

Toolkit for Working with Rural Volunteers

Available online at www.RuralVolunteer.org

Based on our experience working in hundreds of rural communities with thousands of volunteers, it is clear that volunteers are necessary to the survival and mission of organizations striving to improve their community and environment. It also became clear that little empirical research investigated the role of volunteers in these rural areas and very few tools were available to help organizations overcome the unique challenges of recruiting, managing, and retaining rural volunteers. With the support of the Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Wetlands, Oceans, and Watershed and the Office of Surface Mining, the OSM/VISTA Teams developed the "Volunteers for Rural Watersheds" Research Project to investigate solutions to these challenges.

THE PROJECT

This three-year pilot project focused on developing resources that promote and improve locally-devised practices to encourage mobilization and participation of rural volunteers. Research was structured in three phases:

- *Phase 1:* Collected and analyzed survey data from volunteers in 16 rural organizations in both the East and West.
- *Phase 2:* Identified 25 volunteer management practices being done successfully by rural groups; transplanted practices to different organizations and monitored trial practices; compiled case study accounts of trial practices.
- *Phase 3:* Synthesize and disseminate findings as a toolkit of best practices to guide organizations in rural areas.

In the first study phase, surveys were collected from 315 volunteers with 16 organizations in Appalachia and the Rocky Mountain West. Data was analyzed to form a general profile of rural volunteers and to gain valuable insight into their opinions, identifying who is most likely to volunteer and, perhaps more importantly, revealing gaps where new individuals and groups can be targeted for recruitment.

For the second research phase, 25 volunteer practices proven to be successful in recruiting, managing, or retaining volunteers were identified and tested for one year by one or two different rural organizations. Forty-eight case studies revealed successes, challenges, and ideas for other rural groups to utilize.

THE TOOLKIT

Under-resourced and under-staffed organizations often pour all of their time and effort into an event or task and are able to achieve some goal: raise money, get mentioned in the newspaper, recruit volunteers to help out. Key tasks, especially with volunteer management, often slip through the cracks: gathering contact information for those involved, entering that information into a database, welcoming new individuals to the

organization, getting them involved as dues-paying members, giving them upcoming events and tasks so they continue to be involved: the list goes on.

After engaging in place-based research at 34 rural sites, we created the *Toolkit for Working with Rural Volunteers* to share approaches to volunteer recruitment, management, and retention that are successful in rural settings. It is a source of new ideas with real-life accounts of where to start and what to expect, enabling organizations to learn from each other ways to improve rural communities with volunteers. We could have bound this information into an extensive 200-page manual, but we know that rural volunteer managers generally lack three things: time, people, and money. An impenetrable block of "research findings" would simply gather dust on a shelf.

With this *Toolkit*, we take research to the next level by putting it in a useable format that establishes a complete framework necessary for sustainable volunteer management. Readers will not only learn new ways to work with volunteers, but be guided through the larger process of really bringing those volunteers into an organization and keeping them there—with the least amount of time, people, and money—because we know there is a lot of important work to be done.

THE OSM/VISTA TEAMS

The OSM/VISTA Teams, in partnership with the Office of Surface Mining (OSM) and community-led nonprofit watershed restoration groups, place, coordinate, and train AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteers who live and work in host communities to promote economic redevelopment, community engagement, and environmental stewardship. The Appalachian Coal Country Team (ACCT) sponsors OSM/VISTA Volunteers in 7 states in the Appalachian coalfields, while the Western Hardrock Watershed Team (WHWT) sponsors Volunteers in the hardrock mining belt of Colorado and New Mexico.

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