

What Makes A Great Volunteer Program?

**An Interview with
Mollie Tobias,
Volunteer Coordinator,
City of San Jose**



Photos courtesy of City of San Jose

Mollie Tobias caught the attention of CPRS at its 2013 Conference & Expo in San Jose. Tobias led the work to ensure our conference & expo had sufficient volunteers. She also shared her skill set by teaching a session called “Park Volunteers: Life Enhancers.”

Mollie Tobias has been an active leader in the volunteer sector for over 25 years. As the current Volunteer Coordinator for the City of San Jose Parks Division, she has been awarded top honors for her work in creating a successful volunteer program. Tobias’s previous volunteer experience includes Santa Clara County’s Project Cornerstone where she built key strategic relationships in the educational sector, facilitated study groups which focused on character building and led educational workshops for staff to share best practices. She enjoys creating and staffing volunteer positions because it allows everyone the opportunity to serve!

Tobias told us this: “Volunteerism is in the heart of most residents. Citizens want to help their community, yet do not know where or how to involve themselves. In some municipalities, volunteers in the parks is a new and innovative concept. Having residents weeding, mulching and trimming is a radical change from park staff overseeing everything. But today cutting-edge implementation of volunteerism is led by national organizations’ drive to create a culture of service. AmeriCorp volunteers commit a year of service to their community. Now residents can also commit time to their community too and what better place than their neighborhood park.”

CPRS

What unique ways will you use to manage volunteers for the next two years?

Tobias

Managing volunteers takes creativity and thinking ‘outside of the box’. Because volunteers have so many unique ideas and procedures, keeping everyone organized and on target is one key to success. We recently began using Volunteer Squared as our city-wide method of registering, scheduling and logging volunteers and their work hours. With software geared toward volunteers, there are many features of the program that help in the management of all our volunteers.

Communication with volunteers is essential. I find that using our volunteer software data reports helps motivate the volunteers. When they visually see an actual report with their hours graphed on it, it is a reflection of their work and they can see how they can improve their hours and task performance. Since it is easy to generate reports from volunteer data, this is an effortless and cost effective way to encourage volunteers!

I use the email feature on Volunteer 2 to facilitate our communication. I then also send my own email a couple of days later, via our Outlook email. Double email communication helps because everyone receives lots of emails and sometimes the emails move quickly off your screen... out of sight, out of mind! Thus far I have not received any complaints about receiving communications that are repetitive. I personally know that many times I open and read an email and fail to immediately act on it. Therefore I know how appreciative I am of reminder emails, so I hope my volunteers appreciate a reminder email too!

CPRS

What are some simple ways to lead and motivate volunteers?

Tobias

Supplying quality tools and gloves helps to recruit volunteers and make them feel that they are valued. In some organizations, volunteers must provide



their own supplies. Therefore some people will shy away from park volunteering, since they live in an apartment or condo and do not own yard tools. Hence, we supply whatever is needed, which makes it very easy for the volunteers to simply show up on-site and start working! By having clean, sharp and good quality tools, the volunteer projects are completed efficiently and with care, as the volunteer has the proper tools to get the job done.

Taking pictures is a great way to inspire volunteers, especially after a work break! Many times volunteers have lost a bit of their energy after they are given a short break to use the restroom, have a drink or to simply relax a bit. By gathering everyone together for a picture of the work group at the end of their break time, the volunteers energize each other. Everyone loves to see their picture in public, so taking a photo is a great way to motivate them to get up and moving again!

Thanking volunteers on Facebook is another fantastic way to show gratitude for the volunteer work, as well as getting a bit of marketing too! When snapping the picture, I make sure to explain that it will be posted on Facebook. When the volunteers see their photo posted, they will share it or like it, spreading the word about the volunteer program. It’s an easy and free way to let others know how much volunteers are appreciated!

A-Frame Signs: A first time volunteer may not be familiar with a work site, so the more information provided, the more likely the volunteer will feel welcomed, informed and happy to return. Using A-Frame signs that either give directions or announce who the volunteer group is, provides information to both the volunteer and other people who may be in the area. A-Frame signs are large so that everyone can see them, they know they are in the right area, or they learn which way to walk to find the location of the volunteer work. They can be customized with each volunteer groups’ name, which brings recognition to the group, cohesiveness to the volunteers, and information to other people in the area.

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Dealing with Accountability—do your volunteers ‘do’ what they say they will do?

Tobias

Volunteers are the basis of my job, so working with them in a positive light can make a big difference. While there are some volunteers that consistently under-perform, there are more that actually do what they say they will do, with energy and a positive attitude! I try to note the positive experiences so that overall, good feelings prevails!

When I encounter volunteers that fail to follow-through, I try a reminder



email first. Sometimes people just forget! I always try to remember that the volunteer is just that... a volunteer. If things have changed in their personal life, their volunteer assignment probably isn't their first concern. But if a volunteer continues to neglect their responsibilities, I then make it a point to call and talk about the issue directly with the volunteer. Usually, the volunteer— if still interested in helping— has some insights into what or why things aren't right. Talking through our needs and how they fit into the volunteers schedule/abilities sometimes solves the dilemma. If not, then it's time to change volunteer positions by offering other opportunities or discussing the need for a sabbatical. Taking a sabbatical is a good way to have a break without a negative overtone. Once a volunteer is away from their job for a longer period of time, they realize they are not committed and don't return. By giving positive options to unmotivated volunteers everyone remains happy, friendly and feelings are not compromised.

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What would be the advantages and barriers of using a volunteer in transition (someone unemployed or retired)?

Tobias

Good volunteers are worth every minute of training! If there is someone who is available and willing to work for our organization, I find a way to make sure they have the opportunity. If I can't personally use their skills, I pass them onto my colleagues. A volunteer who is between jobs or retired or in a similar situation usually has many professional skills that can be put to use. Their talent can be directed towards

many outstanding projects. A key advantage is that this person probably does not have many activities competing for his/her time, which is a bonus because then more time can be devoted to my project!

Barriers to bringing on a short term volunteer like this, is just that... the short-term nature of their time. Recruiting and training can become very expensive if this situation becomes the norm. Plus, if there is a good, long-term volunteer in a position, someone with similar skills may bypass my organization because they do not see a current need for their particular skills. Then, when the opening does occur, nobody is there to fill it. Many times someone who has been volunteering during their unemployment continues with the volunteer job because they enjoy it so much. Their time is reduced, but they still have the spirit and commitment to the program!

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What advice can you give to someone who just doesn't want to volunteer any longer but won't resign from the position?

Tobias

Volunteers are free labor, so I would do as much as I can to keep them happy. It takes more work and more money to recruit into a dying volunteer program, so working to keep volunteers happy and talking positively about the program to others in the community is very important.

I would try and create a new level of volunteerism: If you've volunteered for 500+ hours, you have the option of scheduling yourself just once a month instead of every week. This gives the volunteer the opportunity to stay connected—yet not be totally committed.

CPRS

How could community services/park and recreation departments "market" volunteerism as being worthwhile?

Tobias

Park volunteers: Save gasoline by Volunteering in your neighborhood! An environmentally efficient volunteer uses less gas, since work is done in their neighborhood! Pull the weeds! Hand weeding helps control poisons and other toxic chemicals from entering the earth/air.

Why join the gym? Volunteer in your local park! Come to the park and enjoy the fresh air, sunshine and peace of nature while getting a total body workout!

Volunteering in parks contributes to better health: Raking and weeding require bending and stretching which use a different set of muscles!

Mollie was interviewed by Leslie Fritz, CPRS Director of Education.

Additional strategies can be asked of Mollie, visit www.sanjoseca.gov/index.aspx?NID=590 and contact Mollie at 408/535-3588 or mollie.tobias@sanjoseca.gov

