



FRIENDS IN FOCUS

Creative & Successful Volunteer Outreach Efforts

Introduction

The vast majority of Friends groups rely on volunteers to achieve their mission. From running programs and leading hikes, to sending out membership mailings and running the organization, there is no shortage of tasks to be completed. But many organizations struggle to attract and retain good volunteers. Below are examples of successful outreach strategies used by Friends groups throughout New York.

Host a Volunteer Interest Night

The Herkimer Home State Historic Site has a structured volunteer program. As part of it, they hold a Volunteer Interest Night when community members can come to the site to learn more about the volunteer program. The event provides information about the program, recruitment process, and an opportunity for questions and answers. The event is billed as an opportunity to “have fun, meet people and get involved”—the reasons many people volunteer.

Keep the event short, with brief presentations with photos, and have handouts listing the various volunteer opportunities and upcoming schedule of events. End the evening with light refreshments and an opportunity for informal conversations. Have participants wear name tags. Weeknight events tend to have better attendance than weekends. Be sure to invite returning as well as potential volunteers and the broader public.

At a recent volunteer night, 30 people attended, 10 new people signed up, though not all followed through. Herkimer ended up with four new quality volunteers that lasted for the season. One of the new people became their Volunteer Coordinator. The Friends developed a volunteer handbook and held mandatory orientation meetings. Each volunteer was required to attend one meeting.

Keep in mind that sometimes people want to volunteer but do not want to be a member of the Friends. That’s been the experience at Herkimer and with the Friends of Glimmerglass. Keeping the two separate may be the best way to avoid losing potential volunteers.

Outreach for Specific Needs

Oftentimes, Friends groups find that they have a specific need that requires a specific skill set—website development, graphic design, finance/accounting, etc. In these cases, posting a “job” announcement is a way to attract people that may be interested in lending their skills, but might prefer volunteering from the comfort of their homes or may not be interested in attending meetings or events.

A job announcement can be posted in a number of places for free or at low cost, such as:

- Community papers and pennysavers
- Friends website, email newsletter, social media sites, and printed newsletter

- Local colleges (either online or flyers on campus)
- Flyers on local bulletin boards
- At events when tabling
- Listservs
- Senior citizen centers

There are several websites that allow you to advertise volunteer positions for free, including Idealist, serve.gov and volunteermatch.org.

Another approach to filling a specific need is to reach out to a local business to explore a partnership. Many firms—such as design and website firms—dedicate a portion of their work to pro bono services. Arrange a meeting at which the Friends can share their mission, accomplishments and goals.

Depending on the need, positions could also be filled using interns. Communications interns, for example, can update websites and social media sites and work on press releases, flyers and other materials.

Research shows that people don't volunteer because they weren't asked.



Create a Formal Volunteer Program

Establishing a formal volunteer program can help give structure to your efforts and create a sense of belonging to something meaningful for volunteers. While not everyone is attracted to a formal volunteer program, for those that are it can promote loyalty, steadfastness, allegiance and faithfulness to the goals of the organization. Committed volunteers will be willing to take on more responsibility and might be interested in serving on the board of the Friends. Giving the program an official name can add even more cache. [See Friends in Focus series publication *Creating a Volunteer Program* for more.]

Use I Love My Park Day as a Kick-off Event

I Love My Park Day (ILMPD) is an exciting statewide event to celebrate, improve, and enhance New York's state parks and historic sites and bring visibility to the entire state park system. Thousands of volunteers participate in more than 100 cleanup, improvement, and beautification events the first Saturday of May each year.

By participating in ILMPD, Friends groups tap into an event with statewide publicity and support, including banners and t-shirts for volunteers. Through PTNY's online volunteer registration system, groups can capture new volunteers that may not have heard about the event otherwise.

ILMPD could be used to launch a new regular volunteer effort. The Friends can get people to sign up that day to volunteer for upcoming volunteer work days or to sign up to be a regular volunteer. The idea is to harness the positive energy and enthusiasm of the event and translate it into a more regular program, such as monthly trail cleanup days.

The Friends of Fillmore Glen (FFG) used ILMPD to kick-start the new Friends group. The first event at the park in 2016 drew 120 volunteers! Gail Morse, Chairperson of FFG, wrote a letter to the editor that was published in the local paper along with photos. The letter not only described the successful ILMPD event and thanked volunteers, it also included the date of the next FFG meeting and the group's Facebook page.

Organize Activities Around User Groups

The Friends of Connetquot have found the most successful way to recruit volunteers is through the hosting of activities of interest to particular user groups. For example, the Friends host a trail ride. There is a small fee for the event. After the ride, the Friends provide refreshments,



Volunteers at Fillmore Glen State Park at I Love My Park Day 2016.

usually donated by a local business, and there is an opportunity for conversation. Board members are there to act as congenial hosts. Usually, participants start talking about what is needed to improve the trails and from those conversations spring volunteers.

Try to think about your park's user groups and design an activity that will be of interest to them, followed by an opportunity for informal conversations and networking. Follow up after the event with specific requests for volunteers, either to all the people that came (since you collected their email addresses when they registered for the event), or to those that seemed to have a particular interest in volunteering.

Whatever route you choose, the most important thing is to ask! Research shows that the number one reason people don't volunteer is because they weren't asked.

Making a difference for New York's state parks and historic sites from the ground up



29 Elk Street, Albany, NY 12207
518-434-1583
ptny@ptny.org | www.ptny.org

