

Ensuring it's a Good Fit: *Finding volunteers that are best suited for your program*

By Katie Mulembe, Catholic Volunteer Network Membership and Recruitment Coordinator

Day after day our volunteers engage in mentally and emotionally strenuous work. Often they are serving extremely vulnerable individuals at critical moments in their lives. One of our roles as program staff is to ensure the safety of the communities being served by providing them with healthy, reliable, and well-intentioned volunteers. Sometimes warning signs are easy to detect, such as criminal records, but often the signs can be much more subtle. Therefore, it is essential to develop a thorough application and screening process to ensure you truly know who you are accepting into your program and whether or not your program is a good fit for him or her. Here are some tips to help you through some of the less clear-cut components of the application and screening process:

Ask open questions. Interviews and applications are designed to provide the applicant the opportunity to share about their experiences and qualifications. Asking open questions can help ensure that you receive the most informative answers, even from shy applicants. Rather than ask “Are you able to live simply?” you might consider phrasing the question “How do you feel about simple living?” This will enable the applicant to share more about their experiences and motives, rather than giving what they hope is the “right” answer. This also sets the tone for a more open, relaxed conversation.

Listen to the questions the applicants asks during his/her interview. Recognizing that this is a mutual discernment process, it is important to give the applicant the opportunity to interview your organization while you are also interviewing him or her. The questions they will ask will reveal many of their priorities and intentions in joining your program. Take note of the questions asked and keep them on record, they may come in handy when making a final decision about a candidate.

Consider interviewing via Skype when in-person interviews are not possible. Skype is a free, internet-based phone service that enables people to talk while watching live video of one another. This offers you many of the advantages of in-person interviews while saving on travel costs. You will be able to gain a better sense of the person's demeanor and professionalism, which is something you may not be able to gauge as easily over the phone. All you need is a webcam and a microphone to get started, and it is possible your computer is already equipped with these. Visit www.skype.com to set up an account.

Pay attention to your gut feeling. Intuition is an important decision making tool. It can alert us to red flags that may not be entirely apparent at first and help us read between the lines. That said, we must be careful not to rely on intuition too heavily or we may run the risk of discrimination based on personal bias. During the somewhat long application process, it may be

difficult to distinguish your personal bias from legitimate concerns. When apprehension sets in, it is important to try to pinpoint the root cause of the negative feeling. It could have been the applicant's choice of words, poor grammar, or hazy responses to interview questions. Once you figure out what is troubling you, take time to assess the importance of that hesitation. If you are still unable to make a decision after this process, it may be wise to get a second opinion. Ask another staff member, or even a trusted current or former volunteer to interview the applicant and see if they pick up on the same thing you did (you may not want to reveal your reservations prior to their interview.) You may be surprised to find that their impression was completely different than yours.

Have an extended application process prepared. If you are still unsure about the qualifications of an applicant, don't hesitate to ask for more information. Prepare an extended application process ahead of time so you are ready when these questions come up. You can develop an additional list of interview questions to get more information from the applicant (see this month's Spotlight article for more ideas.) If you are still questioning an applicant's credibility, feel free to ask for additional references. Questionnaire forms may help draw out the information you are looking for from references.

Ask yourself if the applicant is really a good fit for your program. Occasionally you may come across an excellent applicant, one that has demonstrated an on-going commitment to service, has stunning academic achievements, and extremely positive recommendations from references, yet still doesn't seem like the perfect match for your program. For example, you might sense that the person's true passion is for ministry to the homeless, yet you only offer educational placements. Another scenario could be that the applicant has a terminally ill family member in California and has hesitations about relocating to Chicago to serve with your program. In these cases, it is probably best to talk about these concerns openly with the applicant and be willing to make recommendations of other Catholic Volunteer Network member programs that might be a better fit. You may even want to contact other programs to see if they are willing to accept your application, rather than have him or her begin the lengthy application process again from scratch (but please remember to ask for permission from the applicant before sharing their application.) Collaborative efforts like this will ensure that the service experience is more pleasant for both the volunteer and the program.

And don't forget to pray! We encourage those interested in service to take time to pray about how they can best use their gifts. Many volunteers even spend years discerning the call to service, so it is important that we also enter into this process prayerfully.

Additional resources you might find helpful:

Beyond Police Checks: The Definitive Employee and Volunteer Screening Handbook, 2004, by Linda L. Graff

Energize, Inc. has a resource library full of information on the topic of volunteer screening. Visit their website at: <http://www.energizeinc.com/art/subj/scre.html>.

The Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs maintains a resource center called ServiceLeader.org where you can find a good selection of articles on volunteer management and screening.

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