



# FRIENDS IN FOCUS

## 7 Steps for Creating a Formal Volunteer Program

### Introduction

A formal volunteer program can help give structure to the efforts of Friends groups 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. Follow these 7 steps to creating a formal volunteer program.

### Step 1:

#### **Designate a coordinator.**

It should be clear—whether it is one person or a special committee—who is in charge of coordinating volunteers. This ensures that volunteers know who to talk to and helps ensure that tasks are carried out. This person or committee, with the assistance of the full board when needed, will be responsible for:

1. developing and updating materials for volunteers;
2. recruiting volunteers;
3. reviewing volunteer applications and matching skills with needs;
4. orienting volunteers and organizing training;
5. tracking volunteers using a spreadsheet or database;
6. motivating and acknowledging volunteers; and
7. evaluating the effectiveness of the program.

The Friends of Connetquot stress that having one point of contact for volun-

teers is key. Their coordinator, a board member, fields calls and emails from interested volunteers, screens them (what are their skills, availability, etc.), and then directs them to the volunteer opportunity that best matches their interests, skills and availability. Sometimes that means directing them to park staff to assist with a park-led event. Their coordinator also maintains a library of volunteers based on interest and skill area so she knows who to contact for specific volunteer needs.

### Step 2:

#### **Create professional materials.**

This will show your organization is serious and committed to its volunteers, and will help engender the same kind of commitment from volunteers. Plus, putting some time into these materials will help clarify why you are looking for volunteers.

Provide new volunteers with a manual or a welcome packet that includes:

- welcome letter
- background information on the Friends (mission, history, programs you offer, projects you've completed, etc.)
- a volunteer job description—let them know what's expected of volunteers, such as time commitment (see PTNY's website for a sample)
- volunteer policies and procedures
- key Friends group contact information
- information on membership and giving opportunities

How you describe the volunteer program is also important. Giving the

program an official name can add even more cache. The Darwin Martin House in Buffalo, for example, makes being a volunteer sound important and special (because it is!):

*Join the Martin House volunteer docent team today! Docents provide local, national, and international visitors with world-class tours of our National Historic Landmark. Engage visitors through the acre and a half site while shaping lasting memories of the Martin House. As a volunteer you are invited to participate in continuing education sessions related to architecture, design, history, Buffalo, Frank Lloyd Wright and the Martin family. You are also invited to special volunteer and Martin House sponsored events.*

### Step 3:

#### **Develop an application and process.**

Again, this lets them know this is an organized program. Because people have different interests and skills, provide different options for volunteers and include those options in the volunteer application. For example, the Darwin Martin

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House includes in its online volunteer application a number of options, including docent/tour guide, retail help, cleaning, gardening, education, and more.

You can then track and use this information so that you are only reaching out to people likely to be interested in a particular project. Keep the information in a simple spreadsheet or database and then the next time you need help with a special event or other specific volunteer need, you can easily reach out to only those people who expressed an interest in that kind of work. This also keeps people from feeling inundated with requests that do not interest them.

Follow up the application with a conversation, either via phone or in person, to evaluate the applicant and provide more information on the volunteer program.

## Step 4:

### **Provide training for new volunteers.**

By showing new volunteers the ropes, they will feel welcome and part of a team, and will be more likely to complete the task properly. Have an experienced volunteer act as a “buddy” and work with new volunteers the first time they join you for an event or project. Some Friends groups hold mandatory training sessions for volunteers, particularly for docents, and require a minimum time commitment from volunteers.

Walkway Over the Hudson (WOTH) Ambassadors must complete required training consisting of two classes, 2 hours each, plus an on-site tour. Volunteers who successfully complete the training participate in an official “vesting” cer-

emony and are presented with WOTH’s trademark red vests (see photo).

## Step 5:

### **Show your appreciation.**

Highlight volunteers in newsletters, your website and social media. Add a “volunteer of the year” award presentation to your annual fundraiser or other event. Give them a physical award; a framed, signed certificate will look great in someone’s home or office and is inexpensive to create. A book or framed art related to the park/site is another option. A local business might be willing to sponsor the program and provide gift certificates as the award, or the Friends could supply free passes to the park/site or an Empire Passport good at all state parks.

Something that can be done for all volunteers is to provide them with hats, t-shirts, vests (like WOTH), badges or buttons that show they are a “member” of something special.

Never underestimate the value of saying “thank you.” The simple gesture of a thank-you note shows your appreciation and builds relationships with volunteers. The Friends of Hamlin Beach State Park send volunteers thank-you postcards using historical photos of the park. Young volunteers might appreciate a letter of commendation that can be used with college or job applications.



*Walkway Over the Hudson Ambassadors at a vesting ceremony.*

## Step 6:

### **Focus on good communications.**

Include information on volunteer opportunities in all your materials and at all your events. Be sure to respond promptly to inquiries. Communicate regularly with volunteers—consider a special email newsletter just for them to let them know what volunteers have accomplished and what volunteer opportunities are coming up, and show your appreciation for all that they do!

## Step 7:

### **Evaluate the program.**

Program evaluation is an important, yet often overlooked, step. In the case of a volunteer program, evaluation helps ensure that volunteers are providing the added benefits and capacity that you hope. An evaluation process might include asking volunteers to complete a self-evaluation form followed by a conversation with the volunteer coordinator. You may also wish to solicit feedback on volunteers and the overall program from park/site staff.

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



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