



Strengthening Families & Communities

VOLUNTEER PROGRAM PROVIDES IMPORTANT SUPPORT

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Volunteer Program Provides Important Support

Tapping into the time, energy and expertise of volunteers to support vital programs and people in Bridgeport, Connecticut, was just a kernel of an idea less than two years ago. But today, the Volunteer Program is an important and evolving function, providing everything from tutoring and mentoring services to help with event planning and implementation.

What turned the idea into a viable program was a carefully designed, multi-step plan. The first step was to have a dedicated staffer focus on the program's development. That person, Diana Azevedo, was hired to put the program together in June 2000. Initially, Azevedo spent time researching other organizations, to determine how they developed volunteer programs, with the help of an experienced consultant.

Azevedo then conducted interviews with the Bridgeport staff to determine what outstanding needs could be addressed with volunteers. From there, she put together detailed volunteer job descriptions for such positions as tutors, mentors, special events helpers, and arts program supporters, including anticipated time commitments, duties, and required skills.

Azevedo also developed a formal procedure for recruiting and screening volunteer applications, which included the standard child welfare background checks already used by the agency; a Volunteer Procedures and Policy Manual, covering everything from program goals and expectations to attendance requirements, attire, and grievance policies; and a volunteer contract, which includes confidentiality rules and the specific kinds of resources and support Casey would provide.

By early 2001, the Volunteer Program began recruiting, tapping local universities as well as volunteer organizations like Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America.

"Recruitment," says Azevedo, "is a constant challenge, so collaborating with as many community organizations as possible is key to generating new sources of volunteers." Perhaps one of the biggest lessons Azevedo has learned in developing the program is to include a staff training component, to help staff recognize the value of volunteers and to fully understand how to work with volunteers effectively. Many social workers are understandably protective of their children and may be concerned that the volunteer may not be equipped to deal with them, she explains.

"But most volunteers are highly skilled individuals in many useful disciplines. They have a passion for helping, and can contribute a great deal, if they're directed properly."

Initially, volunteers were placed in the Family Connections program, which successfully demonstrated how volunteer support could work. Eventually, volunteers were used to help with a range of activities, from tutoring children and helping with homework, to planning and setting up picnics and holiday programs.

Volunteers are also serving as team leaders in the performance arts program, which meets once a week through most of the school year, and in the Family Connections' week-long family camp during the summer. Currently, Bridgeport has engaged about 15 volunteer tutors, but the number is expected to double as new recruits become available from nearby colleges, including older adults who have gone back to school for social work and other related degrees.

Looking to the future, Azevedo says the Volunteer Program hopes to help generate foster parents through volunteering, recruit Casey teens who are transitioning into independent living as mentors and tutors for younger children, and direct volunteers with computer expertise to help train families in computer and Internet skills. With a Family Resource Center up and running, moreover, skilled volunteers will be expected to play an important role, from teaching adult classes and workshops in a range of subjects to helping kids with homework and activities.

With the backbone of the program in place, Azevedo recently moved on to a new phase of her career as a life skills specialist in Bridgeport. "I enjoyed and learned a lot from developing the program," she says, "and now its future growth is in the capable hands of Omayra Binion," who took over as volunteer coordinator early this year.