

Introduction to Volunteer Driver Involvement

Recruitment, Training, Supervision, and Retention

Drivers often are referred to as “the heart and soul” of any transportation service. In addition to taking passengers from point A to point B, drivers play many other roles such as friend, listener, communicator, and advocate. While programs that include paid drivers say that driver salaries constitute 50% or more of their operating expenses, volunteer driver programs say that volunteers are not free and require considerable resources for recruitment, training, and retention. Thus, efficient and effective driver recruitment, training, and retention are critical to any volunteer driver program.

VOLUNTEER DRIVER RECRUITMENT AND SCREENING

Communities that have a history of supporting volunteer activities have much greater potential for recruiting volunteer drivers than do communities that have no such history. However, regardless of the community experience, volunteer drivers are not easy to recruit. In fact, there is a saying among volunteer driver program staff that “volunteer drivers are the hardest volunteers to recruit, but once you’ve got them, you’ve got them.”

Recruitment Barriers Why is the recruitment of volunteer drivers such a challenge? Many people volunteer to drive in response to a request from a friend, an advertisement in the newspaper, a message in the church bulletin, an announcement on the radio or TV, or a presentation at a meeting. However, recruitment is not always that simple. Some people who are asked to be volunteer drivers give many excuses for not driving:

- reluctance to use their own car
- unwillingness to drive people they do not know
- concern about risking the possibility of a crash
- concern about the cost for gas
- time requirements for driving people
- fear about not knowing what to do in an emergency

Volunteer Marketing Volunteer literature suggests that the marketing message you choose to recruit volunteers also is an important strategy. Several comments from volunteer drivers about “the best thing about being a volunteer driver” from the Beverly Foundation’s volunteer driver survey may be helpful in thinking about the recruitment message.

“The best part of being a volunteer driver is...

- ...knowing you are helping those who depend on you to go to a medical appointment, the grocery store, or a recreational activity.”
- ...helping people remain independent.”
- ...the satisfaction I derive from extending a helping hand to those who have nowhere else to turn.”
- ...the sincere appreciation reflected in the positive attitude and kind words of thanks from the passengers when they participate in the transportation program.”
- ...the people you meet, especially those who live alone and enjoy talking about their family and their memories.”
- ...being able to help others and give back to the community a service that is so needed and so appreciated by the riders.”
- ...the endless variety of challenging experiences and wonderful people encountered each day on the job.”
- ...feeling that what I do is greatly appreciated by those who I transport and those I work for.”
- ...feeling that perhaps I’m helping the parents of someone in a similar situation who cannot provide for their parents as much care as they would like to.”

Volunteer Screening An important ingredient of volunteer recruitment includes developing criteria for volunteer driver selections and screening prospective volunteer drivers. Screening criteria generally include basic functions of the position and the ability to perform the tasks required.

Basic tools for screening volunteer drivers include, at the very least: a) a position description, b) application forms, c) face-to-face interviews, d) reference checks, e) driver licensing, insurance, and safety checks.

VOLUNTEER DRIVER TRAINING AND SUPERVISION

The Nonprofit Risk Management Center suggests many safety concerns can be alleviated with a good risk management approach. A two-tiered strategy is recommended: 1) the sponsoring organization takes reasonable steps to control risks that threaten the health and safety of individuals who provide service and 2) the sponsoring organization develops proper training and supervision strategies to provide protection to personnel from the service environment, the recipients, and from the public that includes strategies for proper training and supervision.

Several policies related to volunteer drivers providing transportation services for older adults, suggested by The Nonprofit Risk Management Center, that you might want to consider as you develop your risk management strategy for volunteer driver involvement are:

- developing standards for safe drivers and safe driving conduct
- developing specific criteria for selection and screening drivers

- providing driver training in defensive driving
- providing driver training for emergency measures
- providing driver training on passenger appropriate communication techniques
- providing driver training for special vehicles
- ensuring regular maintenance and repair of service-owned vehicles
- securing insurance coverage for service-owned and non-owned vehicles
- undertaking ongoing evaluation of drivers, vehicles, and service delivery

The development of strategy is the first step. However, having a plan for managing volunteer drivers may be just as important. At the end of this section is a checklist for managing volunteer drivers.

Maintaining a well-trained, enthusiastic driving staff is key to the success of any volunteer transportation program. This guide points out two important features to remember when developing or managing a volunteer driver workforce: 1) all drivers, whether using agency vehicles or their own personal vehicles, should be appropriately trained to safely carry out their responsibilities and 2) volunteer drivers should follow the same policies and procedures as paid drivers (if any) operating similar vehicles. According to the literature, such training applies to both the certainties and the uncertainties of the relationship. For example, equipping a driver to provide door-thru-door transportation might require training on assisting a passenger with mobility issues or what do when the passenger refuses the assistance provided. Some programs might also include older adult sensitivity training, emergency procedures training, organization information training, and behind the wheel driver training.

VOLUNTEER DRIVER RETENTION

While recruitment and training may be a challenge, the “once you’ve got them, you’ve got them” experience suggests that retention appears to be a given. In the Beverly Foundation’s volunteer driver study cited earlier, more than 50% of the volunteer drivers had more than 50 years of driving experience and more than 50% of the drivers had been volunteering to drive for four or more years. In one question on the Beverly Foundation survey, drivers selected three reasons they volunteered to drive: to help others, to give back to the community, and to do something meaningful. In a follow-up question related to satisfaction, drivers selected four satisfiers: helping people, feeling needed, getting to know riders, and donating time rather than money. These responses suggest a direct correlation between driver retention and goals for driver volunteerism.

A good volunteer driver retention program also requires ongoing supervision, recognition, and evaluation. These activities are important for providing assurance to the organization that the drivers are performing as requested and expected. These activities also can provide important communication and feedback to the volunteer drivers. Such communication, information sharing, and feedback is critical to the development and retention of a successful and dynamic volunteer driver program.