Job Descriptions

“Recruiting before designing jobs is rather like trying to dance before the music begins. The possibility of ending up out of step is very good indeed.”

Marlene Wilson

Job descriptions are one of the volunteer administrator's most important tools. They are used throughout the volunteer management process. A job description is a definition of a volunteer's duties and responsibilities within the organization. Job descriptions are the building blocks of a volunteer program. They include information on the specific tasks or activities to be performed and serve as a measure by which successful performance will be judged. High performing organizations create job descriptions and then “hire” people with the skills and knowledge that are outlined in the job description. In effect, it is a contract to which both the organization and volunteer agree.

Every volunteer position must have a written job description. Job descriptions are typically written by performing a “job analysis,” examining the tasks and sequences of tasks necessary to perform the job. The analysis also looks at the knowledge and skills required to complete the various tasks required of the position. Creating and revising job descriptions should be a joint effort between the volunteer administrator and the individual who will be supervising the particular position.

Job descriptions form the anchor around which all other volunteer management activities occur. First, job descriptions help the organization “hire” the right person for the job and gives volunteers an idea of their role in the organization. Job descriptions also provide an organized means of creating continuity in a job from one volunteer to the next. When a change in volunteers occurs, a clearly defined written job description makes the transition much easier. The new volunteer knows exactly how they are expected to contribute to the organization. A job description should not be thought of as a final document that is set in stone, but should be updated as the organization grows and changes.

Job descriptions enhance organizational effectiveness in two ways: 1) Ensuring that the work carried out by the volunteer is aligned with the organization's mission and vision, and 2) Helping management clearly identify the most appropriate volunteer for the task.

Job descriptions also aid in recruitment, training, and evaluation of the volunteer. Job descriptions are important in regards to training because they list the specific skills and tasks required for the job.
The recruitment process can be influenced by job descriptions in the sense that you are more likely to "hire" the right person if you and the potential volunteer both clearly understand the job. The job description also aids in the evaluation process by letting the volunteer administrator compare the expectations they have for the volunteer with the volunteer's actual performance. Finally, job descriptions assist in defending the agency when the decision to terminate a volunteer is made. If a volunteer did not fulfill the responsibilities stated in the job description, it can be used as proof of poor performance.

The job description must include all of the necessary components to define the job as clearly as possible. Major items to include are:

- **Title and purpose** - a volunteer's identification. Give this as much prestige as possible.
- **Organization name** – if agency letterhead is used to print the job description, this will already be present.
- **Major Objectives** - overall goal of what should be accomplished in this position.
- **Duties and responsibilities** - as specifically as possible, list each task and responsibility of the job.
- **Qualifications and requirements** - what knowledge or skills are needed?
- **Lines of communication and relationships** - who will supervise the volunteer?
- **Orientation and training** – what training is expected or available to the volunteer?
- **Times needed and place of work** - should include hours of duty, days of the week, and where the volunteer is expected to perform the services.
- **Commitment required** - the minimum amount of time needed from the volunteer should be noted.
- **Contact** - list contact name and other important information (phone and fax numbers, e-mail, etc.)

Job descriptions are the most useful tool in the volunteer administrator’s tool chest. The primary objective of the job description is to help volunteers and volunteer administrators reach a mutual understanding about important details of a job in order to avoid potential problems. They are used in multiple phases of volunteer management, from recruitment to evaluation of volunteers. In the end, the precise format of the job description is not of importance. The effort should be focused toward making sure all the elements are covered, and more importantly, that the volunteer be given a well thought out and clearly defined purpose. A volunteer should never be recruited for a position that cannot be clearly and properly defined.