What the VRPM Can Do for You

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In our previous articles, we've dealt with the unique ways volunteers can help SMPs and SHIPs and with why these volunteers need an effective management structure in which to operate. The conclusion from those two articles is straightforward – if you want to enjoy the benefits of volunteers, you need to build the support and infrastructure that makes their involvement possible.

This article will focus on the easiest way for an SMP or SHIP program to build the system for involving volunteers, with a specific discussion of the Volunteer Risk and Program Management (VRPM) policies that SMP and SHIP programs must implement.

A Little Background

We'll start with the acknowledgment that most SMPs and SHIPs tend to lack many of the management elements that are required for any kind of program – they have limited budgets, small staff, recruit young and inexperienced staff, etc. Most social services programs spend their time basically trying to do too much with too little, scrambling to invent ways to accomplish miracles despite their diminished capacities. And as the numbers of beneficiaries increase, these problems simply become more pressing. That social services programs perform as well as they do is a tribute to the imagination and dedication of those who manage them.

Volunteer programs are no exception to this general rule. Many programs don't have staff whose role is that of a coordinator of volunteers. Those that do often recruit employees who have no previous experience in working with volunteers and must resort to inventing volunteer management as they go along. Supervision of volunteers is often relegated to a "when we get around to it" priority.

In 2011 ACL chose to help address this problem by creating a set of principles – the VRPM policies – that would help provide a structure through which an SMP program might more easily build and operate an effective volunteer program. In 2016 these policies were revised and released to SHIP programs.

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on those they fund, the VRPM policies are actually a sophisticated road map for how to operate a successful volunteer program. They outline what you need to do to produce a volunteer workforce that is reliable, effective, and, ultimately, satisfied with the work they do.

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The 143 discrete VRPM policies cover all aspects of managing a volunteer program. Taken together, they constitute a comprehensive guide, offering to any organization that follows their precepts:

● Structure

The VRPM is an A-Z explanation of all the elements necessary to successfully involve volunteers. It begins with an overall explanation of who volunteers are and why they are involved, proceeds through ways to minimize risks inherent to volunteer involvement, and then covers in great details all the aspects of managing volunteers – from program infrastructure through role design to training to volunteer retention and recognition.

Throughout the policies is a concept that is integral to the VRPM – that an effective volunteer program requires certain actions by program staff that will create the environment and support necessary for successful volunteer involvement. The VRPM essentially outlines each of these elements and actions, detailing the structure under which volunteers will work and ensuring that both paid staff and volunteers understand it.

● Guidance

And while providing a managerial roadmap for staff, the VRPM also provides a similar roadmap to volunteers, both giving them an overview of what the program is doing to assist them and explaining why certain rules of behavior are necessary to ensure quality service to beneficiaries.

The second-longest section of the VRPM, "Volunteer behavior, performance and roles," is a detailed list of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable conduct for volunteers, ranging from dress codes to confidentiality to ethics to cultural sensitivity.

The longest section, "Performance Management," outlines how the program enforces these rules, guaranteeing fair treatment for volunteers who might be accused of misperformance.

Taken together these sections illustrate the unique nature of volunteer involvement, requiring a system that works both to satisfy the needs of the program and the needs of volunteers.

● Flexibility

Since SMP and SHIP programs vary greatly in size, staffing, and

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operation, the VRPM policies are designed to be customized to best fit the particular situation of any program.

Some VRPM policies are designated as "Required" by ACL, meaning that any SMP or SHIP must utilize them in their program. But each of these policies is written in a way that enunciates a general principle and then requires the SMP or SHIP program to develop its own mechanism for operationalizing the policy. To help with this, there is a section called "Suggested Procedures" following each policy that illustrates what needs to be done to make the policy real and workable.

Other VRPM policies are designated as "Recommended," and individual programs can decide whether these policies would work with the needs and capacity of their situations.

To make the VRPM even more customizable, SMPs and SHIPs have the option of adding additional policies on subjects they think are important, as long as the new policies don't conflict with the required ACL policies.

● Consistency

One of the major advantages of a set of policies such as the VRPM is that it creates a set of rules that are much more likely to be applied consistently over the years or over distances. Rather than having an individual staff person determine on the spot what they think would work best in any new situation they encounter, the VRPM provides an overall guide than can be applied in an even, fair, and consistent fashion, regardless of when or where a question arises.

While intended to protect volunteers, this system also makes it much easier for staff faced with tough decisions who are attempting to determine what a reasonable decision would be, often with no experience to use as a guide.

● Backup

Any program involving human beings will run into differences in opinion on what needs to be done and how it needs to be done. Arguments between staff and volunteers will happen, sometimes quite productively.

Occasionally, however, you will get a volunteer whose behavior is thought inappropriate by a staff person who confronts the volunteer, but when asked "why" such behavior won't be allowed eventually has to resort to the time-honored justification "because I say so."

While this might work with other paid staff, it tends not to work well with volunteers, whose ability to leave their jobs is a lot more flexible.

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The VRPM allows you to respond with a much more persuasive set of arguments:

- ☑ "This the same requirement in all SMPs/SHIPs across the country; it's not specific to you but applies to all volunteers."
- ☑ "This requirement is based on state-of-the-art volunteer management techniques."
- ☑ "This is required by our funder, the Administration for Community Living."

Sometimes it's nice to have backup.

Making This Work

Of course, all of the above advantages only accrue if you're willing to put in the work to read the VRPM policies, think through how they should be adjusted to best fit your situation and needs, and then educate staff and volunteers as to what they need to do to make the policies real.

Now you could decide to start from scratch and write your own set of rules and policies, but that is a whole lot of work. So, rather than view the VRPM as a set of rules imposed by ACL, the smarter thing to do is to view them as an opportunity to upgrade your system for volunteer involvement in the simplest and easiest way possible.

Consider this piece of advice: *"Why reinvent the wheel when you can steal the whole car?"*