

An Application and Screening Process for Episodic Volunteers that Works!

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Abstract

The author describes the statewide application and screening materials she developed for use with episodic volunteers in the North Carolina 4-H Youth Development program of the Cooperative Extension Service at North Carolina State University.

Key Words:

volunteer, episodic, application, screening

It was almost a decade ago that Merrill and Safrit (2000) pointed out that episodic volunteering was no longer a “trend” in volunteerism but rather a reality. And almost a decade earlier, Macduff (1991) shared her ideas about analyzing internally for organizational readiness for the involvement of episodic volunteers. She identified five constructs for organizations to consider in terms of readiness for episodic volunteers: 1) whether there are already episodic volunteer opportunities; 2) whether regular volunteers will accept episodic volunteers; 3) whether there are human and financial resources for the additional volunteers; 4) whether there is documentable need for episodic volunteers in the organization; and 5) are organizational partners ready to support a dual component of the volunteer program. These factors combine to create a welcoming environment for all volunteers in agencies, but are especially important to consider with episodic volunteers.

Current research indicates that while more Americans than ever are volunteering (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2008), they are doing so for fewer hours than in previous years. In fact, Dr. Robert Grimm, Director of Research and Policy for the Corporation for National and Community Service, stated, “The research shows that volunteering isn’t as much about having the time to volunteer but creating volunteering opportunities that people want to make the time for” (2008, ¶12). So, the question becomes have volunteer resource managers created positions and processes to provide meaningful volunteer opportunities for those who seek involvement in episodic volunteer activities?

In beginning to address this need to examine internal procedures and opportunities, an important first step is to define the concept. Episodic volunteering is defined as individuals engaged in volunteer activities for short terms, usually three to four months or

less, of service or for specific projects (Macduff, 1991). This differentiates between episodic volunteers and the more traditional ongoing or continuous service individuals who are involved in and committed to an organization on an ongoing basis for long periods of time. Macduff (2005) further categorized episodic volunteers into three basic types. Temporary service volunteers are engaged for single days or very short terms, and this service assignment is typically their only attachment to the organization. A second type of episodic volunteer is the interim volunteer. This includes unpaid interns and others who may volunteer for a longer period of time, but still on a focused assignment. A third type of episodic volunteer are occasional volunteers who return to the organization year after year to assist with a specific annual event or activity and are sometimes referred to as recurring volunteers. It is important to recognize that episodic volunteers might be any of these three types or some combination of these types of volunteer roles.

Historically, volunteering within the national Cooperative Extension Service has involved committing to a long-term, continuous service role, with volunteers taking on local leadership for education and program planning (Ferguson, 1964). In its almost 100 years of existence, Extension has maintained its relevance by being responsive to the changing needs of citizens, with foci adjusting from solely agrarian interests to include urban and home management audiences in addition to traditional programs (Caldwell & Shore, 1993). In an organization with a long and extensive history of volunteer involvement, shifting procedures and attitudes to

accept the reality of episodic volunteers have presented an opportunity to engage staff members in identifying new strategies for volunteer engagement.

In 2003, the author initiated a review process to update existing volunteer screening and application procedures within North Carolina Cooperative Extension and specifically the 4-H Youth Development program. As a result, the opportunity was presented to develop a new, more episodic volunteer appropriate application in addition to the traditional volunteer application. Based upon data indicating that 4-H Youth Development agents were generally ready at the local level from an organizational standpoint to engage episodic volunteers along with their ongoing volunteers (Edwards, 2005), the author led a process to develop tools and procedures to assist in bringing episodic volunteers into programs in greater numbers with a formal structure for management. Today, almost 15 years later and with only a little early resistance to this new option, 4-H Youth Development Extension agents have extensively incorporated this new streamlined application into their local programs.

All 4-H volunteers in North Carolina are recruited and placed through local County Extension Centers. State Extension Specialists in the State 4-H Office (an academic department at North Carolina State University) provides guidance and structure to the overall process, while county Extension professionals actually engage community members as volunteers in local programs. With the 2003 review, a system of levels of screening was developed which allowed local Extension agents to develop written

volunteer position descriptions specific to the exact work the volunteers would be involved with and to decide how the screening should be conducted within prescribed guidelines.

The most intense screening is for those who are engaged in direct relationships/contacts with youth in any component of the program. This includes serving as a club advisor, being an overnight chaperone at camps and events, or serving in any other volunteer role that could include a one-on-one relationship with a young person. This screening includes a five-page application covering personal information, educational background, employment history, volunteer history, references, and permission to perform a criminal background clearance.

For those positions that do not include direct supervision of/interaction with youth during the performance of the volunteer assignment, a one-page application (Figure 1) was developed to allow the agent to establish written files for all episodic volunteers while utilizing a process that more appropriately matches the assignment for the individual. These assignments might include serving as a concession stand worker at a local event, assisting with a local activity or event while other screened volunteers are supervising the youth, serving as a fair judge, and other such short term roles. Note that this episodic application is not used for any overnight volunteer experience, regardless of whether the volunteer is occasional or fits within some other category of episodic volunteering.

One very critical aspect of this process is the development of accurate written position descriptions for volunteers engaged in service, regardless

of the length/tenure/duration of their service. This allows for orientation that reviews roles and responsibilities outlining specific scope of service details so that volunteers understand the limitations of their service. These position descriptions are vital for every volunteer opportunity, and are the keys to deciding which level of screening is most appropriate for those interested in serving.

Providing this new tool gave Extension 4-H agents an option to create meaningful episodic volunteer opportunities and to methodically involve individuals in these short-term positions is leading to a more systematic approach to engaging volunteers in episodic roles in local Extension programs. It also provides agents with a consistent process within which to engage other staff members in local programs in conversations about the changing demographics of the volunteer population and how to better recruit and retain volunteers. Making a basic adjustment to create a more easily managed process is helping North Carolina 4-H Extension agents to view episodic volunteers as important program partners to extend their reach into local communities.

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About the Author

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Figure 1. North Carolina 4-H Episodic Volunteer Application

EPISODIC VOLUNTEER INFORMATION

Last Name	First Name	M.I.	Name You Prefer
Mailing Address		Daytime phone	
City	State	Zip	E-mail
I give my permission for staff of N.C. Cooperative Extension, N.C. 4-H, and/or _____ County Extension to take photographs and/or record video and/or audio of me and/or my property for use in educational, promotional and/or marketing materials. Neither individual addresses nor telephone numbers will be published within these materials. <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Signature _____ Date _____		How did you learn about this 4-H volunteer opportunity? Were you a 4-H member? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes, in what county & state?	
		Would you like to be added to our mailing list? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
What additional 4-H events, activities or projects would be interesting to you as a volunteer?			
I understand that the coordinator of the event for which I am volunteering is responsible for informing me of my responsibilities as a volunteer participant, and will provide any specific training needed to carry out these duties. Although Extension staff will use the utmost precaution in guarding the health and well-being of all participants, I release them from any liability in case of injury as a result of this activity. Signature _____ Date _____			

RECORD FOR AGENT USE

Date	Event/Position	Time Given	Comments	Follow-up Completed

This form is designed for use in enrolling short term volunteers. It is to be used in situations when it is not appropriate to follow application and reference checking as for long-term volunteers. Adults who have been screened and have a current application on file need not complete this form.

Do NOT use this form in the following situations: