Volunteers provide incredible support for community events. They provide benefits for not only organizers and attendees but also build community social capital that contributes to increased quality of life. This type of volunteering is a form of what is now called “episodic volunteering.”

Episodic volunteering is becoming more and more popular as times change and individuals move away from traditional volunteer roles that require consistent long-term commitments or so-called “regular volunteering.” More and more people now prefer to contribute time at the last minute, or over a short period of time that’s convenient to them.

Facilitated by online technology, it is easy to find and sign up for events or short-term commitments on the spur of the moment. It is also easy for organizations to organize such events and perform volunteer management functions such as recruiting, scheduling, and follow-up.

Some of these events involve thousands of volunteers, such as marathons, sporting competitions, and festivals. These are known as mega events, bringing together “an extraordinary level of tourists, media coverage, prestige or economic impact for the host community” (Getz & Page quoted in Cnaan et al, 2018, 86). Bringing together masses of volunteers requires a particularly impressive volunteer management structure, however research into how this all works is fairly new. In this Research to Practice column, we look at the results of a study of the experiences of over 2,400 volunteers at one such mega event, the World Meeting of Families and the visit of Pope Francis to Philadelphia in 2015, with the goal of advancing knowledge in this area.

The Study

The World Meeting of Families and the visit of Pope Francis to Philadelphia in September 2015 provided a perfect opportunity to explore mega event volunteer management issues from the perspectives of volunteers. Researchers from the University of Philadelphia and the Veterans Affairs Medical Center conducted an online survey of all 7,000 volunteers the day after the final event, with a reminder sent a week later. About 2,400 volunteers completed the survey, for a response rate of 34%. The respondents were predominantly Catholic (87%), female (76%), married (58%), highly educated (76% had undergraduate degrees or higher), white (75%), and only 11% were under the age of 34. A follow-up survey to probe some of the findings was also sent to a random sample of 100 volunteers – 50 ‘regular’ volunteers and 50 who did not volunteer regularly, with a 36% response rate.

In order to further the field of volunteer administration particularly as it pertains to episodic volunteering, the researchers explored factors based on prior studies on volunteer management. They were interested in knowing if there were differences between those who volunteered regularly and those who only did episodic volunteering. They looked at a variety of management issues including recruiting, training, and supervision. They also considered the demographics of the volunteers, as well as their motivations for volunteering for this event. All of these were considered in relation to volunteer satisfaction and the likelihood of future episodic volunteering.

Findings and Implications for Volunteer Resource Management

From the descriptive and regression analyses of the data, let’s look at several of the findings that will be pertinent for volunteer resource managers.

- Keeping in mind this was a religious event, spiritual or emotional satisfaction was a key motivator for volunteering for this event. However, significantly less motivating was a sense of duty. Episodic volunteers at this event were more likely to be motivated to volunteer for self-serving reasons. This is in contrast to regular volunteers, who, according to prior studies, are more likely to volunteer for the good of others. As the authors state, “The respondents clearly agreed that they volunteer to help an event, but mostly to please themselves. There is no contradiction in that duality, but something that many volunteer managers need to keep in mind” (101).

- Multiple recruiting methods were important for this event, contrasting other research that found that multiple recruiting strategies could be problematic. Most volunteers heard about the call for volunteers outside of religious channels. Women learned about the event through family and friends, while men tended to find out through media outlets and workplaces.

- Many volunteers reported they volunteered on their own (77%), rather than with others. Those who learned of the event through work were more likely to volunteer as part of a group.

- Half of the volunteers donated the cost of the background check ($38) by paying for it out of their own pocket. The older the volunteer, the more likely they were to donate the cost of the background check. Also, those who were more likely to do so had also given recently to charity.

- There were multiple options for training: webinars, a mobile app, and face-to-face. Most chose the webinar (82%).
Volunteers who were also “regular” volunteers preferred episodic volunteering to regular volunteering. Regular volunteers were more likely to be less satisfied, “suggesting they may have higher expectations” (99).

Volunteer supervision was very important for volunteer satisfaction and repeat episodic volunteering. Supervisor availability, being thanked by a supervisor, and supervisor quality were all positively correlated with satisfaction.

The study confirmed the importance of being thanked as the preferred form of appreciation. As the researchers found, “being thanked by a supervisor was the most significant form of appreciation” (100). What was interesting was that appreciation from event attendees was also a significant factor in feeling satisfied by the volunteer experience. In other words, “being thanked from multiple sources brings more satisfaction to the volunteer experience” (101).

Finally, asking volunteers about their experiences provided useful information for future events. For instance, some volunteers noted there were no means to charge cell phones and their batteries died while on shift.

Your Turn!

How much of this rings true for you in your own episodic volunteer opportunities? How do you approach volunteer resource management differently or the same for regular versus episodic volunteers? Are there any other differences between regular and episodic volunteers that you have noticed in your own organizations? Share below!