

A Framework Allowing for Change

Volunteer programs continue to thrive with the right people and systems in place

BY HILARY ANNE HAGER AND MEGAN WEBB



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Both Megan Webb and Hilary Anne Hager recently experienced major changes in their volunteer programs. Megan became the director of Oakland Animal Services in California, and Hilary moved the operations of Everett Animal Services in Washington state into a brand-new animal shelter facility.

Such huge changes might easily have crippled their volunteer programs; however, they've found that the foundations that they created ahead of time kept their programs running. In this article, they discuss the components of their volunteer programs that they believe were the most instrumental in their time of change.

Megan Webb: Prepping for a New Role

When I took on the position of volunteer manager at Oakland Animal Services nearly seven years ago, I knew I needed to create a program that could run without me. This became a guiding principle in how I developed the program—I knew that there would be a day when I would no longer be volunteer manager, and I wanted to make sure that the program would continue.

That day arrived when I became the director of Oakland Animal Services in April, leaving the volunteer manager position vacant. Things could have fallen apart, but instead the volunteer program is still highly functional when we need it most—in a time of change—because of several pieces that I had put into place earlier.

1. Mentors

I can't say enough about developing a strong mentor program—no volunteer program should be without this critical core component. One volunteer manager can't do all the training, hand-holding, and planning for a volunteer program, but if the volunteer manager is gone, well-trained and integrated mentors can step in to take over. I had created a team of 20 mentors who kept right on going when I became the director. Each of them have stepped up to take on new responsibilities, including:

- Running orientations
- Training new mentors
- Making volunteers official and welcoming them
- Checking in and following up with volunteers

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- Answering potential and current volunteer questions through our online system
- Supervising volunteers when I'm not around
- Answering technology questions
- Monitoring our community message board and bringing big issues to me to address
- Revising training
- Planning new parts of the program

2. Staff Support

I'd worked hard on creating staff support for the volunteer program. Any time there is change in an organization, especially budget cutbacks, staff can begin to feel uneasy about their positions and can see volunteers as a threat. It is very important to find ways to develop staff support for volunteers when times are good so that this foundation is there when it is needed. As a volunteer manager, I made sure to bring up volunteers at every staff meeting and obtain input and suggestions from staff on how to develop the program. I made sure to show that I had listened to their suggestions and implemented the changes they'd wanted to see. This helped them feel ownership in the volunteer program.

Now, as the director, I evaluate my staff based on their interactions with volunteers, and I make sure to praise staff publicly when they thank and help volunteers. I can see from a new perspective how much power the leadership has over how staff responds to volunteers, something we've been talking about for years.

3. Automated Systems

This is critical! We have automated systems in place—to schedule volunteer orientations and trainings, track volunteer hours, provide online training, and maintain a message board—that continue to run without me. If I didn't have this in place, there would have been no way the volunteer program could have kept running. Without them, I couldn't have kept up with the administrative tasks of the volunteer program, and mentors would not have had systems to coordinate their efforts. In tough economic and budgetary climates, it can seem like these systems might be a tough sell, but the return on investment has been absolutely worth it.

4. Communication Systems

It is important to have mechanisms for your volunteers to communicate with each other and the organization. If you don't create these systems, your volunteers will, and you might be locked out of these discussions. We developed a volunteer message board while I was volunteer manager. This board has discussion areas devoted to dogs, cats, rabbits, and mentors. The message board has become even more important now that I'm director. With less time to spend one-on-one with volunteers, I'm able to look at the message board and quickly see the "hot" issues that the volunteers are discussing, and I can address misinformation before rumors spread and volunteers become angry about decisions before they have all the facts. It has also become a great way for me to handle potential and new volunteer questions. These questions are now sent to the message board rather than to my e-mail box. Official volunteers then answer these questions. This saves me a huge amount of time and gets these questions answered quickly.

5. An Open-Door Policy

My transition from volunteer manager to director has definitely not been problem-free. My biggest challenge is that I'm now the person making all of the euthanasia decisions—some of which are unpopular with volunteers. I used to be the person the volunteers went to when they were upset about the director's policies. Now, I'm the director. The mentors are helping by being available to talk with volunteers who have concerns. I

also try to make a conscious effort to have an open-door policy. However, it's not enough to simply leave my door open. I work on trying to slow down and not appear as swamped and busy as I feel. If I look too busy, people worry about "bothering" me, and when that happens, they hold on to issues until they become huge and blow up.

6. A Habit of Appreciation/ Acknowledgement

When I was volunteer manager, I wrote handwritten thank-you cards to volunteers who helped out in a special way or had reached a specific number of hours. I continue to do this as director, and I think it almost has *more* meaning, because people see that I've taken time out of my very busy schedule to appreciate their work.

Hilary Anne Hager: Making a Big Move

When I started at Everett Animal Services in 2007, the volunteer program had been run for nearly six years by a group of incredibly dedicated volunteers. They all had other commitments, including full-time jobs and families, but were committed enough to spend the rest of their free time running the program at our large, open-admission shelter with an annual intake of 9,000. They were responsible for all the orientations and training and ran a program with about 90 volunteers in a union shop, which was a great accomplishment.

I was the first staff person assigned to manage the volunteer program. I had about eight years of volunteer management under my belt at that point, and was excited to get in and make changes and improve the program.

What I discovered quickly was that the volunteers who had ownership of the program weren't nearly as excited as I was about all my plans for change. In fact, I think it's safe to say they were lukewarm about my suggested "improvements" and skeptical about the benefits of what I was advocating. I realized I would need to tread carefully in order to prevent my recommendations from being perceived as criticism of how the program had been functioning.

I am an advocate for structure, and for creating a program that is designed to meet the needs of the animal, the staff, and the organization best; some programs are designed



to suit the needs of the volunteers. Our old program wasn't *all* about the volunteers, but the staff had very little input into how the program was designed, and there were no mechanisms in place to get feedback from staff about how it was actually working from their perspective. And the program had grown dramatically over time—from five volunteers at the program's inception in 2002 to more than 90 in 2007. When you have five people, it's easy to all sit down in the same room, divvy up tasks, and tackle the assigned duties. When you have 90 people coming to your organization who want to serve and spend their time well, it's imperative to have structure in place to ensure everything runs smoothly.

My first step was to listen to find out what the volunteer leaders liked and didn't like about the program. My next step was to work on ways to recommend changes that allowed the volunteers to understand that I wasn't speaking out of my own preferences or a desire to turn the volunteer program into a replica of the one I'd run at my previous shelter. I needed to do some gentle education on best practices in volunteer management, so I started gathering resources.

I accessed animalsheltering.org, energizeinc.org, and other volunteer management sites to outline hallmarks of well-run programs. I had our whole volunteer leadership team take Susan J. Ellis' *Volunteer Program Audit* to grade the existing program against a measuring stick of someone else's judgment. Following that, I wrote a report as though I were an external consultant to the program, identifying key areas where changes and improvements could be useful: recruitment, screening, training, tracking, recognition, and staff/volunteer relationships.

Developing a Backup Team

While all of this was going on, we were developing a timeline for moving to our new shelter facility in April 2009. We had less than two years to develop a program that would best serve our needs in the new shelter. The shelter we had at that time had been built before the volunteer program existed; a new facility that was both people- and animal-friendly would open up all kinds of opportunity for volunteer involvement. We needed to create a program that would maximize our new building, and that meant taking a whole new approach to

the program, one that included structure and a well-trained group of volunteers who could work with little to no direct supervision by staff.

Once the volunteer group was on board with the direction we were headed and the need for more structure, I realized we couldn't do it all and needed more help. I utilized my monthly e-newsletters to put out the call to the general body of volunteers to ask for assistance in developing the program's next stage. I drafted a job description of what I thought the duties would look like, and set up an informational meeting to invite people into the project. I knew we'd need to have bi-weekly meetings (one evening and weekend day per month) and that volunteers who were interested in joining needed to be willing to



do the work. There was no sense in signing up if the amount of time they could dedicate to the project was limited.

We grouped similar tasks together, then thought about where in the building those tasks could be completed, what times of the day would be best for them, and how many volunteers we'd need for each.

We had 10 people step up to the plate; all of them were folks who had weekly volunteer commitments and were excited about driving the program in a new direction. I wound up with a glorious group of people, including a former teacher and union representative, a retired human services director, an engineer, a professional (human) trainer, a mom and her daughter who worked with the cats, plus our core group of five volunteer team leaders. It was incredible. I will say again and again that creating this "Transition Team" was the best and smartest thing I've ever done.

At our first meeting, I presented the transition team with my own vision for the program as a starting point, provided materials on best practices in volunteer management, and outlined my recommendations for program improvements. I spent a ton of time talking to them about my values around volunteerism and volunteer management, about creating a program with highly functioning, well-trained people who helped to reinforce to staff the

notion that the volunteer program is the best thing that ever happened to the shelter. I also *listened*—to what they saw for the shelter, what motivated them to participate as volunteers, what kinds of changes would help them feel more successful as volunteers. We resolved to incorporate their vision for next steps so we could co-create what we wanted to see happen.

Still, the volume of work was overwhelming, so our strategy was to divide and conquer. We split up the groups into task teams focusing on particular elements: developing the new training program, creating a new volunteer manual, revising recruitment materials/Web content, and reorienting all existing volunteers. These teams had set agendas and tasks to accomplish, with assignments due at each meeting. As the lead for all projects, I

was involved with each sub-group, but not responsible for developing all the content.

Our first step was to sit down and write the list of activities volunteers had been engaged in at our previous shelter. Then we sat down and made a list of all the things we'd always wanted volunteers to be able to do, but didn't have the space (or the training and systems in place) to make happen. Once that was in place, we sat down with the plans for the new building and tried to identify all of the other things that the new space would allow us to have volunteers do. We grouped similar tasks together, then thought about where in the building those tasks could be completed, what times of the day would be best for them, and how many volunteers we'd need for each. That gave us the information we needed to draft new position descriptions, which we ran past our staff before sending them to our human resources department and the union for approval. In fact, we ran all of our output past a committee of staff who could provide input in every step.

Once we knew what the program would look like, we started introducing all our vol-



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unteers to the program as it would exist in the new shelter. We required our volunteers to attend workshops about the changes to the program, which included length of shifts, a more structured schedule with definitive start and end times, processes for shift substitutions, a renewed minimum three-month commitment for all volunteers, and required further training before starting in the new building.

Expect the Unexpected

As all this work was occurring, the shelter took in nearly 150 dogs from a puppy mill bust, pushing our dog population from our usual 45 to more than 170. The transition team volunteers proved invaluable, stepping up into a leadership role as the shelter dealt with the overwhelming reality of caring for so many dogs in such poor condition. We'd spent much time with these volunteers and given them insight into the interior life of the shelter and staff perspective, which gave us a huge advantage. We simply could not have made it through without the extra help—and they mostly focused on directing other volunteers rather than providing animal care. They came in handy again when we experienced an influx of about 45 cats this summer from a hoarding case—the volunteer leadership team stepped up to help with cleaning and animal care as needed. The trust from staff was already established, so it was an obvious solution to the problem.

When the time for the move arrived, the transition team really came into its own. The volunteers oriented and trained the existing volunteers to the new facility, showing them the new building's layout, locations, practices, and protocols. They helped us move in and put away our supplies, organize our laundry and animal care supplies, and show our volunteers around. Once we were settled in, we started doing orientations and trainings for new volunteers, after having put recruitment on hold for five months in anticipation of the move. The transition team is responsible for providing training to each new class of volunteers coming through the system.

Even after being in the building for six months, we are still making tweaks and adjustments—to the volunteer trainings, to our practices, and even to some of our protocols. The volunteer leaders give input at each step and help make it happen. They train and

mentor new volunteers, give feedback to me about whether new recruits are a good fit for the program, and assist me with a variety of administrative tasks. We meet once a month after work at the shelter, bringing food and friendship and commitment to the table so we can cover the work that needs to be accomplished. I value these people more than I can ever really explain.

Bringing these volunteer leaders in to help guide the volunteer program also gave them an increased sense of ownership, engagement, and investment in the shelter operations in general. There is no question in my mind that we would not have been nearly as successful without their commitment to the work—I simply could not have done the amount of work that was required to make the changes to the program and to get everything put into place.

While I believe my volunteers are exceptional, I do not believe volunteers of this quality are unique to Everett, Wash. I believe that shelters and animal welfare groups all around the country can access people with time and talents they're willing to give to the animals via volunteer management rather than (or in addition to) direct animal care. It all depends on what you're inviting them to participate in, and how you structure their involvement. You have to be willing to spend the time uploading a lot of information so they can be totally on the same page as you move forward, which means less detailed oversight on your part.

Calling for Backup

All of our volunteer programs will ultimately undergo some major type of change—expected or unexpected. The key is planning. How well would your shelter's volunteer program function if you or your volunteer manager were no longer available? No program should survive solely on one person. We need to recruit other people to participate in taking on parts of the program and preparing for the future. We both agree that the most important tool any volunteer manager has is a team of volunteers who are willing and able to take on volunteer manager functions—call them mentors, a transition team, or some other word, but you need a group that backs you up so you're not doing this work alone. 