

## Hardwiring Leadership Skills and Best Practices in Volunteer Programs

By Sandra Huster

The number one reason that volunteers leave organizations is because their volunteer leaders did not know how to lead, notes Thomas W. McKee in *Volunteer Power News* (2010.) When asked why they are no longer active with an organization, volunteers report several reasons:

- there was a lack of professionalism in the program;
- they received little feedback about their contributions;
- they weren't sure they made a difference or their time was well spent; and
- communication was poor.

All of these reasons for leaving an organization are the result of poor leadership.

Hospice volunteer managers need the same leadership skills that other leaders must have to be successful in recruiting, training and retaining an excellent workforce. Hospice volunteer managers may be responsible for 50 to 100 volunteers—or even more. This is far greater than the number of employees that other managers and leaders supervise. As hospice organizations depend more and more on the support of volunteers during challenging economic times, it becomes critical that volunteer programs have the right leader.

The Volunteer/Volunteer Management Section of NHPCO's National Council of Hospice and Palliative Professionals strongly believes that providing leadership skills training for volunteer managers *is a critical need*. Nationally, there is a need to establish benchmarks for quality in hospice volunteer programs and to hardwire processes for capturing, communicating and replicating best practices.

### Developing Volunteer Leaders

One of the challenges in developing volunteer leaders is that there is no standard for education, qualifications or training for hospice volunteer managers (unlike other disciplines that require professional degrees and certifications and come with a well-defined list of required qualifications). When hospice organizations interview and hire new volunteer managers, there may not be a clear understanding by those conducting the interviews of the skills that are needed to be an excellent leader of volunteers. It's not enough to look for someone who is outgoing and loves people, although these are important qualities for volunteer management.

What skills do volunteer leaders need? What training is needed to equip volunteer managers to be high-performing leaders? Volunteer managers, like other hospice leaders, need to excel in the following areas:

## **1. Human Resource Management**

Volunteer managers serve as recruiters, HR coordinators, trainers, and supervisors. They are responsible for insuring that all policies, procedures, background checks, health screenings, training requirements and competencies are met. Volunteer managers must guarantee regulatory compliance with the Medicare Hospice Conditions of Participation, accrediting organizations, and state regulations. Risk management is the volunteer manager's job as well, adhering to insurance and legal regulations, and infection and disease control practices.

## **2. Customer Service**

Volunteer managers have many customers. We might see volunteers as their primary customers, but beyond that they serve patients and families, the entire hospice staff, community groups and individuals. It is important that volunteer managers create a culture that places customer service first. These leaders must be open to change, willing to work shoulder to shoulder with staff and fellow volunteers, and must always communicate caring and appreciation. Relationship building is a key component to a successful volunteer program and to volunteer retention.

## **3. Fiscal Management**

Volunteer managers should be included in the budget planning process and be held responsible for checking their financial reports monthly. Including a finance goal as part of the volunteer manager's annual evaluation provides motivation to be fiscally responsible. When given the skills needed and empowered to manage their own budgets, they will be much more likely to be good stewards. For example, at Covenant Hospice, where I serve as the director of volunteer services, all leaders must establish a finance goal annually. Volunteer managers know that part of their annual performance evaluation and merit increase depends on meeting or exceeding their budget goal.

## **4. A Commitment to Excellence**

All hospice leaders must work together to achieve excellence. This means that no team, department or program can have a "silo" mentality or expect to achieve success alone. Too often in hospices the volunteer manager and volunteers are seen as separate from the clinical team. We say that volunteers are fully integrated into the team, but are they really? Volunteer managers must step up and speak up as advocates for volunteers and must find their places at the interdisciplinary team table alongside other team members. Through NHPCO's National Council of Hospice and Palliative Professionals (NCHPP) and as individual hospices, we must all make a commitment to excellence in hospice volunteer programs. This includes establishing qualifications, training, continuing education, competencies and credentialing opportunities for hospice volunteer managers, just as we do for other hospice disciplines.

## **5. Accountability**

Hospice volunteer programs grow when their leaders set specific measurable goals and are held accountable for meeting or exceeding those goals. Program goals must be tied to performance evaluations and leaders should be rewarded for outcomes.

For example, Covenant Hospice senior leaders set strategic goals annually. In 2010, four of the organization's 20 goals were "owned" by the volunteer department. They included:

- Meeting at least 95 percent of all patient/family requests for volunteer services (the result was 99 percent).
- Maintaining volunteer satisfaction of 4.75/5.0 (the result was 4.81/5.0).
- Maintaining a 1.9 ratio of volunteers to ADC (the result was 2.3).
- Maintaining a Medicare Match at 9 percent (the result was 14 percent).

At Covenant, volunteer program strategic goals are aligned throughout the organization, from the CEO to the vice president of human resources, to the director of volunteer services and, finally, to all volunteer services managers. Accountability based on shared measurable outcomes and rewarded through agency-wide recognition and annual performance merit increases has produced outstanding results.

If our volunteer managers do not come to our hospices with these five key skills, it is up to our organizations to provide training and coaching in these areas. In my organization, quarterly training is provided through our Leadership Development Institute. Volunteer managers, along with all other Covenant leaders, attend these one-day trainings, designed to equip leaders with the knowledge and skills that are needed to lead others.

### Harvesting and Hardwiring Best Practices

NHPCO's National Council of Hospice and Palliative Professionals (NCHPP) offers the perfect opportunity for volunteer leaders and volunteers to identify and share best practices. Volunteer managers should be encouraged to join NCHPP. Membership is free for all employees and volunteers whose hospice is a member of NHPCO. (Visit [www.nhpc.org/nchpp](http://www.nhpc.org/nchpp) to learn more or call NHPCO's Member Services Center at 800/646-6460.)

Members of NCHPP's Volunteer/Volunteer Management Section have free access to the following resources:

- **My.NHPCO:** This [professional networking site](#) provides daily access to the Volunteer/Volunteer Management Section through an eGroup (which is similar the former "listserve"). The eGroup provides the opportunity to post questions, share best practices, and connect with peers and colleagues.\*
- **Volunteer Section eLibrary:** The Volunteer Section [eLibrary](#) (on the My.NHPCO website) includes a range of helpful management tools and resources that eliminate the need to "reinvent the wheel."\*
- **Volunteer Section Chat Sessions:** These chats are open discussions on topics of interest to both new and experienced volunteer managers. They are scheduled on the fourth Wednesday of each month (except the November Chat which falls on the 5th Wednesday), from 3:00-4:00 p.m. (ET). See the last page of this article.

### Some Examples of Hospice Volunteer Program Best Practices

- Conducts and documents initial and annual volunteer competencies.
- Completes and documents annual volunteer evaluations.
- Surveys volunteer satisfaction annually and reports results.
- Reports volunteer scores from NHPCO's [Family Evaluation of Hospice Care survey](#): (1) percentage of families who reported receiving volunteer care, and (2) percentage who rated volunteer care as excellent.
- Reports results from internal satisfaction survey of volunteer program.
- Tracks and reports volunteer retention annually.
- Reports Medicare and non-Medicare volunteer activities by type, hours and associated cost savings.
- Provides volunteer manager ongoing leadership training, competencies and evaluations.

In addition to these free resources, NHPCO's [two primary national conferences](#)—the Management and Leadership Conference (MLC) held each spring and the Clinical Team Conference (CTC) held each fall—offer valuable concurrent sessions for both volunteers and volunteer managers as well as a scheduled time for members of the NCHPP Volunteer/Volunteer Management Section to meet for face-to-face discussions.

Hospices that want to grow their volunteer programs, meet the increasing needs for volunteer services, increase patient and family satisfaction, and retain volunteers must have volunteer leaders who know how to lead. This presents an exciting opportunity for the NCHPP Volunteer/Volunteer Management Section to demonstrate leadership excellence, share best practices, set benchmarks and celebrate results!

\*While My.NHPCO is free to NHPCO members and their staff, each staff member must enroll. For instructions on enrolling (which just takes a few minutes!), see the “[Getting Started](#)” section of the My.NHPCO site.

*Sandra Huster has worked in the field of volunteer management for 14 years and is currently director of volunteer services for Covenant Hospice (Pensacola, FL). She also just began her first term as the NCHPP Volunteer/Volunteer Management Section leader (2011-2013) and is a frequent presenter at NHPCO’s national conferences.*

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