



How Can I Help?

Spotlight On: Recruitment Reflections from Volunteers

By Alyssa Sickle, Catholic Volunteer Network Executive Assistant

Volunteer program staff might sometimes feel the need to anticipate the questions and feelings of each potential volunteer and to know how to respond in a way that will make a positive impact on their service decision. However, it is good to be reminded of the dozens of other factors that draw a volunteer to a program and an experience. While the program staff is crucial in opening the door, other dynamics also play a part in “recruiting” the volunteer. While you might not have control over all these factors, it can help to be aware of the thoughts and feelings that potential volunteers have as they begin to consider service.

These volunteers, drawing from their own memories and experiences of their recruitment and discernment, share thoughts on how they reached the decision to commit to service.

The volunteers who contributed to the article: Josh Currie, Covenant House Faith Community; Shannon Hoffman, Christian Appalachian Project; Laura Hopps, Volunteer Missionary Movement; Eileen Thomasmeyer, Vincentian Service Corps West.

How did you first hear about the volunteer program with which you served?

Josh: I had been reading and talking quite a bit about homelessness in one of my sociology classes and heard that there was going to be a homeless vigil on campus (Ohio Wesleyan University). This immediately sparked my interest and so I attended. A friend spoke at the event about teen homelessness and an agency called Covenant House. I knew immediately it was something I was interested in looking into.

Shannon: CAP (Christian Appalachian Project) has an alternative spring break program, WorkFest, that allows college students to come down to Kentucky during their spring break and work on the debilitated homes of people in Appalachia. I participated in WorkFest my junior year of college at Michigan State University and lead the trip my senior year. It was on this trip that I began to talk with some of the girls that had been serving with CAP long-term (9 months to 1 year) about coming to volunteer for a year.

Eileen: I first found out about the Vincentian Service Corps West (VSC) because they contacted me after I completed a volunteer profile on the Catholic Volunteer Network website.

What was the first thing that drew you to the program or sparked your interest?

Josh: Generally, it takes me awhile to make decisions but in this case, I knew right away that Covenant House was something I wanted to do. The coordinators of the program were incredibly helpful and friendly but it was the passion and vision of the agency that sold me. In the mission statement it calls us to show "absolute respect" and "unconditional love" to the youth we serve. How can you go wrong with that?

Shannon: What drew me to CAP is the area and the people. CAP serves people in poverty in south and eastern Kentucky. This is the area where my mom grew up until she was a young adult and moved to Michigan and met my dad. What drew me to my specific placement, adult education at ABLE Families (a smaller non-profit linked to CAP), was my desire to learn more about adult learning. I have always been interested in the education gap that is evident between rich and poor communities.

Laura: My process was a little different because I and my fellow volunteer, Christine Ruppert, were recruited by Sister Helen Prejean to start a volunteer program at the Centro Cultural Batahola Norte in Managua, Nicaragua as a way to provide young people with a formative experience in accompaniment work and to aid the Center's programs. Christine and I went through things backwards, as we had an idea of our project already and made our own arrangements, and then approached the Volunteer Missionary Movement, who was more than happy to aid us in the creation of the project.

Eileen: I liked that VSC was located in California as I have extended family that lives there. I had never been to Los Angeles before and decided that living and serving in a new city would be interesting. They also had many options when it came to choosing a worksite, so I liked that it was truly up to me where I would work.

What or who was most helpful to you as you decided where to serve?

Josh: Prayer kept me strong and helped me focus on getting involved in the program. Friends and family gave me the support and encouragement that I needed to come in strong. Professors encouraged me and believed in me.

Shannon: Probably the most helpful people in getting me to even THINK about coming to CAP were the long-term volunteers I met at WorkFest. They talked to me for hours, since we had the time while we were working, about what it was like to volunteer and live in a community with so many different people. The girls even took me to visit their volunteer house. This had such a big impact on me because I could see they were normal girls like me, just out of college, just looking for some life experience. It made me unafraid. Also, while at WorkFest, some former volunteers came out with hot chocolate on the site to answer questions. However, the night I knew God was calling me to CAP was the last night of WorkFest. After working, all the volunteers gather together for dinner to sing songs and tell stories about their week. One volunteer began to play her guitar and the whole group was drawn in to contemplative prayer. As I began to pray about coming to CAP and what to do after I graduated a voice, not my own, began to speak to me and said, "Please come back here and don't worry. I will take care of the money and I will take care of you."

Eileen: At Villanova, where I got my undergrad degree, there is one person who works for campus ministry who focuses explicitly on helping seniors to discern about year of service. She gave me the RESPONSE directory and that opened my eyes to how many opportunities exist for service. The VSC director was also very encouraging and I received mail periodically, such as Valentine's Day card and graduation card from her that demonstrated just how personal and caring VSC is to everyone, including potential volunteers.

What questions were you asking yourself and the volunteer programs as you considered where to serve?

Josh: I only looked into one volunteer program. I knew it was for me. But since there are three service sites available, I prayed that God would place me where I could be most useful, which I definitely think happened.

Shannon: I guess the sensible questions I was asking were what are my living expenses and how much money will I get to take care of that? Where will I be living? There are several different volunteer houses at CAP in different locations and I had a desire to live close to my mom's family, which I did. With whom will I be living with? What will my volunteer job placement be? I was able to visit my job site before I committed to volunteering there, as well as other volunteer sites, just to ensure that I would feel comfortable.

Eileen: One aspect of programs that I looked at was length. Another was distance from home. While I initially had grand plans to leave the country, in the end, I am glad that I chose to stay domestic.

Were there questions that you feel went unanswered that would have helped you decide?

Josh: All my questions were answered. Sure situations came up that I never thought to ask about but everyone was really helpful in letting me know all that I was getting into. What I like about Faith Community is that they work to get quality individuals that will make a lasting impact rather than just trying to build a large program.

Shannon: Honestly, no. The women that work in recruitment at CAP, Kathy Kluesner, Kathleen Leavell and Amy Schill are amazing. They always call back and answer e-mails as soon as possible while you are trying to decide. Not only that, but Kathy called me several times while I was thinking about CAP just to chat, see what I was up to and to see if I had any questions. It was very kind and allowed me to ask questions as things came up.

What other important factors helped "recruit" you to the program?

Josh: The emphasis on simple living, intentionality and community, prayer/reflection and direct meaningful service to a population that is largely overlooked. I also felt this program would bring about a lot of personal growth, which it has.

Shannon: I think it was helpful that I knew I would be getting the incentive of an AmeriCorps Education Award at the end of it. However, that wasn't really make or break. I think what made it is that CAP wants all volunteers to visit before they commit to volunteering. This was very

helpful because I met people I would be living with and got very excited about that. I just clicked with one of the girls I met while visiting. We are best friends now. Meeting her before the volunteer year made me feel, see and know I would have a friend in the volunteer house.

Laura: For long-term volunteers (1 or more years) it seems there are many people who already know where they want to work because they've studied abroad or done a shorter internship and want to make a longer term commitment to the same organization. Christine and I both studied at the Casa de la Solidaridad program in El Salvador through Santa Clara University, which was a very formative experience for us, and we knew we both wanted to return to Central America to make a longer commitment to simple living and accompaniment work. Thinking of volunteers I know in Central America, it seems best to recruit from study abroad programs. I think people have a higher success rate as long term volunteers if they have already lived abroad, speak the local language, have experienced some degree of culture shock, know what to expect, and understand the historical and cultural context and the context of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Eileen: I liked the fact that VSC was a small program. From the beginning, I felt important to the organization every time they contacted me, and I knew that I would develop relationships with all of the other volunteers in the program. My work site, Chrysalis, a nonprofit employment resource center, was another huge factor, as it was the perfect work site for me.

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