



Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century

Managing Master Volunteers

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The Texas AgriLife Extension Service conducts Master Volunteer programs to train volunteers and thereby increase Extension's ability to deliver educational programs. In 2007 alone, 8,460 Master Volunteers within the Texas AgriLife Extension Service each gave an average of 130 hours of their time. These Master Volunteers help Extension serve its traditional audience but they often reach people not typically involved in Extension programs. This outreach opens the door to new opportunities and collaborations and helps Extension in its mission to enhance the quality of life for the citizens of Texas.

A study of the membership of the Association of Volunteer Administrators (AVA), conducted in 2000, revealed that 77.8 percent of those surveyed had received no training before first working with volunteers. Most Texas Extension educators have learned about leading volunteers through on-the-job experience and training after joining Extension.

County Extension agents who work with Master Volunteer programs must recognize their role as administrators and develop the skills needed to direct and lead volunteers within the organization. County agents acting as volunteer administrators must

decide what needs to be done, then create networks of people and relationships that can accomplish the task, and finally ensure that the job is completed.

Establishing and maintaining a Master Volunteer program takes time and effort, but when county Extension agents formulate a plan and then apply the competencies they have gained through training and experience, they are uniquely positioned to manage and collaborate with volunteers to accomplish Extension's mission.

Identifying the Need

County Extension Agents should assess the need for a Master Volunteer program before initiating one. The Leadership Advisory Board or Program Area Committees may also be involved in identifying the need. Regardless of who identifies the need, it is important that the county Extension agent build support for the idea by discussing the Master Volunteer program with his or her direct supervisor and with the appropriate program area committee. The Agent begins this process by completing the checklist (p. 5), then contacting the state Master Volunteer Program Coordinator.

It is a common misperception that Master Volunteers will alleviate some of a county Extension agent's workload. Instead, it takes time to manage and train volunteers if they are to increase Extension's contacts and visibility in the community. Properly managed Master Volunteers can produce more office inquiries and create opportunities for reaching new audiences.

When assessing the need for a Master Volunteer program within the county, consider the following.

- What specific need within the county/program area will this Master Volunteer program address?
- Is the office burdened with phone requests for information about the specific subject matter?
- Would volunteer help responding to these phone requests be useful?
- Is there a demand on your time to talk to clubs and civic groups about the specific subject matter?
- Is the lack of willing and trained workers causing community needs for projects related to this program to go unmet?
- Can you provide office space and a telephone for volunteers?
- Are you willing to empower volunteers?
- Are you willing to accept volunteers in leadership roles?

These and other questions are included in the Checklist for Starting a Master Volunteer Program.

Requirements

People are often motivated to volunteer by their interest in learning more about the specific subject matter. However, they must also be committed to sharing information with the public, meeting the needs of the community and supporting the mission of Extension.

The Texas AgriLife Extension Service has established minimum requirements for Master Volunteer programs. A certified Master Volunteer must:

- complete at least 20 hours of specialized training in a particular subject
- be able to lead educational programs in the subject
- commit to giving at least 50 hours of service in the specific subject (or a combined total of 80 hours with training)
- have a position description on file

Volunteers are considered interns until they fulfill their training requirements. There are many ways that Master Volunteer interns can meet their service hour requirements. They may:

- answer telephone questions related to the subject matter
- conduct educational programs for clubs and civic groups
- lead and support community projects and educational programs
- support the 4-H and youth development program by conducting programs and supporting project work

Managing a Master Volunteer Program

Managing Master Volunteers is just as important as training them. Once Master Volunteers have completed their training, it is important to help them use their subject matter knowledge and skills to educate new audiences.

Managing a first-year Master Volunteer program will require a great amount of time and may initially show little return on the time invested. However, with continued organization and management, the volunteers' service will benefit Extension and the community.

Experienced volunteers may manage less experienced volunteers; however, the county Extension agent is ultimately responsible for volunteers and must ensure that the program fulfills the mission of Extension. The county Extension agent must communicate with the volunteers, build trust and relationships, offer opportunities for service, provide feedback and recognition for their work, and be certain the job is getting done.

Extension volunteer administrators need various competencies in order to successfully manage a volunteer program. These competencies are divided into five groups and include: organizational leadership, systems leadership, organizational culture, personal skills and management skills.

■ Organizational Leadership

Competencies within organizational leadership include skills in needs assessment and strategic planning, as well as a commitment to communicating the organization's mission and vision to volunteers and the public. Volunteer administrators must be able to "see the big picture" and identify the individual steps necessary for accomplishing Extension's goals.

Volunteers help Texas Extension reach more people, ensure that programs are relevant, deliver Extension education, and interpret the value of Extension to others. These are powerful functions within the Cooperative Extension system. Volunteers must truly understand Extension's mission and where they fit into the organization. Other essential competencies include:

- the ability to assess the needs of the client, the community, volunteers and the organization
- the ability to turn needs into plans and plans into action
- the creative use of technology to make programs more effective
- long-range strategic planning skills
- short-range planning and organizing skills

■ **Systems Leadership**

Systems leadership competencies help establish a proper balance of ownership and responsibility within the volunteer program. Enlisting Master Volunteers and then giving them freedom to carry out tasks – in their own way – is important. The key to volunteer management is not to micromanage, but to provide guidance, ensure that subject matter information is accurate, and make certain that volunteer-led programming meets Extension requirements.

Sharing leadership responsibilities within a Master Volunteer program involves delegating tasks to volunteers that facilitate their personal development and extend the capabilities of the volunteer administrator. Competencies include:

- collaborating with others
- sharing leadership
- understanding and using group dynamics, personality type, and team-building strategies
- willingness to share power and give up control

■ **Organizational Culture**

Organizational culture competencies allow agents to set the organization's tone when interacting with volunteers or the public. It is important for Master Volunteer Coordinators to use words and actions that show volunteers they understand the volunteer organization and that they are willing to make the most of its strengths and improve its weaknesses.

It is important for volunteer administrators to respect volunteers as individuals and as autonomous groups. Additional administrative competencies include:

- knowing volunteers and their life experiences and respecting their professionalism
- trusting volunteers to complete assigned tasks
- respecting volunteers' time and contributions
- willingness to do the same things you ask of volunteers
- creating a positive environment in which volunteers can learn and operate

■ **Personal Skills**

To have a successful program a volunteer manager must enjoy partnership and collaboration. Specific personal skills needed for managing a Master Volunteer program include:

- the ability to predict and manage change
- communication skills
- the ability to motivate, delegate and facilitate
- willingness to let volunteers complete tasks in their own way
- the ability to manage volunteers without micro-managing

Good people skills will enable a volunteer administrator to overcome limited subject matter competencies and a lack of experience in coordinating volunteers.

■ **Management Skills**

A volunteer administrator must have management skills that enable the volunteer group to conduct its business according to set procedures with order and clarity.

It is the combination of personal and management skills that allows a volunteer administrator to establish and maintain a successful Master Volunteer program.

Specific management skills include:

- leading with a shared vision and purpose
- enlisting the assistance of volunteers
- giving volunteers the proper amount of responsibility within the organization
- conflict resolution skills
- organizational skills

Types of Master Volunteer Programs

Master Volunteer programs within Extension include:

- **Master Gardener** – These volunteers conduct school garden projects, answer telephone requests for horticultural information, establish and maintain demonstration gardens, work with special audiences in the community, and design and implement community improvement projects, and coordinate Master Gardener projects.
- **Master Naturalist** – These volunteers provide outreach and service related to the management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities.
- **Master Marketer** – These agricultural producers are trained in marketing techniques, marketing plans, technical analysis, futures and options and many other marketing-related skills. These skills equip them to address the vital marketing component of their agricultural enterprise.
- **Master Wellness** – These volunteers are trained in nutrition, food safety, child health, physical activity and general wellness. Volunteers are required to return 40 hours of service to the program by making educational presentations, assisting with community health fairs and helping plan and organize special wellness projects. The goal of the program is to create an informed group of volunteers who can help Extension provide health and nutrition information to the community.

Master Volunteer Associations

Associations are networks of volunteers with similar interests and skills who come together for a common cause. Master Volunteer programs can operate without an association. However, sometimes the Master Volunteers want to organize as a group and meet on a regular basis. It is important that these groups receive training and support and be directed to areas where their skills can be best applied.

Screening of Volunteers

The Texas AgriLife Extension Service requires that all volunteers, including Master Volunteers, who have direct contact with young people undergo criminal background checks before beginning their volunteer service. Volunteers must be rescreened every 3 years. The Youth Protection Standards Program was established to provide a safe and secure environment for young people and adults involved in Extension programs.

Summary

Master Volunteers benefit Extension and the citizens of Texas by strengthening outreach efforts and serving new audiences. As county Extension agents establish Master Volunteer programs, they must assume the role of volunteer administrator and develop the personal and managerial competencies needed to have successful volunteer groups. Strong volunteer programs have been and will continue to be a cornerstone of successful Extension educational programming.

References

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Checklist for County Extension Agents Starting a Master Volunteer Program

After completing this checklist, share it with your immediate supervisor and submit to the appropriate state Master Volunteer Program Coordinator.

CEA name: _____

County: _____

Program area you currently serve: _____

Years as a CEA: _____

Years in county: _____

Master Volunteer program you are starting: _____

Have you previously managed a MV program? Yes No

The need for a MV program was identified by (circle one):

Public

Leadership Advisory Board

Program Area Committee

County Extension Agent (self)

Have you discussed development of this Master Volunteer program with the Program Area Committee?

Yes No

Does the Program Area Committee support development of this Master Volunteer program? Yes No

Why does the county need this Master Volunteer program?

What specific county programming need will this Master Volunteer program address?

Is the office unable to respond in a timely manner to phone, e-mail and/or walk-in requests for information related to the subject matter of the Master Volunteer program under consideration? Yes No

Could you use volunteer help answering these requests? Yes No

Is there a demand on your time to talk to multiple groups in the county on topics related to the specific subject matter? Yes No

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Checklist for County Extension Agents continued

Are community needs going unmet in this program area due to a lack of trained and willing workers?

Yes No

Are you able to provide office space and a telephone for volunteers? Yes No

Are there candidates in your county willing to pay the fees for participating in this Master Volunteer program?

Yes No

Are you willing to empower volunteers? Yes No

Are you willing to accept volunteers in leadership roles? Yes No

How will you use these Master Volunteers once they are trained?

What will the Master Volunteers do?

How will the Master Volunteers provide service hours back to the program area? Provide specific activities:

Have you visited other counties and/or shadowed other county Extension agents who have a Master Volunteer programs? Yes No

If yes, please list the county and agents shadowed.

County	County Extension Agent
<hr/>	

List at least two lessons learned from visiting other Master Volunteer programs and/or shadowing a county Extension agent.

Supervisor Checklist – Hiring/Evaluating Competencies of a Volunteer Administrator

Master Volunteer programs are a powerful resource within the Texas AgriLife Extension Service that must be managed by county Extension agents. This checklist can assist Extension mid-managers in evaluating candidates who may be responsible for managing volunteers.

Applicant name: _____

County: _____

Does the applicant have experience managing volunteers? Yes No

Knowledge of Extension's Mission:

It is important for candidates to understand of the role of Extension and be able to articulate the mission and goals of Extension to volunteers. New hires will likely have a very limited understanding of Extension's purpose and goals; however, they should be able to explain Extension's general purpose.

Applicant understands the mission of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. Yes No

Attitude:

Statements about previous experiences or the individual's work style should give some insight to that person's attitude toward work and colleagues. Prior volunteer service, training and administrative experience are not essential to managing volunteers effectively. However, experience in managing volunteers can help new employees work with a Master Volunteer program.

Have you served as a volunteer for any organization? Yes No

If so, in what capacity or for what organization(s) did you serve?

Do you have any volunteer management training? Yes No

If so, please explain.

Do you have any experience in managing volunteers? Yes No

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Personal Skills:

People skills are important competencies associated with successful volunteer administrators. In fact, these skills are more essential than subject matter knowledge to successful management of Master Volunteers.

- Respects volunteer's time and contributions Yes No
- Is able to motivate, delegate and facilitate Yes No
- Allows others to complete tasks in their own way Yes No
- Trusts volunteers to complete assigned tasks Yes No
- Avoids micromanaging volunteers Yes No

Communication Skills:

Good communication is essential to a volunteer organization. Volunteers rely heavily on county Extension agents who oversee them. Therefore, county Extension agents need communication skills and the desire to communicate effectively with their volunteers.

- Oral communication skills Yes No
- Written communication skills Yes No
- Listening skills Yes No
- Ability to communicate volunteer accomplishments and impact Yes No
- Ability to effectively communicate Extension's policies and procedures Yes No

Management Skills:

The county Extension agent is responsible for the functioning of volunteer groups, including Master Volunteers. Though veteran volunteers may help manage programs, ultimately the county Extension agent is responsible for the smooth operation of the volunteer program.

- Able to inspire others to rise to challenges Yes No
- Leads with a shared vision and purpose Yes No
- Able to enlist the assistance of others Yes No
- Ability to delegate responsibility Yes No
- Willingness to take time to meet with volunteers for training and guidance Yes No
- Conflict resolution skills Yes No
- Organizational skills Yes No

Notes: