Community Action Team: Volunteerism

Overview

Volunteerism is among the most important aspects of all successful communities. It provides free labor for all sorts of valuable tasks; more importantly, community activism breeds (and is symptomatic of) a strong sense of belonging to a particular city, town, or region. In effect, volunteerism provides citizens with a way to demonstrate their commitment to their particular geographic location, their neighbors, and their future.

Volunteerism is of particular importance to the service members, veterans, and military families, who move frequently and often feel isolated from the rest of their community. Civic engagement if one of the most effective ways of remedying this problem. It provides the tangible benefits of the volunteer work itself while also building solidarity between the military and civilian communities. More importantly, it provides the military community with a productive way to exercise the leadership skills, diligence, and responsibility instilled through their years of service.

By recruiting service members, veterans, and military families to volunteer and serve, you will be able to leverage some of the most talented and devoted volunteers in the country to any number of productive and important tasks.

The following tool is designed to help guide a motivated leader through the steps necessary to create a Volunteerism Community Action Team.

There are four steps to creating a Community Action Team: 1) Recruit Leaders; 2) Convene and Assess the Community; 3) Develop an Action Plan; and 4) Act.

Is it being done already?

Many organizations work to provide valuable volunteer opportunities to service members, veterans, and military families. Before forming your Community Action Team, survey the community and identify any programs or organizations that actively recruit volunteers from the military community, or that specialize in projects suited to the talents of service members and veterans. It may be more fruitful to work with these programs rather than attempt to start your own. Organizations common to many communities include Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), Points of Light, The Mission Continues, and many others. For a more complete listing, please see Additional Resources at the end of this document.
Step-by-Step Implementation

Step 1: Recruit Leaders

In order to ensure the success of your Community Action Team, it is important that you incorporate prominent members of the community. Reach out to these community members and attempt to sway them to your cause. In order to do this in an efficient manner, it may be helpful to organize a town hall meeting or community forum, which will build familiarity between community members, allow fruitful discussion, and save time. During this time, you will introduce the relevant issues, distribute any materials you may have created, and inspire community members to get involved. Here are some of the parties you should seek to involve in your meeting:

- CNCS State Offices
- Faculty members from universities
- Faith-based community member(s) and interfaith council member(s)
- HandsOn Network Action Centers
- Local business leaders
- Local VA representative(s)
- Representatives from local nonprofit organizations
- Representatives from local government, such as the mayor’s office or town council
- Service members, veterans, and military families
- Social services representative(s)
- Veterans service organization (VSO) representatives as well as those from other nonprofits focusing on the military community

Step 2: Convene and Assess the Community

Once you have identified those leaders most likely to support and partake in the Community Action Team, you must begin your outreach attempts. The specific steps you take in order to bring together your Community Action Team may differ depending on your standing in and relationship with the various members of your community. Generally speaking, however, the most efficient way to bring together all interested parties is through a community forum, town hall meeting, or similar convention. The steps below outline the general steps behind bringing the community together:

Preparation

- Logistics
  - There are many important logistical steps to consider in planning your community forum. These include issues such as where the event will be held, who will speak, who will attend, etc.
  - For a comprehensive listing of logistical considerations, please browse the HandsOn Network Volunteer Leader Toolkits.
- Network with Local Experts
  - Rely on local experts whenever possible. Community leaders and local volunteer manages will most likely have a more complete grasp on the topic as a whole than you, and will be able to speak to the particular challenges facing your community.
Whenever possible, invite local experts to participate in your community forum as speakers or presenters. Doing so will build your relationship with important community members and organizations.

The participation of local experts will also add credibility to your effort, particularly if they are well-known within the community.

- **Relevance**
  - It is important that you discuss the relevance of volunteerism to your community. Why should those attending your event care? Discuss the tangible benefits volunteerism, such as the free labor provided to at-need projects and areas. You should also emphasize the impact of volunteerism on overall community solidarity.
  - Emphasize the breadth, scope, and overall impact of volunteerism, particularly if service members, veterans, and military families compose a significant portion of the overall community. A core of devoted citizens can radically alter the character and shape of a community for the better.
  - If substantial efforts are already underway in the community, be sure to discuss how your Community Action Team will differ. What are you bringing to the community that is not already being done? What gaps in the available services do you plan to fill?

- **Scheduling**
  - Identify a date and time that works for most people invited. Make sure you check with the local community calendars, as well as those community leaders you are inviting to avoid any scheduling issues. Be mindful of federal holidays or religious holidays.

**At the Event**

- **Introductions**
  - Though it may seem unnecessary, be sure that all attendees are familiar with one another. Tags with names and organizations may be useful.
  - Begin your presentation by briefly introducing yourself. Who are you? What are your personal reasons for getting involved? What is your standing in the community, if applicable?

- **Call to Action**
  - It is important to establish the context for the Community Action Team. Reiterate the importance of volunteerism, and discuss again how the issue will affect the community.
  - Identify the volunteerism-related challenges within the community. Does the community lack significant volunteer involvement? Are we engaging our service members, veterans, and military families with the opportunity to serve? How can we refine our volunteer recruitment mechanisms?
  - Identify the assets available within the community to redress these issues. Emphasize that the problems in the community are pressing, but solvable. It is here that you should strive to motivate the community to action.

- **Logistics**
  - Once again, there is a great deal of logistical information you may wish to discuss with the attendees of your event. Here are a few of the considerations you may wish to discuss at this time:
    - Who is the group facilitator? Who will take notes?
• How often will we meet?
• What is the best way to communicate (email, phone calls)?
• Do we need a contact list or Community Action Team Roster? If so, who will create it?
• Who will consistently move the group to consensus building and action?
• Is there anyone missing that we need to bring to the table?
• How do we make new members feel included and engaged?

• **Identify Next Steps**
  - Before ending the community forum, be sure that you have identified clear steps to be taken in the future.
  - Set a date for a future meeting.

**Step 3: Build the Community Action Team**

Once you have recruited your community leaders and held a preliminary meeting, it is important that you begin to clearly define the overall structure of your Community Action Team. In order to do so, you must first analyze the strengths, weaknesses, and resources of your current group. The following questions are designed to assess the capabilities of your Community Action Team:

- What talents and expertise do I (and the organization I represent) have to offer the group?
- What impact can my contribution have on this issue?
- What language and vocabulary do I use to define the issues or challenges in our community?
- What do I hope to get out of this experience?
  - How is our group nested within the wider Community Blueprint Network?

**Establish Working Groups**

Working groups provide an excellent way to break the larger overall goal of the Community Action Team into more easily handled pieces. They also allow each member of the project to work on those goals he or she finds most engaging.

- Identify the overall goals and targets the working groups will be assembled to meet.
- Decide who will participate in each area of responsibility. For example, some may wish to work to raise public awareness, while others may want to work to facilitate child care services.
- The size of the working group(s) may differ depending on the particular expertise of your community. Be sure, however, that each working group is well-staffed, responsible, and able to address the issue on which it will be focused.
- In some cases, it may be more beneficial to divide your working groups by projects, rather than content area. Use your judgment to decide which method of organization will be most efficient.
Develop a Plan of Action

The development of an action plan is the most important part of the planning process. This is the time that the team should identify specific goal-oriented actions that can be enacted by the Community Action Team. The action plan should also clearly show how the ideas and solutions you have discussed will be implemented within the community. It may be helpful to approach the development of the action plan with the following ideas in mind:

- What types of activities can be done to achieve the goal(s)?
- Is the plan practical and will the target audience respond to it well?
  - It may be beneficial to conduct a rudimentary poll targeting the audience for a plan or event. Would the audience attend such an event? Do any adjustments need to be made to ensure its success?
- Develop clear timelines for each priority.
- Develop a clear chain of accountability.
  - Who is responsible for which piece of the plan and how will they leverage community members and volunteers to meet that goal?
- Develop a clear reporting structure.
- Identify resources.
  - Outline resources that the community already has as well as those for which they need to seek in-kind donations or funding. You may want to explore a conversation at this point about setting up a joint fund inside the local community foundation to support this common cause.
- How can we reach out to the military community?
- Identify how community members and volunteers can help support the implementation of the promising practices or other proposed recommendations. You also want to pay close attention to the following:
  - Required skill set and age
  - Number of volunteers needed
  - Availability of supplies required for volunteers to use, to include a space in which to work
  - Required time or days to complete the task or project
  - Impact: Will the project have a short-term or a long-term impact, and can this impact be measured in any way?
  - Diversity: Are community members with diverse backgrounds comfortable volunteering with the project?
  - Overall cost of producing the project
You may find it helpful to reach out to your local HandsOn Action Center/Volunteer Center, City of Service, and/or State Commission to help you think about the most efficient and effective ways to leverage volunteer talent. For more information on these organizations, please see Available Resources.

**Step 4: Act**
The action phase is marked by putting the plan into action and rolling out the proposed idea. In general, your implementation will run best if you adhere to some basic principles:

- Collect some early “wins” by making your earliest priorities the easiest. Collecting some early victories will build confidence and will pay off when the more difficult challenges are looming.
- Ensure that there is a clear timeline that is well-understood by the involved parties.
- Ensure that adequate resources are available for each goal.
- Establish a clear structure of accountability.
- Adhere to the outlined measures of success.
- Assess your efforts at periodic intervals. Does anything need to be adjusted or changed?

**Measure Your Success**

It is very important that you implement ways of tracking the successes and failures of your Community Action Team. The lessons you learn as you move your community towards action may be of great use to future efforts to leaders throughout the country. Clear measures of success also increase the transparency of your effort; every volunteer will be aware of what needs to be done in order to succeed. The methodology of your tracking will likely differ substantially depending on the overall purpose, size, and scope of your Community Action Team. With that said, you should strive to keep the following in mind as you track your efforts:

- What were the lessons learned? Were the Community Action Team’s objective(s) met? Why or why not?
- What can be done to improve the process?
- What was done well and what should be repeated or replicated in future efforts?
- Does the Community Action Team need to formulate a new plan for future efforts? If so, what is the best way to go about that process?
- Can Community Action Team development process and action plan be effective in other communities and is this recommended? Why or why not?
Additional Resources

Volunteering Resources

- **Corporation for National and Community Service:** [http://www.nationalservice.gov/](http://www.nationalservice.gov/)
  - The Corporation for National and Community Service is a federal agency that engages more than five million Americans in service through Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America, and leads President Obama's national call to service initiative, United We Serve.

- **National Service Resource Center:** [http://www.nationalserviceresources.org/](http://www.nationalserviceresources.org/)
  - The Resource Center, administered by ETR Associates, is the knowledge management training and technical assistance provider to the Corporation for National and Community Service. It connects service programs with targeted training and information.

- **Volunteering in America:** [http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/](http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/)
  - Volunteering in America provides information on volunteering and civic engagement in communities throughout the country. The site is managed by the Corporation for National and Community Service.

- **United We Serve:** [http://www.serve.gov/](http://www.serve.gov/)
  - United We Serve is a nationwide service initiative that helps meet growing social needs resulting from the economic downturn. The initiative began with the knowledge that ordinary people can achieve extraordinary things when given the proper tools, and is designed to help lay a new foundation for growth. This initiative aims to both expand the impact of existing organizations by engaging new volunteers in their work and encourage volunteers to develop their own "do-it-yourself" projects.

**HandsOn Network Tools and Resources**

- **HandsOn Guide to Skills-Based Volunteering:** [http://www.handsonnetwork.org/nationalprograms/skillsbasedvolunteering](http://www.handsonnetwork.org/nationalprograms/skillsbasedvolunteering)
  - The HandsOn Guide to Skills-Based Volunteering provides a way for individuals and corporations to use their personal talents or professional skillsets for the benefit of others.

- **HandsOn Library:** [http://www.handsonnetwork.org/tools/library](http://www.handsonnetwork.org/tools/library)
  - The HandsOn Library provides a large array of documents designed to aid volunteers, community leaders, and project managers.

- **HandsOn Volunteer Leader Toolkit:** [http://www.handsonnetwork.org/volunteers/gethandson/toolkits](http://www.handsonnetwork.org/volunteers/gethandson/toolkits)
  - The HandsOn Volunteer Leader Toolkit provides extensive tools for prospective community leaders, including a “Volunteer Leader Guidebook,” a “Project Planning Worksheet,” and a number of other extremely useful guides, tools, and templates.

- **HandsOn Volunteer Center Map:** [http://www.handsonnetwork.org/actioncenters/map](http://www.handsonnetwork.org/actioncenters/map)
  - The HandsOn Network Action Center Map allows you to easily locate volunteer centers near you.

**Statistical and Demographic Tools**

- **National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics:** [http://www.va.gov/vetdata/](http://www.va.gov/vetdata/)
The National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (NCVAS) supports planning, analysis, and decision-making activities through the collection, validation, analysis, and dissemination of key statistics on Veteran population and VA programs.

  - The National Resource Directory (NRD) is a website that connects wounded warriors, Service Members, Veterans, their families, and caregivers to programs and services that support them.

- **U.S. Census Bureau – Veterans Data:** [http://www.census.gov/hhes/veterans/data/](http://www.census.gov/hhes/veterans/data/)
  - The U.S. Census provides the most recent and comprehensive data available on the citizens of the country.

  - The U.S. Department of Labor (DoL) provides extensive monthly statistics on the employment situations of veterans.

**Volunteers and Recruitment**

- **All For Good:** [http://www.allforgood.org](http://www.allforgood.org)
  - All For Good is the nation’s largest volunteer database. Volunteers can search available opportunities, while community leaders can post volunteer listings for their projects.

- **VolunteerSpot:** [www.volunteerspot.com/](http://www.volunteerspot.com/)
  - VolunteerSpot is a simple, easily-accessible tool designed to enable the quick mobilization and coordination of volunteers.
Community Action Convening Tool

Sample Agenda
When hosting your initial community meeting, it is important to have a set agenda. Here is a sample agenda for your meeting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Presenter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>08:45-</td>
<td>Check in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:00-</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:15-</td>
<td>Overview of the issues and Community Blueprint - introductory PowerPoint</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:30-</td>
<td>Impact area walk-through</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:50-</td>
<td>Questions and answers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09:55-</td>
<td>BREAK</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:10-</td>
<td>Possible practices and community solutions overview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00-</td>
<td>Intro to break-out: Theory of change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:20-</td>
<td>Pick up lunch and go to break-out session: Working group convenes to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30</td>
<td>meet and begin discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30-</td>
<td>Wrap-up and open mic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01:00</td>
<td>- Group “ah ha” moments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Challenges/barriers to doing this work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Individual and group commitments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Planning Checklist
Here is a brief checklist to consider as you plan and prepare for your convening.

The Weeks Before
- Create registration for your event. You always want people to pre-register for your event so you know who to expect. Check out the following registration tools:
  - Constant Contact
  - Eventbrite
  - Regonline.com
  - GoTo Webinar, Go To Training
  - Webex
  - Adobe Connect
• Reach out to the on-site venue point-of-contact and confirm all of the logistics. Have a land line or cell phone number for that person should they be needed.
• Contact your co-leaders/facilitators and confirm all logistics such as event time, venue/location, travel arrangements (if necessary), etc.
• Make sure you have addressed food and beverage needs. If it is a long agenda, be sure and have scheduled breaks as well as food and drinks available.

**The Day Before**
• Send a nice note to your co-facilitators and event leaders letting them know you are excited to see them and are grateful that they are taking time to be there and lead such an initiative.
• Check the room set up: If possible, see if you can arrive early and check out the location and the room set up. Note where the restrooms are located. The room is never exactly as you envision it. Arriving early will give you time to make changes and verify equipment and materials are working and in the appropriate place. Assure that the tables are arranged in a way that allows for easy interaction.
• Check all equipment. Make sure all equipment works. Allot extra time if you are using video, connecting to the Internet, etc. Be sure and have a contact name and number for your technology and AV needs.
• Check materials. Make sure you have copies of participant handouts and training evaluation forms.

**Equipment and Supplies**
Equipment needs will vary. The following is a list of possible equipment and supply needs:

- Laptop computer
- LCD projector
- Microphone
- Extension cord or power strip
- Easels
- Easel pads
- Evaluations
- Different color markers
- Sign-in sheets
- Snacks

**Facilitation Tips**

**Set Goals and Outcomes**
All participants need to be clear on the goals or outcomes of the facilitated session. What is the group trying to achieve? Is it simply a time to brainstorm or is there a deliverable? As a facilitator, your goal is to encourage peer-to-peer learning and collaboration. It is good practice to ask group members what they want from their time together.

**Stay Focused**
In a facilitated session, it is easy to drift off the point or go off on tangents. Keep the focus on the goals or outcomes to make sure the session stays on track.

**Involve Everyone**
Look for ways to involve those who are less vocal as they often have valuable contributions to make
and may just need a little encouragement to voice them. Simply asking, “What is your take on that, Jim?” could be a way to extract participation. Additionally, do not allow one person or a small group to dominate the conversation.

**Actively Listen**
When facilitating, make sure you are listening not just to what is being said, but how it is being said. You also need to pay attention to the overall energy level of the group.

**Stay Neutral**
Your job is to encourage discussion, help bring out ideas, and document them. Remember your role is to stay neutral. *This means keep your own views out of the session and do not take sides.* You can offer ideas, tools, and resources but be mindful how you present these ideas.

For example: Say, “You may want to check out the following resource at www.testexample.org,” instead of “You should always use this model when implementing this type of program.”

**Summarize**
Facilitated sessions move at pace. A lot will be going on, so it is useful to summarize periodically. This will help to keep the group focused, on track, and provide foundations to build upon.