Utilizing a State Level Volunteer Recognition Program at the County Level

Abstract

Volunteer recognition is an important component of Extension programs. Most land-grant universities have implemented a state volunteer recognition program. Extension professionals, however, are too overburdened with meetings, programs, and activities to effectively recognize volunteers locally. Utilizing a state model is an efficient means of recognizing volunteers. This article presents an idea that Extension professionals can utilize to implement a statewide volunteer recognition program on the county level. The first step is to appoint a volunteer recognition committee that will utilize the state recognition categories and identify and nominate worthy volunteers for their programmatic contributions at both the county and state levels.

Fran Korthaus McCall
Commodity Specialist
Kentucky Farm Bureau
Louisville, Kentucky
fran.mccall@kyfb.com

Ken Culp, III
Principal Specialist for Volunteerism
Department of 4-H Youth Development
University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service
Lexington, Kentucky
ken.culp@uky.edu

Introduction

The 4-H program relies heavily on adult volunteers. Extension agents devote considerable effort and expense to coordinating county recognition activities (Culp & Schwartz, 1998). At the Kentucky 4-H Volunteer Forum, volunteers are recognized in 13 different award categories. These include: Certified Livestock Volunteers, Certified Horse Volunteers, Certified Shooting Sports Volunteers, Community Service – Adults, Community Service – Teens, Conrad Feltner – Adults, Conrad Feltner – Teens, I.C.E. (Innovative, Creative, Enthusiastic), T.E.A.M. (Together Everyone Achieves More), Leadership Development, Partners in Progress, Lifetime Achievement, and Friends of Kentucky 4-H (Culp & Brown, 2011).

Agents have too many demands on their time to create a new volunteer recognition program for use at the county level. Many states have implemented a system of state-level awards and recognition for 4-H volunteers. However, many Extension agents find themselves too busy to nominate volunteers in multiple award categories, nor do they have the infrastructure necessary for volunteers to nominate their peers. The issue, therefore, is how to utilize a state level volunteer recognition

program at the county level. In other words, how can Extension professionals think globally and act locally, regarding volunteer recognition?

Review of Literature

Kwarteng, Smith, and Miller (1988) defined recognition as "formal or informal attention given to the volunteer to provide a sense of appreciation, security, and belonging." The specific types of recognition that volunteers feel are the most meaningful, however, are an ongoing debate. Some researchers recommend extrinsic recognition (Murk & Stephan, 1990; Steele, 1994; Zeutshel & Hansel, 1989). Conversely, Kwarteng, Smith, and Miller (1988) believe that informal verbal recognition, praise, and encouragement by other involved in the program are the most important developmental factors. Informal methods of recognizing volunteers and their contributions are frequently overlooked in place of more formal methods, yet are often more effective (Holtham, 1989; Vineyard, 1984).

Although the debate regarding whether formal or informal recognition is most effective is ongoing, the most effective form of recognition is that which fulfills the volunteers' motivation to serve. Recognition programs designed to fulfill the volunteer's motivation to continue serving will therefore be the most effective.

Atkinson and Feather (1966) and McClelland (1995, 1962) identified three categories of motivation: achievement, affiliation, and power. Achievement-motivated individuals take pride in accomplishments and achievements. Affiliation-motived people are most concerned about their relationships with other people or groups. Power-motivated individuals have a strong desire for control and influence. Maehr and Braskamp (1986) determined that achievement, affiliation, and power motives were important determinants of performance and success in both work and volunteers. Furthermore, Henderson (1981) found most 4-H volunteers to be motivated by affiliation with the organization. Interestingly, most Extension agents typically devote most of their time providing public recognition, which fulfills achievement motives.

Therefore, the questions posed to Extension professionals are as follows:

- If most volunteers are motivated by affiliation, how should Extension professionals recognize their volunteers?

- What methods should be used to enhance the volunteer's affiliation with the Extension program?

Developing a County 4-H Volunteer Recognition Team

Some County Councils have identified a standing committee for volunteer recognition. These committees are generally responsible for identifying and nominating individuals to be recognized at the county and state levels. If "recognition" is not a standing committee on the 4-H Council, then the agent should either recruit or identify volunteers to serve on an ad hoc committee, or suggest to the council or the council's by-laws committee that a reoccurring standing committee be added to the by-laws. The agent should meet with the volunteer recognition committee, share the state award categories descriptions, and develop a timeline with milestones and deadlines. The volunteer

recognition committee then brainstorms worthy nominees for each award category and sets nominations deadlines.

A common justification Extension agents use to develop or add a volunteer recognition committee is that the council needs to more effectively recognize volunteers and the entire Extension program. In many cases, volunteers recognized at the state recognition program have really not achieved or accomplished any more than other worthy volunteers. Rather, they benefit from their involvement in a county with an active awards committee or an agent who devotes the considerable amount of time necessary to complete the award application process. By adding a volunteer recognition committee to the council, all volunteers have the opportunity to receive the same benefits and recognition as do volunteers from well-organized counties.

Because the nomination forms for volunteer recognition often require written narratives that quantify and document the achievements and accomplishments of the nominee, the individuals recruited to serve on the recognition committee should be articulate and have advanced writing skills. Additionally, they should be goal oriented and be willing to honor agreed-upon deadlines. Finally, one or more committee member should be able and willing to gather information and conduct research on potential nominees. Finally, in order to make the nomination process easier in the future, it is helpful if good records are kept throughout the year. This information, in the form of minutes, a scrapbook, newspaper clippings, Extension newsletters, website information, etc., will be invaluable to the volunteer recognition committee when writing nominations in future years.

The volunteer recognition committee is responsible for nominating individuals for each award category, completing the application process and securing the necessary documentation required for the nomination. Volunteers on the recognition committee identify the most suitable applicants and distribute the nomination applications among committee members. The recognition committee then completes the award applications. The agent should make it clear that the committee is responsible for completing the nomination (the task is too large to be completed by an agent alone). The agent offers assistance with proofing, editing, providing additional information from the volunteer's personnel file, and general support and supervision of the volunteers.

Implications for County Programs

Follow these steps to develop a volunteer recognition program in a county program:

1. Adopt the state volunteer recognition model (If your state has one)

2. Form a volunteer recognition committee

3. Create a timeline for yearlong volunteer recognition

4. Develop a budget for volunteer recognition in your county

5. Create a plan for volunteer recognition for your county program (volunteer breakfast, achievement banquet, National 4-H Week, etc.)

6. Recognize and nominate county volunteers for local and state volunteer awards

7. Compete a 360 evaluation for your volunteer recognition program (Culp, Brown, Hall, McDonough, Ragland, Weaver & Whitson, 2009).

Conclusion

Volunteers are motivated to serve by different factors; therefore, the same types of recognition and the same recognition strategies will not be appropriate for all volunteers in all county programs. Recognition is an essential component of a successful volunteer program. Because most agents lack the time to research and develop a volunteer recognition program that is unique to their own county, utilizing a state-level recognition program is a more efficient means of recognizing volunteer contributions. Developing a committee of volunteers to select and nominate local volunteers is a key component of implementing a local recognition program. After the committee successfully identifies volunteers for local recognition, they can be nominated for state level awards. Effective Extension agents serving as volunteer administrators will help the county recognition committee adapt the state recognition program at the local level to fulfill the needs and expectations of the county and ensure that volunteer achievement are recognized and celebrated.

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