

# Teaching Small Charities to Use Volunteers Well

*By Michelle Gienow*

Picture a disaster-recovery organization that for a long time lacked its own disaster-recovery plan. Founded on the fly in the wake of Superstorm Sandy, Yellow Boots uses an average of 600 volunteers every weekend to clean up and rebuild on Staten Island.

But if a volunteer was ever injured on the job, "Well, there was an emergency-response plan, but it was mainly in my head. I knew what to do, but other staff and lead volunteers weren't exactly in on it," says Ross Decker, the charity's co-founder and managing director. "I was pretty floored to realize this."

That realization and what came from it — including the group's new disaster-response plan, now posted everywhere Yellow Boots works and in volunteers' orientation packets — were the result of Mr. Decker's participation in a new program of New York Cares.

The organization, which mobilizes more than 62,000 volunteers each year, has learned a lot about leading people who want to help charities. Now the group has created the Volunteer Impact Program to teach other small nonprofits how to do the same.

The eight-week online interactive course includes in-person meetings with New York Cares experts to help participants develop their own volunteer-management programs.

"We are teaching nonprofit groups not just how to bring volunteers in the door but how to bring the right people in the door — and, once they're there, how to keep them coming back," says Gary Bagley, the group's executive director.

The program is intended to help small organizations make more of their resources, he says: "Just about every charity realizes that managing volunteers is something they could do better, but rarely are they able to stop and take the time to make this happen."

## **Making a Plan**

Since the program's launch in March of last year, 82 nonprofit groups from New York's five boroughs have participated.

## **About the Volunteer Impact Program of New York Cares**

**Time commitment:** Eight weeks, two to five hours per week, covering course work and meeting with mentors

**Cost:** \$1,800, though all but \$200 is subsidized for participants

**What's covered, basic track:** Fundamentals such as volunteer recruitment, evaluation, and retention

**What's covered, advanced track:** Risk assessment, cost-benefit analysis of volunteer programs, and demographic analysis of current and potential volunteers

**Added bonus:** One-on-one consultations with New York Cares staff to develop customized plans and data-analysis tools for each charity

A "beginner track" teaches the basic concepts of managing volunteers, including how to find and keep them.

An advanced course tackles issues such as risk management, cost-benefit analysis, and incorporating volunteers into an organization's strategic plan. (Mr. Decker's own "Aha!" moment occurred during the risk-management part of the advanced course, which he completed in May.)

As a follow-up, New York Cares offers discounted consulting services for program participants to help them craft and implement customized plans for their groups.

Mr. Decker completed the basic track of training in late 2014 and says it is "as fundamental for running an effective volunteerism-based nonprofit as laying a solid foundation is for building a real-life house."

His group's most valuable take-away from the basic course, he says, was learning how to get volunteers to keep coming back.

"We used to plug people into whatever the work was that day, said thank you, and never reached out again afterward. Then we wondered why we never saw them again," says Mr. Decker.

### **Increased Retention**

As part of the training course, New York Cares employees helped Yellow Boots develop a system to screen volunteers for interests and skills, match those assets with appropriate work, and conduct exit interviews.

Since then, Mr. Decker says, his group has not only seen its volunteer-retention rates jump about 10 percent but has also gained new volunteer team leaders in fundraising and recruiting.

Recently, he says, a group of fraternity brothers expected to be rebuilding houses for the charity. "What we really needed that day was neighborhood clean-up, and they were cool about it, but the exit interview revealed they were disappointed," he says.

That gave Mr. Decker the chance to explain to them that clearing junk and overgrowth from abandoned houses discourages squatters and is a crucial step in rebuilding. Before lessons from

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the Volunteer Impact Program, "that was a group we would have lost," he says. "Now they are psyched to come back."

Mr. Decker and the volunteer coordinator of Yellow Boots completed the advanced-training track together. In consultation with New York Cares, they are studying the demographics of their volunteers.

"We formerly did a decent job finding out where our volunteers come from, but then didn't do much with the data," Mr. Decker says. Closer analysis of background, race, age, and other factors revealed "what groups are really breaking through for us, and others that we are missing totally."

Yellow Boots is now developing new, more-targeted volunteer-recruitment strategies as a result.

The leaders of New York Cares are investigating ways to make its program available beyond the New York metropolitan area or to help other organizations start similar programs

elsewhere.

"This is certainly scalable, transferable knowledge," says Mr. Bagley, adding that he welcomes inquiries from any group interested in launching similar efforts. Mr. Decker says he appreciates the low price — participants pay only \$200 per course, with the rest subsidized by New York Cares and a grant from the city — and the customized approach

Only a few weeks after he and his colleague wrapped up the advanced course in May, he says, "as a group, we are already better for it."