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GOOD STORY

Independence, Missouri's Coordinated Volunteer Program

SUMMARY

The city of Independence, Missouri, operates a coordinated volunteer program through Independence Citizen Corps (ICC). The program organizes volunteers and volunteer opportunities with the city government and Citizen Corps programs. A volunteer business plan served as a catalyst for the development and management of the Independence Citizen Corps volunteer program.

BACKGROUND

In winter 2002, a severe ice storm left thousands of residents in Independence, Missouri, without power. The Emergency Management Department could not contact volunteer groups such as Neighborhood Watch for assistance with damage assessment or cleanup because it lacked a central point of contact for volunteer groups.

In retrospect, the response to the ice storm not only confirmed the lack of a coordinated volunteer program but also pointed to an overall decline of volunteerism in the city of Independence. In fact, the number of volunteers registered with the city government had declined by half in the previous 6 years. City officials believed this decline was due to the lack of understanding by government agencies about the use of volunteers and the lack of a central contact point for volunteer opportunities. The city received calls regularly from citizens interested in volunteering but did not have an effective mechanism for organizing volunteers and opportunities.

In 2004, city officials established the task of increasing volunteerism as a high priority for the city of Independence. With this in mind, Independence city manager Robert Heacock directed the emergency preparedness manager (EPM), Mark Weidner, to draft a business plan to organize the volunteer program.

GOAL

To increase volunteerism, the city of Independence, Missouri, operates a volunteer program that coordinates volunteers and volunteer opportunities in one central location.

DESCRIPTION

Following the 2002 ice storm, city officials in Independence, Missouri, recognized the need for a coordinated volunteer program to organize volunteer activities within city government. The EPM was directed to design a coordinated volunteer program that would serve as the clearinghouse for all volunteer opportunities within the various government agencies. In order to complete this task, EPM Weidner teamed with Helen Matson, who was serving as

assistant to the mayor. Together, they drafted a volunteer business plan with the intent to use it to gain support for the volunteer program. The plan went on to serve as the basis for the initial implementation of the newly coordinated volunteer program.

Volunteer Business Plan

Before drafting a plan to organize the volunteer program, a working group consisting of city managers and elected officials was established to determine the necessary components of a successful volunteer program for the city of Independence. The group, led by city manager Robert Heacock and former mayor Ron Stewart, agreed that the volunteer program needed a central point of contact for all volunteer opportunities and a way to increase volunteer retention. The point of contact would establish the program's legitimacy by illustrating the importance of volunteerism and would match volunteers with available opportunities to help increase volunteer retention.

The volunteer business plan was developed based upon criteria identified by the working group. The plan identifies Citizen Corps as the base from which city volunteer opportunities are coordinated. In addition, the plan calls for a full-time volunteer program director (VPD) to manage all existing and future volunteer programs and opportunities within city government agencies. Helen Matson, named to the VPD position, became responsible for helping recruit, retain, and educate volunteers; enhancing the volunteer experience; and organizing the Citizen Corps Council.

> **Volunteer Program Mission Statement**
> "Working together to build a stronger community. Through providing diverse volunteer opportunities, the city of Independence, Missouri, Independence Citizen Corps Volunteer Program seeks to develop a bonding relationship with the public to help support and facilitate citizen involvement in the stewardship of our community."

Objectives/Action Steps

The plan outlines several objectives and action steps to serve as an implementation timeline for the volunteer program. The steps and dates enumerated in the plan are, in order:

- Determine the exact number of volunteers being utilized by city departments (August 2004);
- Create a volunteer database that can match volunteers' talents and interests with prospective volunteer opportunities within the city (August 15, 2004);
- Create a presentation that will update department directors on the advantages of associating and coordinating all volunteer program needs under the ICC umbrella and what the new VPD can do to help enhance and expand the current volunteer activities (July 2004);
- Assist the Public Health Department in obtaining volunteers for the bioterrorism exercise, scheduled for June 23, 2004, and future exercises;
- Create an Independence Citizen Corps Volunteer Organization Board (September 2004);
- Develop a Volunteer Policy Manual for distribution to volunteers that includes policies and conduct expectations (September 2004);
- Develop a unified recruitment program (November 2004);
- Host a volunteer booth at local events (June 2004 and Labor Day weekend);
- Create an ICC website;
- Seek and apply for grant opportunities;
- Establish a permanent visible volunteer office (December 2004); and
- Develop a program for the retention and training of volunteers.

The specificity of the plan provided legitimacy to the program by assigning clear responsibilities and goals for all aspects of the program. The objectives and actions also served as the starting point for program implementation.

Independence Citizen Corps Volunteer Program
The ICC volunteer program serves as a catalyst to increase volunteer recruitment and participation. The core component of the volunteer program is the coordination of available opportunities and volunteers. To accomplish this, the ICC VPD reaches out to government agencies and potential volunteers and works closely with the Citizen Corps Council to explore further coordination opportunities.

Coordination with Government Agencies
The first step in implementing the volunteer program was to assess the needs of government agencies. The newly created business plan was distributed in June 2004 to all government agency directors in the city. The VPD met with each agency director to learn more about his or her existing volunteer program and how the agency could use more volunteers. At first, individual government agencies were hesitant to join the program, fearing loss of control over their own volunteer programs; however, after the first few departments signed up and found the program beneficial, the rest were soon to follow. According to VPD Matson, once the agency directors learned that a volunteer base was in place, they began to ask for volunteers who could fill additional roles and take on new responsibilities. The Independence Fire Department was first to take advantage of the new program, and every government agency now participates in the program.

In order to assure its continued success, regular assessments of the volunteer program are conducted. Frequent contact is made with individual government agencies to discuss their need for volunteers and to review their expectations of volunteers. The VPD then coordinates the appropriate action, such as providing additional volunteers or revising volunteer hours.

Volunteer activities are coordinated with the needs of government agencies through the use of a volunteer database. Government agencies were enlisted to participate in the volunteer program. A comprehensive list of volunteer needs and opportunities was compiled to create a database that is used to match volunteers with opportunities that complement their interests. This database serves as the central resource database for all Citizen Corps volunteers and activities.

Coordination of Volunteers
Providing a central point of contact for citizens to learn about volunteer opportunities is an important component of the volunteer program. In June 2004, all volunteers working with individual city departments were sent a letter to inform them of the newly coordinated volunteer program. Once a volunteer agreed to participate in the new program, his or her skill sets and interests were added into the volunteer database. This information was then compared to the opportunities reported by the agencies. Once existing volunteers were matched with opportunities, the ICC began recruiting new volunteers. The ICC established contact with various volunteer organizations and local cable television stations to develop advertisements, to operate a volunteer website, and to participate in volunteer coordinator councils.

New volunteers are required to meet with the VPD to register their contact information and interests. This information is added to the volunteer database and then matched with volunteer opportunities. When a potential match is found, the volunteer is asked to talk to

the volunteer coordinator within the participating government agency. This process ensures volunteers are placed in opportunities they are interested in and well-suited for.

Citizen Corps Council

The volunteer business plan was also used to form the Citizen Corps Council. Members of various volunteer organizations in the community, including the American Red Cross (ARC), the Salvation Army, and the public school district, serve on the Council. The Council provides an opportunity for volunteer organizations to further coordinate their volunteer activities and to develop new volunteer programs. Council members also help identify additional volunteer opportunities in the community and increase the visibility of the ICC volunteer program by promoting Citizen Corps within their own organizations.

Program Growth

The level of volunteerism in the city of Independence has grown significantly since the implementation of the coordinated volunteer program. In 2005, volunteers provided 32,000 hours of service, an estimated value of $1 million in salaries. As of September 2006, Independence Citizen Corps had 1,100 volunteers working with 18 government agencies. Activities conducted by volunteers included clerical office administration, communitywide cleanup projects, litter control, police assistance, park patrols with the Volunteer in Police Service program, the operation of several of the President Harry S. Truman historical sites, the operation of the emergency operations center during emergency situations, the running of shelters, and various administrative functions within government departments.

> "Through the Citizen Corps, the city has been able to increase volunteerism in city government. The more citizens involved in their government, the better it will be able to serve them. The Citizen Corps program has allowed the city to create a close bond with its citizens, and that creates a stronger community. The value of volunteerism exceeds the monetary benefits to the community; their involvement has helped to generate trust in government."
>
> -Mayor Don Reimal, Independence, Missouri

As the success of the coordinated volunteer program increased, it expanded beyond its original scope. Citizen Corps programs now include additional community organizations, businesses, and preparedness programs. Based upon the success of the city government volunteer program, the Citizen Corps Council expanded volunteer opportunities throughout the city and developed new programs, such as the "Safe" designation program. This fee-based program provides instruction, training, and preparedness planning assistance to businesses and churches. Upon completion of the program, the organization receives a "Safe Business" or "Safe Church" designation. The ICC uses the fees to promote Citizen Corps and its programs.

As the ICC volunteer program grows, the volunteer business plan continues to serve as a guideline for managing the program. The EPM is responsible for ensuring that the volunteer program meets the objectives and action steps detailed in the plan. The ICC uses the objectives and actions outlined in the plan to recruit and to retain volunteers and to seek out new volunteer opportunities. Furthermore, the EPM and VPD distribute the plan to businesses, schools, and organizations throughout the community that are interested in preparedness and response programs.

REQUIREMENTS
Keys to Success

Leadership. The mayor's office and the city manager's office were instrumental in initiating the coordinated volunteer program by participating in both drafting and implementing the volunteer business plan.

Specific Goals and Methods of Implementation. The clearly defined goals and objectives of the volunteer business plan demanded a high level of accountability from the VPD and participants, which gave the program legitimacy.

CITATION

"Independence is Finalist in NLC 2006 Awards for Municipal Excellence." *KansasCity InfoZine*. 19 Sep 2006.
http://www.infozine.com/news/stories/op/storiesView/sid/17822/

Matson, Helen. Volunteer Program Director, Independence Citizen Corps. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 10 May 2006.

Widner, Mark. Emergency Preparedness Manager, Independence Fire Department. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 10 May 2006.

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