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## Workshop offers tips on volunteer retention

PORTLAND - More than a dozen people attended the Main Street Volunteer Management Strategies workshop on June 24, to learn about effective volunteer recruitment and retention.

The workshop was sponsored by the Portland Main Street Organization & Finance Committee and was presented by Janelle Hill, community services coordinator for Arbor Circle in Grand Rapids. Attendees included volunteer coordinators from throughout the county.

Hill warned attendees that before any recruitment is done, they need to determine their volunteer needs and their capacity to supervise and train those volunteers.

"Too many groups try to get all of the volunteers they can, and then those people are left without training, supervision, or anything to do," Hill said. "The quickest way to lose a volunteer is to appear as though you don't need that person."

Hill also urged attendees to be willing to refer potential volunteers to other organizations if it's not the right fit.

"Not everyone will be a good fit for your organization or for the event you're planning," said Hill. "When you help find the right fit, the volunteer will be happy and the other organization will appreciate what you've done-it will come back to you."

In terms of making the best use of volunteers and their wealth of talent, Hill noted that there are clear differences between volunteers. "Baby boomers," for example are usually looking for something very different than "millennials" (those born between 1977 and 1994). And volunteers with stable, long-standing professional careers are often looking for something different than volunteers who are trying to build their resumes -- in other words, those who are trying to enter that world. Hill used these examples to illustrate the need to offer volunteers what they're looking for and that job titles can be an important component.

"If you need a volunteer who can update your Facebook page on the Internet, what might you call that position?" Hill asked. One attendee suggested -- and all agreed -- that "Social networking guru" was a much more attractive (and accurate) position title than "Computer assistant." Attendees worked on a number of tasks during the workshop, including identifying their own organization's volunteer needs and working together on a job description for at least one position in their organization. Hill urged them to consider the benefits that the volunteer will gain from each assignment.

"Some benefits might be very personal, like learning a new skill to add to a resume or helping a cause that's close to a person's heart," said Hill. Other benefits included networking, improving the community's economic strength, giving back to a specific organization, or simply getting some exercise.

Hill packed the 90-minute workshop with a broad range of information. She provided strategies for attracting volunteers, connecting to state and national volunteerism programs, creating a positive volunteer experience, and thanking volunteers. She also asked the audience to brainstorm about their volunteer-management experiences in the past -- what worked and what didn't.

"Find one project, pull them into that, and they may be more willing to take on a long-term project later," said Diane Smith, Ionia County Economic Alliance director and chair of the Main Street Economic Revitalization Committee.

Hill agreed. "Don't let them leave without telling them about the next volunteer opportunity."

Hill said that recruitment can sometimes involve raising the awareness of the attendees at an event. She stated that people often attend events and think everyone working is being paid. When they realize the workers are volunteers and that the event they enjoy attending could not be held without those volunteers, they too will volunteer.

Hill went on to explain the importance of the screening and acceptance-or rejection-process. "The interview and screening process is very time consuming, but it can be among the most important components," said Hill. "At the interview, you will find out the person's other interests, goals, hobbies, and skills. These might be very helpful to your organization." Hill noted that this process can also reveal whether the person is a good fit for your organization.

Finally, she explained that "the acceptance piece is missed a lot, but this is also an important element."

"Welcome people," said Hill. "Make their acceptance formal and important, even if it's just a welcome via a phone call; let them know the next step. Rejection is harder, but it needs to be done. Be specific about the reasons, and if they might fit somewhere else, try to refer them."

For more information on this workshop, contact Main Street Manager Patrick Reagan at (517) 647-5027 or via e-mail at [ddamainstreet@portland-michigan.org](mailto:ddamainstreet@portland-michigan.org).

- From the Portland Main Street organization

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