

## Meeting the Needs of Volunteer Tutors

Tutors are a volunteer-based literacy program's most valuable asset, and they need to be guided and nurtured. Volunteer retention does not happen spontaneously. It happens because volunteers know that they are valued members of your group. It happens because you care and you make certain your volunteers know you care. It happens because of a well-thought-out plan.

### New Volunteers

The plan for tutor support begins when people in your community voice an interest in becoming volunteers with your program. Give them the dates of your next orientation meeting and put their names on your mailing list to receive your newsletter. Newsletters are an excellent way to keep prospective volunteers interested and motivated as they read about all the wonderful things your program is doing.

### Orientation

The next step in the plan is an orientation that provides new volunteers with information about your program and about their possible role in the program. Here are some things to consider as you design your orientation meetings:

- Hold the meetings on-site at your literacy council office or learning center and include a tour of the site. |
- The meeting should last no more than two hours.
- Have a registration area near the door.
- Prepare a display of materials used in your program and photographs of program activities.
- Provide an overview of: the history of your literacy council, its structure and operation, the services offered, how the local program connects to the national organization, and the program participants (volunteers, students, staff, board members).
- Invite a tutor, a student, staff member, and board representative to share their experiences and responsibilities.
- Show a video of a tutoring session and small group session.
- Describe your program's expectations of volunteers and the variety of ways for them to be involved. Include: job descriptions, commitment (e.g., length of commitment, in-service training, hours tutoring per week), reporting, initial training, and ongoing training opportunities.
- Ask participants to complete a volunteer data sheet.

## **In-Service Training**

After their initial tutor workshop, continuing training of tutors is critical to an effective volunteer-based literacy program. In-service training needs to be scheduled on a regular basis, and participation should be part of the commitment to being a tutor for your program.

Use a variety of formats during these in-service workshops—presentation, discussion, hands-on practice of new skills, and role-playing situations. Consider holding some in-service meetings at the local library, other literacy program offices, Adult Basic Education classrooms, or the computer learning center of your local community college. In-service training workshops are excellent opportunities to tap the expertise available in your community. Invite members of your local International Reading Association council, volunteer center staff, university and community college faculty, and representatives from other literacy programs and advocacy groups to be presenters or resource people.

## **Support Meetings**

In addition to formal in-service training, tutors need the opportunity to network with each other on a monthly basis at tutor support meetings. Give tutors the chance to help each other with problems and share their successes. Also, have new materials on display and provide handouts of tutoring aids and supplemental activities.

### **Library**

Make it easy for tutors to get the materials they need. Develop a literacy library in a central location to give them access to instructional books and supplemental materials. This library does not even need to be staffed. If it is set up well, it can be run on an honor system.

Have your trainers conduct at least one session of the tutor training workshop in the library to give tutors hands-on experience in finding and using the materials.

## **Communication**

Your program's newsletter is an important communication channel, not only with the community but with those in your program as well. Newsletters should emphasize the work of the volunteers and learners and should acknowledge individual achievements and contributions. Publish the names of those who help in the office, speak to a group, or fill in when someone is unavailable. Include short articles by tutors and by students describing how they feel about their learning experiences.

The telephone is another effective tutor support tool. Put together a committee of telephone callers. Assign each person no more than ten tutors to call on a quarterly basis. These should be friendly calls to touch base with each tutor. “Is everything all right? Do you need anything? We'd like to see you at a tutor meeting. Thank you for the good job

you are doing.” Callers should also ask about student progress and be ready to discuss problems and praise successes.

## Recognition

Each time a tutor and student complete a book or other learning goal, write notes to the tutor and student acknowledging the effort and quality of the work it took to accomplish these results.

Some other ways of giving recognition that you might want to try include:

- personal praise of the volunteer on the job
- letters and postcards of thanks
- recognition of a special contribution that a volunteer has made
- giving the volunteer a more complex assignment
- telling the board about a volunteer's work
- newspaper publicity and pictures
- special event award meetings.

## Developing Competence

1. There must be consideration of a volunteer's motivations, needs, and skills. This can be done through one-on-one placement conversations or group interviews.
2. Have a clear description of each volunteer job and the qualifications needed.
3. Supportive and careful placement with appropriate training is part of any effective volunteer management program and progress.
4. Clear definition of and agreement on service...outcomes are absolutely essential. Volunteer service must be measurable. Persons who volunteer want to know what is expected of them and why it is a necessary task.
5. They need regular feedback sessions on how things are going.
6. Opportunities for growth and change can be included to motivate volunteers as they become familiar with the volunteer job, the system, the mission of the system, and as they become more comfortable and more competent.
7. Ongoing learning opportunities are important. These may be formal seminars and workshops or informal on-the-job conferences. They may be chances to participate in sessions in-house, or in conferences and classes in the community, or even, if possible, outside of the community.
8. Opportunities to influence the system can also be made available. Volunteers in a particular program or service have useful ideas for improvements.

## A Final Note

Use these ideas to build on the ways in which you are already supporting your tutors. Think of this as a long-range plan, and work on it one step at a time. The volunteers who deliver the services of your literacy program must be valued, guided, and supported. Their effective and caring work will ensure the success of your program.

