this reason that more attention needs to be paid to how well such arrangements are managed. Volunteers are at the core of these partnerships and require somewhat different managerial techniques and standards than do employees. They need to be managed appropriately and incorporated into existing operations. For their part, organizational managers must devote attention to acquiring and honing a range of managerial competencies and organizational tasks in order to accommodate volunteers.

1.1 Background

The concept of volunteer management capacity (VMC) is emerging in the broader philanthropy literature. Good work has been done on volunteerism and on partnerships separately (e.g., Macduff 1997, Hou et al. 2003, Woodwell 2003, Hager and Brudney 2004, Urban Institute 2004). Very little primary research work has focused on VMC in natural resource agencies, although volunteerism in public agencies has been studied to some extent (Brudney 1990, Brudney 1999, Absher et al. 2000). The main point to be carried over to this study is that VMC is rooted in the distinction between “having” volunteers and involving them effectively (Brudney 1999). A primary concern is how volunteers are involved so that effective outcomes are realized simultaneously for both the agency and the volunteers themselves. Research suggests that VMC depends upon two related components: (1) administrative funding and agency support for the volunteer program and (2) a set of best practices for involving volunteers (Hager and Brudney 2004, Urban Institute 2004).

More specifically, recent research literature suggests that administrative policies and funding to support volunteer involvement should include a distinct budget

to supply adequate resources for volunteer program administration and an agency staff person or position with designated responsibility for management and oversight of the volunteers. In turn, this funding will underwrite background/training of staff in volunteer administration, time on the job devoted to volunteer administration by the volunteer resource manager, and facilitating paperwork, standards, and practices for use and reporting. The second component of effective VMC consists of implementing a set of appropriate (or “best”) practices to administer or govern the partnership and volunteer program. There are many “best” practices, such as written policies and job descriptions for volunteers, and screening, matching, and placement of volunteers (Hager and Brudney 2004, Urban Institute 2004).

Research results from charities and congregations further suggest that success is associated with having a paid staff member with time devoted to volunteer management, and that more time spent on volunteer management (VM) means fewer problems in recruiting volunteers. Although three in five charities and one in three congregations reported having a VM staff person, the majority of these staff members spent less than 30 percent of their work time on volunteer coordination. Finally, paid staff coordinators and adoption of volunteer management practices are linked to greater benefits and fewer problems with volunteer involvement (Hager and Brudney 2004, Urban Institute 2004).

1.2 Objectives

This paper focuses on managing volunteers in partnership arrangements. The objectives are to review the prevalence of partnerships and volunteerism in the USFS setting, and to present results from a recent VMC survey of USFS staff. Analyses will show the extent to which VMC is occurring in the USFS and provide key comparative baseline data on support and tasks accomplished.

2.0 METHODS

Two sources of information are used in this paper: a USFS database and a VMC survey. Volunteer managers throughout the USFS were asked to report

volunteer hours and associated basic demographic and administrative details, which are available through a centralized database. For this paper, total volunteer hours and type of work done were compiled and analyzed overall and for each region of the agency.

A VMC survey was developed and implemented for the USFS based on research undertaken elsewhere on charitable and religious institutions (Hager and Brudney 2004). A key addition was the differentiation of direct and partnership-based volunteerism as separate managerial tasks. A service-wide survey of all identifiable staff with volunteer management responsibilities was conducted in fall 2006 via official USFS email employing a SurveyMonkey® Web-based questionnaire. After follow-up requests, 158 responses were obtained, yielding a response rate of 62 percent. Although one region did not participate at all and two others did not participate fully, the dataset reports results from at least five individuals for six of the nine USFS regions. The sample represents partnerships and volunteer efforts at different levels of the agency.

Data include basic job information, volunteer management background, and 37 aspects of VMC, including 12 administrative or organizational practices, 14 benefits or advantages, and 11 challenges or disadvantages. The VMC aspects were measured with a simple three-point rating scale of “not at all,” “to some extent,” and “to a great extent.”

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Patterns of Volunteer Hours in the USFS

Data from the USFS’s centralized reporting system show that nationwide in 2007 there were 2,618,163 volunteer hours recorded across all categories. This is equivalent to 1,477.5 person-years (for comparison, the agency has approximately 22,000 employees). These volunteer hours provide services that would be valued at more than \$55 million at the accepted Independent Sector rate. Although there is variation across the USFS regions with roughly 200,000 to 600,000 hours per region, all regions report substantial volunteer programs.

Field units also report which management activities are being supported by volunteer hours. To be consistent and to avoid duplicate reporting, data are presented only at the regional level. The 13 separate managerial reporting categories were collapsed into four broad program areas: recreation and heritage (R&H), resource management (ResMgt), administration and operations (A&O), and Other. Figure 1 shows that most volunteers are associated with recreation and heritage tasks (82 percent). Each of the other managerial categories represented less than 10 percent. However, there may have been some overlap of tasks in the reporting. For instance, a trail re-building activity or an anti-litter clean-up day at a picnic area may have been categorized as recreation or resource management support, or both. The data were not investigated further to clarify such distinctions and resolve ambiguity.

Survey results showed that both direct and indirect volunteering occurs. Volunteering for the USFS is “indirect” when these volunteer efforts come through an outside group or organization and their leadership assists in various aspects of the on-site volunteer effort. Thus, individual participants may view themselves as volunteering for the outside group, the USFS, or both. It is important to note that in this case USFS employees do not manage these volunteers directly, but work with the group or organization that has the volunteers.

“Direct” volunteering is managed internally. Volunteer activities are managed primarily by agency staff, often on a person-to-person basis. This arrangement was the more prevalent form reported, with many units reporting relatively few partnership-based volunteer hours. More than half (55.9 percent) of the respondents reported that for their field unit less than 40 percent of their total volunteer hours are from partnerships. For 24.7 percent of the respondents, more than 60 percent of their volunteer hours are through partnerships. Thus, about a quarter of the reporting units rely heavily on partnership-based volunteers, but overall the norm for the agency is still direct management of volunteers.

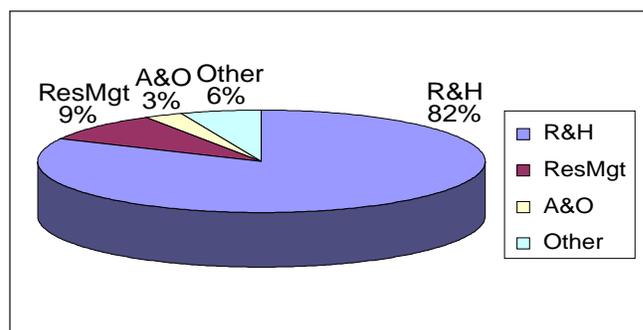


Figure 1.—USFS volunteer hours by program areas in 2007.

Approximately one in five (21.9 percent) of the field personnel reported a budget for administration and management of volunteers through agency partnership. Only 10 percent said they had received any formal education or training in volunteer administration or management at the time they began their volunteer management duties. At the time of the survey, 30 percent said they had had some education or training in volunteer management, so some “on-the-job” education or training does occur. That finding still leaves a large majority without any training and brings into question how to improve agency VMC. This situation is underscored by the time devoted to volunteers: respondents devote on average 15 percent of their time to volunteers, with a median of 10 percent. It would be informative to investigate whether such small amounts of time devoted to volunteer administration are coupled with the lack of training or education, and if that possible association has some bearing on the ability to focus on and to improve VMC.

This pattern of volunteer management in the USFS suggests that there are some strong relationships with local communities and organizations, and that there is a moderately strong reliance on partnerships and volunteers among these respective staffs. Beyond the most active programs, however, it may be an uphill battle to increase resources and competencies in volunteer administration. This circumstance, in turn, may be a reason for partnerships to be valued because under this arrangement many of the volunteer management tasks are left to administrators outside the agency.

3.2 Administrative Tasks, Benefits, and Concerns of Managers

VMC survey results in Table 1 show that staff performs the most recommended or “best” volunteer administration practices “to some extent.” That is, a very high proportion of USFS staff employs recommended volunteer management tasks such as record keeping (96.7 percent), supervising volunteer performance or managing risk and liability (95.1 percent each), volunteer orientation (91.9 percent), screening volunteers (90.2 percent), or volunteer recognition (89.4 percent). Other tasks commonly promoted among nonprofit organization managers were reported less often, such as writing job descriptions for volunteers (74 percent) or training employees to manage volunteers (44.7 percent).

The next section in Table 1 contains the results about benefits and advantages that managers feel partnership-based volunteers offer the USFS. The percentages refer to the proportion that say these apply “to some extent” or “to a great extent.” Examples of the highest-rated contributions are: quality services (91 percent), cost savings (88.8 percent), and providing services (88.6 percent), followed by increased public support (85.4 percent), client satisfaction (84.3 percent), and improved publicity (84.3 percent). These results put a very “public” face on the use of volunteers in the minds of the current partnership-based volunteer managers. Furthermore, note that handling money is decidedly not an important benefit (23.6 percent), with 76.6 percent of respondents saying “not at all.”

Finally, the third section of Table 1 presents concerns and barriers to partnership volunteers. The barriers and concerns that respondents most commonly say exist to “some extent” or “a great extent” are an inability to provide monitoring and oversight (92.1 percent), the need to train volunteers (91 percent), and having the resources to support a partnership volunteer program (91 percent). Lowest-noted or “non-issues” are: confidentiality (25.8 percent) and absenteeism (29.2 percent). Further analysis needs to be done to ascertain whether this pattern is uniform across settings or

Table 1.—Managing partnership-based volunteers: Prevalence of administrative volunteer management practices, advantages or benefits, and barriers or concerns. Percent responding “To Some Extent” or “To a Great Extent”

Administrative practices	Percent
Record keeping	96.7
Supervising performance	95.1
Risk & liability	95.1
Orientation	91.9
Screening volunteers	90.2
Position, skill matching	89.5
Recognition activities	89.4
Recruiting volunteers	83.9
Evaluating performance	74.6
Job descriptions	74.0
Expense reimbursement	68.3
Training employees	44.7
Advantages or benefits from partnerships	Percent
Quality services	91.0
Cost savings	88.8
Providing services	88.6
Increased public support	85.4
Client satisfaction	84.3
Improved publicity	84.3
Advocacy & outreach	79.8
Feedback suggestions	75.2
Helping visitors	74.2
New ideas	74.2
Increased diversity	66.3
Expanding capacity	59.1
Special skills	52.3
Handling money	23.6
Barriers or concerns from partnerships	Percent
Monitoring, oversight	92.1
Training volunteers	91.0
Resources to support	91.0
Agreements, paperwork	79.7
Special training	77.5
Performance reporting	76.1
High turnover	48.3
Poor work	36.0
Unreliability	36.0
Absenteeism	29.2
Confidentiality issues	25.8

is related to some underlying variables of agency support, training, or job status.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, these results provide a glimpse into the USFS’s use of partnership-based volunteers and offer implications for improving VMC in this area.

The USFS's reliance on volunteers and partnership-based arrangements is substantial. The findings reveal that the USFS volunteer program is in some ways like other charitable sectors. The data provide specific examples of how partnership-based volunteering is managed today, and invite future cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. Applying the ideas that underlie VMC seems straightforward and suggests that the USFS will benefit from continued attention to some important aspects of organizational and policy support for volunteer involvement.

The survey also reveals that those respondents who manage partnership-based volunteers are performing many of the accepted "best practices" at least to some degree and have a foundation upon which they can build. In general, the USFS recreation and heritage programs use partnerships and volunteers more than other programs areas. Although VMC is not fully implemented in the USFS, it is fairly robust in terms of the diversity of "best practices" or management tasks being accomplished at least to some extent. The results also suggest that improvements can be made in USFS VMC practices, especially in providing information, training, coordination, and oversight. Community partnerships may be a form of volunteering that is especially valuable to the USFS given the time and resources available. The results from this study provide a useful set of baseline or performance benchmarks for partnership-based volunteering that could be used to gauge progress in the future if studies were replicated. Further, they suggest the importance of developing accountability mechanisms and ongoing training and evaluation practices. In so doing, the USFS will sustain and improve VMC, and the agency will achieve more from voluntary service.

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