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# Implementing a Family Volunteer Program

It is Easier than You Think - *One Volunteer Center's Recipe for Success.*

By Lynne M. Harper, Volunteer Center of Rhode Island

The challenges of starting any new program can be many. Do you have support of the board of Directors? Is there staff buy-in? Is there adequate funding? Is the timing right? In 2004, based on current local research that implied the time was right, Board support, the acquisition of funding that enabled the hire of a program coordinator, the Volunteer Center of Rhode Island (VCRI), embarked on the implementation of a Family Volunteer Program using the "Family Matters" Program model of the Points of Light Foundation. Following are suggestions for volunteer centers, nonprofit agencies and other groups that want to engage families in community service but may not have the luxury of dedicated funds, expanded staff or extra time on their hands!

## Practical Tips to Get You Started

### *Don't Reinvent the Wheel*

Use the Family Matters Program Model developed by the Points of Light (POL) Foundation and Volunteer Center National Network as your main resource. No, I do not work for POL; I just don't like to look stupid! When my kids ask me to bake a cake, I pull a box off the shelf and add a few key ingredients or I pull a book off the shelf and turn to their (my) favorite recipe. As a program manager or a mother, I try not to make things up as I go along. Whether you are a working mother or a busy, overworked, under resourced nonprofit professional, you probably have access to a proven recipe or two, USE IT! That is usually what its there for.

POL has everything you need; the research data and program history, tips for recruitment (volunteers and agencies), project ideas, risk management, reflection, trainings, etc. VCRI used it all, every bit of it, to get started.

However, with every recipe, there always seem to be little things you end up changing to make it suit your tastes. After all, the fine print on the box or in the book usually says "recommended cooking time", "individual ovens may vary", or some such thing implying that there is room to do what works for you. At VCRI, we took the basic recipe provided by POL and enhanced it to fit our "kitchen". In other words, Rhode Island is not Minnesota, which is not Florida, which is not California. Neither are VCRI's budget, staff, local needs and constraints the same as other VCs. With that in mind, here is a brief description of what works for us.

### *Look Within*

You may already have most, if not all of the ingredients you need to start implementing a Family Program. As a Volunteer Center with over 800 active opportunities sponsored by over 400 different agencies, the first thing we did was review our data base to see if we were lucky enough to have any "family-friendly" (FF) opps to begin with. We found 87 opportunities already listed for families and translated that to mean, "Hey, look at that! We already promote family volunteering." Then we looked at the type of agencies sponsoring those opportunities and found that we already had about 20% of agencies accepting families to help fill a diverse base of social needs. We also found that we had registered volunteers requesting opportunities for themselves and their families. "Phew!" I said. "At least I don't have to start from scratch." The next step was capitalizing on what we already were doing and thinking the rest would fall into place.


### *Recruitment*

Our web site, [www.vcri.org](http://www.vcri.org) is our biggest and most effective tool we have for recruiting agencies and volunteers alike. We get over

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20,000 hits per month to our opportunities pages. We also connect through weekly and monthly newspaper columns in several of the local papers distributed throughout the State. We offer professional development workshops to agencies and the public relative to just about every aspect of volunteer management and service you can think of. We also make the most of any outreach opportunity we can to speak about volunteering. Therefore, we figured that the easiest thing to do for the Family Program was to highlight it within what we already did.

#### On our web site...

- We added a “Family-Friendly” icon  next to the opportunity headline and highlighted these on our main search page. This makes it easy to distinguish them from the hundreds of other opportunities.
- We used the POL Family Matters suggestions for program purpose, definitions of “family”, benefits, project ideas, etc. and turned them into easy to find and read pages for families and agencies to use as a resource.
- We highlighted “Family-Friendly” agencies by assigning the “FF” icon to their opps.
- We provided a “Family Volunteering Resources” area that has web links to POLF, Kids Care Club, Family Fun.com, Disney Hand, and so on.
- We also provide our registered volunteers that specifically request opportunities for their families with an opt-out monthly e-newsletter. It contains Featured Projects – ongoing and upcoming one-time, Tips on Getting Involved and so on.

#### Agency outreach...

- We made use of the Family Matters Program information and created flyers for agencies that covered family definitions, benefits to agencies, risk management tips, project ideas and most importantly an agency self assessment tool/questionnaire.
- We contacted all registered agencies via e-mail and those agencies already designating opportunities as FF with a letter and flyers and

asked if anyone would like more information on expanding their volunteer and donor base.

- We responded with face-to face meetings and offered group workshops to help assess, refine or define opportunities.
- We promoted participation in Join Hands Day and National Family Volunteer days as a way to try out a FF opp.

#### Volunteer outreach...

- We added a family piece to our normal speaking engagements at libraries and schools.
- We took the POL FM list of family recruitment sources and added pediatricians and day care centers. (Look to established family support businesses as a targeted recruitment venue.)
- We connected with local cable access talk shows and our PBS affiliate to get television coverage of National Family Volunteer Day events and the benefits of family volunteering.
- We added the words “great opportunity for families” as appropriate to our newspaper opportunity columns.
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#### Get Creative

As we have said, the POLF Family Matters Program Model is our core resource for most of our Family Volunteer Program. But, as I eluded to, Rhode Island is not always known for following the model on anything so why would volunteering be any different. One of our challenges here in the smallest State in the Union is that even though you can get from one end of the State to the other in about one hour, for whatever reason, Rhode Islanders do not like to make that kind of commitment to a car ride without packing a suit case! A similar philosophy seems to apply for volunteering. If it isn't near by, not to mention something I am interested in than why should I?

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## One time vs. ongoing opportunities ...

National Days of Service are great for inspiring people to service and letting them get their feet wet. If we hadn't recruited agencies from all over the State we wouldn't have had the nearly 200 family volunteers fulfilling opportunities that included food and clothing drives, pie bakes, donation pick-up and delivery, yard clean-ups and more. Some of these were actually on-going opportunities that agencies normally have that they offered as a Family Volunteer Day project. By showing agencies, that it really isn't any more than they are already doing it became an easy task to get the more projects in more geographic areas.

## Redefine the Family Opportunity ...

POL has an extensive and comprehensive list of family volunteer activities that can fit into just about any agencies mission. Take the list as is or expand it by adding the twist to recruiting family members for different activities for the same organization. Mom can serve on the Board of Directors, Dad can bring the smaller kids to help with a mailing and the high school age daughter can do internet research and write an article for the agency newsletter. Each family member may be performing a different volunteer opportunity but they all have an impact on the agency mission. They can discuss their individual contributions in the context of family volunteer reflection time (a.k.a. the dinner table) and feel empowered as a unit. Especially when they all take part in that annual walk-a-thon together!

## A big Two for One tip...

Non-profit childcare and elder care facilities are great resources for VCs to recruit as supported agencies/family project sites as well as a ready-made source of family volunteers with a connection to the agency mission.

## Conclusion

While the Volunteer Center of RI had the good fortune to have everything seem to fall into place; support from the Board, funding to hire new staff and pay for trainings, a seemingly willing volunteer base it was not exactly the

perfect cake. The actual grant award was two-thirds of the funds requested. This meant we had to the same with less or just less. By opting to follow the Points of Light Foundation, Family Matters Program Model and the willingness to make do with the ingredients at hand, VCRI has established a solid base and program resource for families looking to make a difference in them and in Rhode Island. Although not fully funded, the Family Volunteer Program is still going strong. It is staffed by an AmerCorps\*VISTA volunteer and has been incorporated into a Youth and Family Program. VCRI continues to perform outreach to agencies and family centered groups to expand and maintain the program offerings. Its components are a natural fit to VCRI mission and future as families are a natural and important fit for the future for so many nonprofit organizations today. Please contact the Points of Light Foundation for complete information on implementing a Family Matters Program in your organization today.

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*Lynne Harper is currently the Marketing and Communications Coordinator for the Volunteer Center of Rhode Island.*

*She was the Family Volunteer Program Coordinator hired in March of 2004 because of grant from the Carlisle Foundation of Framingham, MA provided specifically to implement the program. The position was part time, consisting of 15 hours per week for a term of one calendar year. In essence, VCRI was able to establish the program with the equivalent of 100, 8-hour business days.*

*Lynne's professional background consists of nearly 20 years as a practicing civil engineer. Her personal background consists of over 12 years of volunteering that included fund development, volunteer management and organizational leadership in roles as an individual and a family. Married with two young children, her combined role as mother, wife and lifetime RI resident are the sources of many an inspiration relative to enhancing the recipe for the Volunteer Center of Rhode Island's Family Volunteer Program.*

*For more information regarding the Volunteer Center of Rhode Island, or to obtain a copy of the Family Volunteer Program Outcomes Report, you can contact Lynne at [lharp@vcri.org](mailto:lharp@vcri.org)*



The mission of the Volunteer Center of Rhode Island is to connect people with opportunities for effective volunteer community service.