

Evaluation Practices

And the Volunteer Driver Program Experience

***“Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap,
but by the seeds you plant.”***

It is doubtful that Robert Louis Stevenson had evaluation in mind when he wrote these words. However, they suggest the importance of the past when considering the success of the present, and they can be particularly relevant to the evaluation of volunteer driver programs.

Some managers of volunteer driver programs view evaluation as intimidating, mainly because they don’t know much about it or how to do it. Others see evaluation as an invaluable tool to improve their volunteer driver program. Many nonprofit organizations measure their performance by indicators such as dollars raised, membership growth, number of people served, and overhead costs. This brief information sheet introduces concepts and practices for nonprofit organizations. They are based on a wide range of literature on evaluation in the nonprofit sector and applied to the volunteer driver program experience.

EIGHT CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL NONPROFIT

Let’s start the discussion with a summary of characteristics. They generally include:

1. qualified staff members
2. money
3. a good board of trustees
4. clear and concise mission statement
5. the identification of need and ability to fill it
6. marketing the organization and its services
7. strong and supportive volunteer base
8. the ability to adapt and adjust the involvement of board members, staff, and volunteers

The Volunteer Driver Program Experience

In evaluating if it is successfully implementing the above characteristics, a volunteer driver program would need to look at its experience during the past year and ask the following questions: 1) Were its staff members qualified to do their job? 2) Did it have sufficient

funds to perform its functions, and did it raise new funds for the coming year? 3) Were its board members involved, and did their involvement contribute to the mission of the program? 4) Was the mission statement clear, and if not, was it revised as necessary? 5) Did the program identify the need for transportation services, and was it able to meet that need? 6) Did the program make an effort to market its need for volunteers (and perhaps passengers and its transportation services to potential passengers and the community at large)? 7) Do the volunteer drivers participate in the program on a regular basis, and did the program recruit new volunteer drivers? 8) Were board members, staff, and volunteers involved, and was their involvement adjusted to meet their needs and the needs of the program?

FIVE KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTEER DRIVER PROGRAMS

- 1.** Insurance for the organization, the board of directors, the passengers, and the volunteer drivers is essential.
- 2.** Volunteer drivers and their recruitment and training are critical to the success of a volunteer driver program. Recruitment can take many forms (radio, print, church, friends, relatives, nonprofits, community groups, and corporations).
- 3.** Collaboration with the community is not only important in recruiting volunteers and passengers, it also is important in understanding the transportation gaps that exist, the need for transportation and types of services, who should receive the services, and priority destinations.
- 4.** Data collection should include quantitative data and qualitative data.
- 5.** Impact can be measured by any number of methods (e.g., metrics related to the number of rides, destinations, and milestone accomplishments). However, there also are qualitative methods for measuring impact.

The Volunteer Driver Program Experience

A volunteer driver program needs to consider the above essential elements of a successful program by reviewing the following: 1) Considerable information related to insurance is available for volunteer driver programs and volunteers. Insurance provided by VIS is included in the evaluation section of the TurnKey Kit. 2) According to volunteer driver program managers, volunteer drivers are the heart and soul of a volunteer driver program. At the same time, these same managers often say that volunteer drivers are the hardest volunteers to recruit. Many program managers (and volunteer drivers) also say that volunteer drivers are the best recruiters of volunteer drivers. 3) Although volunteer driver programs are part of the community and dependent on the community for visibility, support, and acceptance, a volunteer driver program may be so involved in providing rides that it does not “have time” to be involved in the community. Every volunteer driver program should view itself and the community as mutual beneficiaries of its transportation and other services. Its communication and interface with the community is critical to its success. 4) In past years, programs managed data collection with pad and pencil. Today, there are a variety of excellent software packages available specific to volunteer driver programs. Most software packages specific to volunteer driver programs

are low cost and can not only produce and manage data but can also schedule rides. 5) In recent years, the Beverly Foundation and the National Volunteer Transportation Center collected considerable data on volunteer driver programs. A Fact Sheet called *Volunteer Driver Program Data* includes data from a 2016 volunteer driver survey. At the same time, qualitative data also is an important method of reporting impact.

Note: The two organizations mentioned above collected the stories of passengers and drivers. *Stories from the Road* (stories of volunteer drivers) and *Passenger Stories of Gratitude* are both included in the TurnKey Kit and speak to the qualitative aspects of a volunteer driver program.

THE INTERNAL COMPARISON METHOD

According to the literature, a nonprofit uses internal comparisons to measure success since it is unlike a for-profit organization that has competitors. These measures may include whether its annual mission's critical goals and objectives were achieved and the achievement of goals related to factors such as number of volunteers, number of clients helped, and number of people assisted.

The Volunteer Driver Program Experience

So, what is a volunteer driver program to do? It can compare its current quantitative statistics to those of previous years to see if its goals have been met. Those goals might include its number of volunteer drivers, number of passengers, number of rides provided, number and type of destinations to which it took passengers, fundraising accomplishments, and so forth. A nonprofit also needs to include its qualitative measures such as its reputation and the benefits its services provide to the community. Qualitative measures might include surveys and interviews. The TurnKey Kit includes a section that introduces both quantitative and qualitative surveys and information gathering tools for volunteer driver programs.

THE EFFECTIVENESS METHOD

The literature also identifies the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of an organization. Many of them emphasize the importance of evaluation from the donor's perspective. One that readers might find helpful is "What Makes an Effective Nonprofit" by Fidelity Charitable.

The five qualities and characteristics that should be considered by a volunteer driver program for measuring its effectiveness are: 1) clarity of its mission, 2) communication of the mission, 3) alignment of the organization's program and operation with its mission, 4) documentation of the need for its services, and 5) the ability to perform key functions.

The Volunteer Driver Program Experience

In the case of a volunteer driver program, its mission might be to meet the transportation needs of older adults. Its communication might include newsletters, PSAs, and meetings with key stakeholders such as board members, donors, volunteers, and the general public. Alignment of its program with its mission of meeting the transportation needs of older adults might include the delivery of volunteer transportation to older adults. Documentation of the current and future program and operation needs might include the

preparation of service delivery reports from the previous year and a community scan of unmet transportation needs. Key functions of performance might include its projections of the number of passengers, number of volunteer drivers, number of rides, the direct and indirect costs, and fundraising accomplishments compared to its performance projections for the previous year.

PRACTICES, PROCEDURES, AND POLICIES

According to the literature, an effective nonprofit will exhibit good practices in finance, governance, and organizational and program development. Key information might include the budget, financial statements, its IRS form 990, its financial audit, IRS forms, its reserve fund, governance policies, a strategic plan, input from clients and the demonstration of measurable outcomes.

The Volunteer Driver Program Experience

An example of a volunteer driver program's good finance, governance, and organizational practices might be a review of its quarterly financial statements, its board structure and governance policies, its strategic plan and written service delivery policies, types and numbers of staff, passengers, volunteers, and internal/external feedback regarding activities and accomplishments gleaned from internal surveys, external inquiries, and community surveys.

METHOD OF MEASURING NONPROFIT SUCCESS

Because a nonprofit generally has no direct competitor and may not be similar to other organizations, most often it will undertake an internal comparison and use its current statistics to those of previous years to determine if it met its goals. Success can be measured by whether the nonprofit has achieved the mission-critical goals and objectives it has set. Both quantitative and qualitative performance metrics including qualitative measures and quantitative numbers achieved via surveys and interviews can be used to measure success. Tools including both fiscal and statistical analysis of financial records, volunteer records, and client records will provide data for determining whether the organization has met objectives.

The Volunteer Driver Program Experience

The typical volunteer driver program (and smaller nonprofit programs for that matter) will undertake an internal comparison of its previous year's data (and may depend solely on that data) to determine if it has met its goals and objectives (greater numbers of volunteers, greater numbers of clients served, or more efficient fundraising). It will review its overall mission related goals and objectives to see if they have been achieved. It will use surveys and interviews to measure its qualitative and quantitative success. Additionally, it will review financial, volunteer, and client records for determining if it has achieved its objectives.