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## Organizational readiness for youth involvement

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### **Are you *really* ready to involve youth in your organization?**

With so many initiatives in education that incorporate community service and the importance of volunteering to youth looking to enter the job market or get accepted in post secondary institutions, there are a lot of young people looking for volunteer opportunities.

Some are only looking for 5 hour commitments, while others are looking to volunteer for much lengthier terms. Some youth are looking for decision-making roles and want to serve on advisory committees or even on boards.

It's tempting to say, "Great! Let's include youth in our agency. They need the experience and we need the help." Before you start recruiting, however, it is important to take some time to determine if your agency is, in fact, ready to really involve youth.

First of all, what age range do you consider to be youth? Some think under 18 while others think under 24. According to some federal initiatives, youth are considered to be adults 18 to 30 years. There is a vast difference between a 15 year old and 29 year old—especially in a legal sense! So it's important to establish what age range *your* organization considers youth.

### **Current climate**

- Do you currently involve youth in your organization—either as clients, volunteers or staff? If so, have you taken the time to ask if they are satisfied or how you can improve your programs?
- Have you really listened to them or implemented any of their suggestions?
- Are there any youth on your board of directors? This is especially important if the clients you serve are young people!
- Do you have any policies specific to young volunteers? It's important to consider things like "work alone procedures" for youth, or to consider that a teen volunteer is still technically a minor in your care!

### **Creating opportunities**

If you don't currently have young volunteers in your organization, have you considered consulting youth about what kinds of volunteer opportunities they would find desirable in your agency?

So often we think we know what a young person will want because we were once young ourselves—and probably still consider ourselves young, or at least young at heart. But, unless you

are a teen yourself, you don't know what it's like to be a teen *now*! After all, who knows young people better than other young people?

Do you have opportunities for youth to work in pairs or groups? Remember the importance of friends at this particular age.

### **Addressing barriers to youth**

It can be challenging for young people to find volunteer opportunities that fit in with their busy schedules (and a lot of today's youth are very busy, juggling school, work, clubs, team sports, friends, family and volunteering!).

- Do you have volunteer opportunities that offer flexible hours, or are your opportunities all during the day on weekdays?
- Can you create opportunities that can be performed from home?
- Do you have one-time only or short-term projects that would be suitable to youth?
- Can you give students time off during exams?
- Is your agency located on a major bus route? Transportation may be a challenge for younger volunteers who are not yet driving or who live on campus.
- Do you offer food to volunteers? The link between youth, particularly teenagers, and food may sound like a cliché but the reality is that, often, they are coming straight from school to their volunteer jobs. Those growing bodies need nourishment—can you offer them a snack?

### **Addressing barriers to organizations**

It may also be challenging for your organization to include youth as volunteers. In some cases, young people may require extra supervision.

- Can you offer training to staff and other volunteers on how to effectively work with youth as equals?
- Can you recruit and train other youth to lead or supervise young volunteers? Young people may be lacking in experience or confidence and may require extra training.
- Do your young volunteers know who to report to?
- Who can they comfortably go to for questions?
- Do you have an orientation and training session that is appealing to youth?

If your agency serves young people, remember that some volunteers may be only a year or two older than your clients. Empower your volunteers with confidence so they can earn the trust and respect of those young clients, as well as older staff and volunteers.

Be sure in your training to be crystal clear about instructions and expectations. If you expect your young volunteers to show initiative, then explain what that looks like! Take the time to show them how to successfully complete their tasks.

An equal challenge when including youth are the attitudes that may be exhibited by staff, clients and other volunteers!

- How do you and other staff feel about mandated youth volunteers?
- When a young volunteer makes a mistake do you believe it isn't necessarily *because* they are young volunteers?

## Performance evaluation

As with any age group, it is important to regularly evaluate your youth volunteer's performance. During your appraisal interviews or on your surveys do you:

- Give your young volunteers an opportunity to offer suggestions for improvement?
- Ask them if they've been welcomed by staff and volunteers?
- Allow them to evaluate themselves?

Your young volunteers should really see the impact their involvement has made to your clients, your organization and even to society. Even if they are performing a seemingly meaningless task, it's important to show volunteers (of all ages) how their work impacts the agency's ability to carry out its mission. That can then be linked to the benefits to society as a whole.

## Recognition

There is a correlation between volunteer appreciation and retention. How young volunteers are successfully recognized is probably different from other age groups. Since they may be looking for resume experience more than a middle-aged or senior volunteer, then something like a letter of reference or certificate may be of more value than a coffee mug. A traditional and formal banquet may not be as well received by youth as an informal BBQ.

The key to successful recognition—for volunteers of any age—is to know your volunteers and their motivations for being involved in your agency. Never underestimate the importance of a smile and a verbal thank you for a job well done on a regular basis by your staff and other volunteers!

There is no question that being inclusive to all ages takes extra thought and resources. When involving young volunteers, it can be a balancing act between treating them differently *because* they are youth and *not* treating them any differently because they are youth! The important thing to remember is that, they want to feel valued, be treated with respect and enjoy their time as a volunteer with your agency—just like every other volunteer—of any age!

## **Acknowledgement**

This article was written by Amanda Sokol; 2006

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