

# **DO YOU NEED A MASTER VOLUNTEER PROGRAM?**

Master Volunteer programs exist throughout many program areas in both large and small counties across the state. Master Volunteers are volunteers that receive special training in a technical area and are managed to help the local Extension office extend or improve its educational programs. Master Volunteers are only one type of volunteer used by Extension. Other Extension volunteers may have short-term assignments or very focused responsibilities, such as members of Program Councils.

Master Volunteers represent a well-trained, committed and motivated source of reliable manpower and expertise. With demands that Extension agents do more and more to address the priority issues in their community, volunteers are an obvious resource, but Master Volunteers are not necessary or appropriate for every Extension office. There is some trade-off required by the Extension agent who utilizes Master Volunteers. The agent needs to expend time organizing the training and managing the use of the volunteers. The most effective Master Volunteer programs are those where the agent identifies tasks for the volunteers to do that will relieve the agent of enough duties to justify the time required to organize and manage the team of volunteers.

If you can meet the demands of your constituents and satisfy taxpayers through other strategies, a Master Volunteer program may not be of benefit to you. Included in this discussion are some ideas to consider when you are exploring the question of whether a Master Volunteer team will help make you a more effective agent. Also included is a “question and answer” discussion of concerns about creating a Master Volunteer program and a list of questions to ask yourself as you consider developing a program.

Successful Master Volunteer programs currently exist in Extension for you to explore as you make your decision about developing a Master Volunteer program. Perhaps the greatest key to creating a successful program is objectively assessing the need for a Master Volunteer program in your county.

An agent should view volunteers as a way to multiply the current resources of the county office, reduce the time spent on the job, increase the agent’s value because more is accomplished for the community, and increase the agent’s flexibility to respond to emergencies or new opportunities as they occur.

Assess your basic educational program to identify important tasks which require agent time that could be done by volunteers. Some obvious ones are homeowner inquiries, public speaking engagements, and educational displays at home shows, conferences, trade shows and fairs. Horticulture, environmental issues, money management, parenting skills, agriculture are technical areas which Extension currently has Master Volunteer programs. Many technical topics are easily handled by trained volunteers, but the topics and issues have to be interesting and important enough to attract volunteers. It is reasonable to expect that an experienced, well-trained volunteer could instruct a novice gardener how to grow a zinnia or a 4-H’er on how to raise a rabbit, as well as an Extension agent.

Assess your constituency to identify populations that need more service. Examples may be inner city youth, parents of newborns and families in transition from welfare to work. Master Volunteers can bring “Agriculture into the Classroom” or neighborhood gardens to inner city youth. Another example is non-English speaking urban and rural residents. Volunteers who speak Spanish or other languages can outreach these sometimes isolated communities. Senior citizens in nursing homes is another difficult to serve group who would benefit by volunteers providing Extension Service educational services. Remember too, older youth may also represent a source of Master Volunteers with special abilities in educating Extension clientele of all ages. Not only will the agent better meet these groups’ legitimate needs for service, but will provide opportunities to showcase to local elected officials the capability of the Extension Service to meet the needs of an even bigger part of the community.

Identify your needs for volunteers and then examine the existing Master Volunteer models within the Extension Service to help you organize a structure that will work best. Start out with a basic structure and then use some of the time you save by utilizing volunteers, to develop new competencies to improve your utilization of volunteers.

A corp of volunteers in partnership with Extension Service to meet the needs of their community will make you more effective and your job more satisfying. A corp of volunteers will become some of the strongest advocates for your program.

### *Answers to Your Concerns About Organizing A Master Volunteer Program*

**Q. There aren’t any suitable volunteers available in my county.**

A. Successful volunteer programs operate throughout the state in every size county and every technical area you can imagine. Volunteers are attracted to volunteer opportunities that meet their need for technical information, community service, personal interaction and interest.

**Q. I don’t have the time to recruit, train and manage volunteers.**

A. If the Extension Service is going to remain competitive in the taxpayers quest for the most service for their dollar, we will have to meet the citizens’ expectations and stand out in a crowded field. Volunteers make it possible to meet constituents’ expectations for traditional educational programs and to respond to the new challenges that occur with regularity. An effective volunteer program may require new skills and structures but should not require extra time. Agents all over Texas have successfully turned traditional tasks over to volunteers.

**Q. I don’t know how to assess my job in order to identify tasks for which volunteers could be prepared and would want to do.**

A. Examining models that are related to the topic you are considering and reviewing the management manuals for the various Master Volunteer programs will help you assess your job. Most processes start by breaking your job down by components. Chart the information you want to provide, the audience you want to reach, and the time it takes to do it. Consider the audiences you need to reach that volunteers could more likely reach by their location, time of availability or acceptance as a peer. Also consider the types of requests you receive frequently that are not your major program thrust or primary concern in your program plans which well-trained volunteers could handle and free your time for priority program responsibilities.

**Q. I don't know how to recruit, train, and organize volunteers.**

A. Models, training and technical assistance exist to teach you the competencies necessary to recruit, train and organize a volunteer group that meets your needs.

**Q. My constituents expect professional, personal service that only I can deliver.**

A. Constituents expect and deserve accurate and responsive service. It is arrogant and usually incorrect to believe that people will only accept one service delivery model. They also appreciate effective use of their tax dollars and understand the limitations of a 24-hour day. Constituents all over Texas have accepted changes in the way educational programs are delivered. Some hard to reach audiences are more receptive to peer education than other models.

**Q. You cannot trust volunteers to deliver programs, as well as agents.**

A. There are hundreds of examples of programs that are effectively delivered by Extension Service trained and managed volunteers. There are probably some tasks best reserved for the agent but there is a long list of tasks that well-managed volunteers are effectively delivering. Perfect educational programs are not possible or necessary. Good training will prepare volunteers well for the challenges of Extension service. Many individuals seeking technical assistance from the Extension Service seek it at basic levels well within the competency of experienced, trained volunteers.

**Q. If volunteers do my job it reduces my value.**

A. Volunteers cannot do a job without training and management. The Extension Service faculty has traditionally been a respected educational entity in organizing and managing volunteers. The truth is that agents who manage volunteers well deliver more service to the community and become more valued than those who try to meet the challenges of the community's expectation for Extension educational programs without help.

**Q. My community and the Extension Service administration have been content with my job performance and I never use volunteers.**

A. This may be true today, but you are being asked constantly to do more with less. As tax dollars become more in demand, taxpayers will become more demanding of all agencies competing for those dollars. In your day-to-day contact with your constituents, you will feel the higher expectations, and so will your administration from the legislature and other sources.

**Q. Computer technology will make it unnecessary to make as many time-expensive personal contacts as in the past and so I won't need volunteer help.**

A. Computer literate volunteers help many agents utilize the potential of the new technology. Computer communications and other new technologies will help meet part of the growing demands on your time but probably not all of it.

**Q. Liability and child abuse questions are too dangerous to consider an expanded use of volunteers.**

A. This is an evolving issue within all of Extension for paid employees and volunteers. Volunteers organized by County Extension Agents have the same coverage for liability as employees of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service. The future may involve background checks by law enforcement agencies for Extension employees and volunteers with youth. For now when it comes to youth work, a good policy might include a requirement for more than two volunteers to be present whenever working with youth.

**Q. Who will do the training for my Master Volunteer group? Specialists already are hard to get to come to my county.**

A. Most programs use a combination of Extension Specialists, Agents and local experts. Master Volunteer programs are usually considered a priority by Specialists because of the multiplier effect. Videos and other distance learning technology are utilized in more and more programs. Multi-county training arrangements have been especially successful for counties only needing a few volunteers in a topic area. Counties considering a new program that are geographically close to a county with an established program can often work out an arrangement to reserve a few slots in the established training course.

### *Questions to Consider When Determining if You Need Master Volunteers*

If you answer yes to more than a few of these questions you probably would benefit by a Master Volunteer Program.

1. Do you work more hours than you would like?
2. Do you answer more homeowner phone calls on horticulture and other topics than you would like?
3. Do you lack enough time to respond to new challenges and new opportunities as they occur?
4. Could you use more program funding to operate programming by which you feel your constituents would benefit?
5. Do you answer the same questions over and over for you constituents?
6. Do you wish you had access to more expertise and time to do everything you want with computer technology?
7. Do you serve all the different segments of the population within your county equally?
8. Do you have non-English speaking groups in your county that you could better serve with help from an expert in that language?
9. Do you have topics for which you do not know enough to meet your constituents' needs?
10. Do you enjoy teaching well-motivated individuals?
11. Are you organized enough to analyze your job and identify tasks that others could handle?
12. Are you secure enough in your knowledge and work habits to have well-motivated volunteers work with you?
13. Do you enjoy change and are you proud of your ability to adjust to new situations?
14. Do you believe that if other agents can make use of volunteers to teach, research and fund raising, you could too?

15. Are you proud of your ability to get along with people?
16. If you restructured your job to your own specifications, could you do more for your constituents?
17. Do you enjoy it when your youth and adult students have impact on community needs with their knowledge?
18. Are you a good leader?
19. Do you believe enough in what you do to ask others to help do it?
20. Do you believe one of the things that has made Extension great is our ability to get the job done with whatever resources are available?
21. Do you believe volunteers can be as well-motivated and proficient as a paid staff person?
22. Do you believe one of the things that makes America great is that citizens are willing to volunteer for important community service?
23. Does the community you live in have retired folks and working people who are interested in filling their spare time with volunteer service?
24. Have you been curious about how your fellow agents make use of volunteers to meet their professional needs?

**Lead Author:** *Dr. Calvin Finch, County Extension Agent - Horticulture*  
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