

Overview of Volunteer Driver Involvement

Policies, Recruitment, Marketing, Screening, Training, Management, Risk Management, and Retention

Drivers often are referred to as “the heart and soul” of any transportation service. The reason is that, in addition to taking passengers from point A to point B, drivers play many other roles, such as friend, listener, communicator, and advocate. While programs that include paid drivers say that driver salaries constitute 50% or more of their operating expenses, volunteer driver programs say that volunteers are not free and require considerable resources for recruitment, training, and retention. Thus, efficient and effective driver recruitment, training, and retention are critical to any volunteer driver transportation program.

Volunteer Driver Policies Several policies related to volunteer drivers in transportation services for older adults that you might want to consider as you develop your risk management strategy for volunteer driver involvement are:

- developing standards for safe drivers and safe driving conduct
- developing specific criteria for selection and screening drivers
- providing driver training in defensive driving
- providing driver training for emergency measures
- providing driver training in passenger (especially older adult) treatment
- providing driver training for special vehicles
- ensuring regular maintenance and repair of service-owned vehicles
- securing insurance coverage for service owned and non-owned vehicles
- undertaking ongoing evaluation of drivers, vehicles, and service delivery

Volunteer Driver Recruitment Communities that have a history of supporting volunteer activities have much greater potential for recruiting volunteer drivers than do communities that have no such history. However, regardless of the community experience, volunteer drivers are not easy to recruit. In fact, there is a saying among volunteer driver program staff that “volunteer drivers are the hardest volunteers to recruit, but once you’ve got them, you’ve got them.”

Why is the recruitment of volunteer drivers such a challenge? Many people volunteer to drive in response to a request from a friend, an advertisement in the newspaper, a message in the church bulletin, an announcement on the radio or TV, or a presentation at a meeting. However, recruitment is not always that simple. Some people who are asked to be volunteer drivers give many excuses for not driving:

- a reluctance to use their own car
- unwillingness to drive people they don't know
- concern about risking the possibility of a crash
- concern about the cost for gas when spending their own money on gas
- time requirements for driving people
- fear about not knowing what to do in an emergency

Volunteer Driver Marketing The volunteer literature suggests that marketing the need for volunteers also is an important strategy related to recruitment. Several comments from volunteer drivers about “the best thing about being a volunteer driver” from the Beverly Foundation’s volunteer driver survey of 2004 may be helpful in thinking about the recruitment and marketing message. Consider the comments from managers below.

The best part of being a volunteer driver is...

- knowing you are helping those who depend on you to go to a doctor appointment, the grocery store, or a recreational activity.
- helping people remain independent.
- the satisfaction I derive from extending a helping hand to those who have nowhere else to turn.
- sincere appreciation reflected in the positive attitude and kind words of thanks from the passengers when they participate in the transportation program.
- the people you meet...especially those who live alone and enjoy talking about their family and their memories.
- being able to help others and give back a service to the community that is needed and so appreciated by the riders.
- the endless variety of challenging experiences and wonderful people encountered each and every day on the job.
- feeling that what I do is greatly appreciated by those whom I transport...and those I work for.
- feeling that perhaps I'm helping the parents of someone in a similar situation who can't provide for their parents as much care as they would like to.

Volunteer Driver Screening An important ingredient of volunteer recruitment includes developing criteria for screening prospective volunteer drivers. Screening criteria generally include: a) basic functions of the position, and b) the ability to perform the tasks required. Basic tools for screening volunteer drivers should include: a) a position description, b) application forms, c) face-to-face interviews, d) reference checks, e) driver licensing, insurance, and safety checks.

Volunteer Driver Training Volunteer management literature indicates that maintaining a well-trained, enthusiastic driving staff is key to the success of any volunteer transportation program. The guide points out two important features to remember when developing or managing a volunteer driver workforce: 1) all drivers, whether using agency vehicles or their own personal vehicles, should be appropriately trained to safely carry out their responsibilities, and 2) volunteer drivers should follow the same policies and procedures as paid drivers (if any) operating similar vehicles. According to the literature, such training applies to both the certainties and the uncertainties of the relationship. For example, equipping a driver to provide door-thru-door transportation might require training in

how to provide assistance in helping a passenger stand and walk, and what do when the passenger refuses assistance that is being provided. Some programs might also include older adult sensitivity training, emergency procedures training, organization information training, and behind-the-wheel driver training.

Volunteer Management The implementation kit includes a checklist for managing volunteer drivers. Many of the items were included, in a different form, in a survey of volunteer driver programs. You may find it interesting that the top five management practices of the respondents to the survey were: 1) completing an application form, 2) screening volunteer drivers, 3) providing volunteer drivers with a job description, 4) undertaking a driver's license check, and 5) undertaking a motor vehicle insurance check. According to survey responses, the finger print check, criminal record check, and driver record check were the least frequently used volunteer management practices.

Volunteer Driver Risk Management Managing volunteer drivers is important, however, having a plan for managing risk related to volunteer drivers may be just as important. A good risk management strategy can alleviate some safety concerns. A two-tiered strategy might be appropriate in which the sponsoring organization: 1) takes reasonable steps to control risks that threaten the health and safety of volunteer drivers who provide service, and 2) develops proper training and supervision strategies that provide protection to personnel from the service environment, the public, and the recipients.

Volunteer Driver Retention While recruitment and training may be a challenge, the "once you've got them, you've got them" experience suggests that retention appears to be a given. In the Beverly Foundation's volunteer driver study cited earlier, more than 50% of the volunteer drivers had more than 50 years of driving experience and more than 50% of the drivers had been volunteering to drive for four or more years. In one question on the Beverly Foundation survey, drivers selected three reasons they volunteered to drive: a) to help others, b) to give back to the community, and c) to do something meaningful. In a follow-up question related to satisfaction, drivers selected four satisfiers: a) helping people, b) feeling needed, c) getting to know riders, and d) donating time rather than money. These responses suggest that driver retention may be related to the realization of goals for volunteering to drive.

A good volunteer driver retention program also requires ongoing supervision, recognition, and evaluation. These activities are important for providing assurance to the organization that the drivers are performing as requested and expected, but they also can provide important communication and feedback to the volunteer drivers. Such communication, information sharing, and feedback is absolutely critical to the development and retention of a successful and dynamic volunteer driver program.