Program evaluation report for: Nevada Child Seekers

Nori Evans
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Raymond Keeler
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Lisa Pletz
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations

Part of the Policy Design, Analysis, and Evaluation Commons, Public Administration Commons, Social Policy Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Repository Citation
http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations/825
Program Evaluation Report for:

Nevada Child Seekers

Prepared by
Nori Evans, Raymond Keeler, and Lisa Pletz
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
11 May 2007

Christopher Stream, PhD
PUA-791
Spring 2007
Executive summary

A program evaluation of the Nevada Child Seekers (NCS) organization was conducted from October 2006 through April 2007. The evaluation consisted of a qualitative assessment of the organization's volunteer recruitment and retention program. The evaluation was conducted by performing a series of interviews of staff and by conducting a web-based survey of available volunteers. Information gathered from the interviews and surveys was compared with benchmarking data from multiple scholarly and community sources.

As a result of the assessment, the evaluation team makes the following major recommendations:

1. Routine events, such as NetSmartz, should be utilized for soliciting volunteers
2. Fliers requesting volunteers should be more widely distributed, especially to religious and community service organizations.
3. Existing volunteers should be relied on more heavily to recruit new volunteers.
4. The on-line volunteer process should be refined, but not relied on as the primary source of volunteers.
5. Attempts should be made to identify and utilize the available skills of current volunteers.
6. Communication should be more frequent through the volunteer application process.
7. A master calendar of events should be developed and distributed to volunteers several months in advance.
1 Introduction

In partial fulfillment of a Master of Public Administration degree, students of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, conducted a program evaluation on the Nevada Child Seekers organization. This evaluation occurred over a period of six months from October 2006 through April 2007.

1.1 Program Overview

NCS is a statewide, nonprofit organization working to reunify families when a child has been abducted or becomes missing. The organization is small, with five paid staff members, a part-time intern, and a governing board of 12 directors. NCS was formed in 1998, in response to the social problem of missing and abducted children in Nevada. The organization is funded by both public and private grants.

NCS’s goal is reflected in a statement in the program’s public service brochure, “Protecting children is what we do. Providing help, hope, and support is why we’re here” (NCS, 2006). This goal is reflected in the three-fold mission of NCS. The first objective is to assist in the process of locating missing, abducted, and runaway children. The second is to act as an advocate of those children. The third purpose is to act as a preventative influence against the conditions in the community that create the need for the first two elements.

NCS performs two basic functions in the effort to meet its goals. The first is to assist in the child recovery process. The second is to train teachers, children, and other members of the community about missing and abducted children’s issues.
To meet the first function, NCS employs a full-time caseworker who works directly with the families and legal guardians of missing children. This caseworker also works with police detectives; the process is generally initiated when the detective contacts the caseworker directly or refers the family of the missing child to NCS. Additionally, the caseworker works in tandem with other entities, such as national child safety organizations and out-of-state law enforcement agencies.

A higher-profile component of the child recovery function is the NCS network of citizen search volunteers. NCS’s Volunteer Search Force “stands ready to assist local law enforcement agencies in their efforts to search for and locate missing children.” This group of citizens is trained by “local law enforcement and Nevada Child Seekers staff in basic search functions and procedures, utilization of volunteers during a search, contacting people during a search, and evidence recognition and preservation” (NCS, 2006).

In meeting the second function, NCS has developed an active partnership with the Clark County School District to train individuals who then instruct both students and other volunteer trainers. NCS also provides the materials for conducting training classes. This Train the Trainer program is necessary because the number of children that NCS can educate directly is extremely limited.

1.2 The Problem

The evaluation team met with the NCS Director, Stephanie Parker, on October 13, 2006. At that meeting, Ms. Parker indicated an interest in focusing the evaluation on NCS’s volunteer force. Because citizen volunteers make up over 95% of NCS’s available workforce, Ms. Parker
recognized the importance of properly structuring any volunteer program. She expressed a
desired that the evaluation focus on the process of recruiting new volunteers and keeping existing
volunteers engaged.

2 Evaluation/Assessment Design

2.1 Focus of Evaluation

The current evaluation limited its scope to an assessment of NCS’s recruitment,
utilization, and retention of volunteers. No attempt was made to assess the effectiveness of
NCS’s various efforts in achieving its stated goals and objectives. Because the needs of the
organization vary with time, no attempt was made to determine the specific skill sets needed by
volunteers, except for those cases wherein specific skills are required to implement the
recommendations of the evaluation.

The evaluation was intended to be a qualitative assessment of program implementation.
While some statistical data could have been collected, the overall effectiveness of the volunteer
program would be difficult to quantify. However, as will be discussed in more detail in section
four, the team does recommend that metrics be established to allow for quantitative assessments
and trending in the future.

2.2 Evaluation Plan

A preliminary program evaluation plan (Appendix I) was prepared on September 13,
2006. A revised and refined plan (Appendix II) was prepared and presented on December 8,
2006. These plans were used to guide the evaluation. However, by design, the plans were
loosely structured to allow for flexibility in implementation so that the evaluation could adapt to
information obtained throughout the process.
As employed, the plan was divided into three major components. The first was to assess the needs of the organization. The second was to assess the as-found condition of the organization and its volunteer program. The third was to compare the needs and the as-found condition to benchmarking data.

2.2.1 Assess organizational needs

To assess the organization’s needs, the team planned to conducted personal interviews with all current NCS staff members, the Executive Director, and a limited number of volunteers. Individuals charged with implementing programs often are keenly aware of the limitations or problems with programs. They tend to know how things are supposed to function, and how, in practice, they actually do function. By interviewing the Executive Director and other staff members, the team would be able to identify the goals of the organization and any recognized impediments to achieving those goals.

Interviews with volunteer workers were intended to assess the needs of the organization from a non-staff member perspective. While staff members may be acutely aware of a program’s limitations, there is a tendency to focus on those aspects of the program that directly impact the staff member or their ability to perform their organizational role. It was therefore necessary to interview volunteers to determine if there were any pressing needs that were known to the volunteers, but unknown or unrecognized by the staff members.

Late in the process, plans were made to augment the staff member and volunteer interviews with at least one interview with a member of the Board of Directors. Inclusion of information from a Board member was necessary in order to determine if the direction that the staff was taking was in harmony with the goals and aspirations of the Board.
2.2.2 Assess as found condition

In addition to assessing organizational needs, interviews of the NCS Executive Director, Board President, staff members, and volunteers were planned for assessing the as-found condition. In order to reduce the time burden on respondents, these interviews were to be conducted in conjunction with the organizational needs interviews.

In addition to the interviews, an anonymous volunteer survey was planned (Appendix C). This survey was to be administered via the web utilizing automated data collection capabilities. Given time and other resource constraints, the web survey allowed the evaluation team to gather information from numerous respondents efficiently, accurately, and anonymously.

2.2.3 Benchmarking data

Although Nevada Child Seekers is a unique organization, with needs particular to its mission, its need for recruiting and engaging volunteers is by no means unusual among nonprofits. Many nonprofit organizations rely heavily on volunteer workers. As such, a great deal of research, resulting in a large body of information, has been conducted on volunteerism. This research includes studies on why people volunteer, how much they volunteer, how they are recruited, and demographic data about the volunteers themselves.

A key component of the evaluation plan was to conduct a literature search of the available data on volunteerism. No attempt was to be made to identify a single organization that could serve as an ideal for NCS, but rather to identify best practices of other organizations that could be used for benchmarking and identifying areas of potential improvement.
2.3 Evaluation/Assessment method

The evaluation was planned to be a qualitative comparison of the as-found condition of NCS with the best practices identified from the benchmarking studies. Although quantitative information on the number of NCS volunteers, their length of service, their level of activity, etc..., would be collected and used for comparison against national and state-wide statistics from other organizations, the primary purpose of the quantitative data was to provide insight into the functionality of the qualitative process.

3 Evaluation/Assessment Process

3.1 Assessing Organizational Needs

In accordance with the evaluation plan, the team conducted interviews of staff members, the Executive Director, President of the Board of Directors, and volunteers, in an effort to determine the organization's needs. For purposes of practicality, these assessment activities were conducted as an iterative process in parallel with the as-found assessment activities, which will be discussed in section 3.2.

3.1.1 Staff Interviews

All members of the NCS staff employed during the interviewing stage of the evaluation, both in Reno and Las Vegas, were interviewed. The interviews revealed that most staff members recognized a need for more volunteers, but in general, did not have a clear vision of what they wanted the volunteers to do or what specific skills the volunteers needed to bring to the organization. The general strategy was to recruit whomever they could and to utilize whatever skills the volunteers brought with them.
3.1.2 Board of Directors Interview

The team also conducted a telephone interview with the President of the Board of Directors, Lee Haney, on April 11, 2007. In the interview, Ms. Haney indicated that the primary areas of focus for the NCS Board of Directors over approximately the last year have been "housecleaning" and improving the financial stability of the organization. Although the recruitment and retention of volunteers was important, it was primarily an implementation issue that had been delegated to the Executive Director.

However, even though the Board had delegated much of the responsibility, it had not completely abdicated its responsibility to recruit volunteers. Past experience had shown that having Board members who were leaders in other organizations resulted in an increase in volunteers from those external organizations. As a result, the Board had actively been seeking to diversify itself, and thereby increase volunteerism, by recruiting Board members from other community organizations.

3.1.3 Volunteer Interviews

A small number of volunteers were interviewed to assess their understanding of NCS's organizational needs. In general, the volunteers were unaware of any specific needs that the organization had that could be filled by volunteer workers, other than the volunteer search force.

3.2 The As-Found Assessment & Findings (Assessing Organizational Realities)

3.2.1 Staff Interviews

In February 2007, the team met with the staff of the Las Vegas office of NCS. Each staff member was individually interviewed about their roles and responsibilities within the
organization. The volunteer program was discussed with each of them, looking for individual experiences, observations, and potential obstacles that would impede a successful implementation of recommendations.

The session was successful. The team was surprised to learn that, though there is a volunteer coordinator on staff, all staff members actively take part in recruiting volunteers when the opportunity arises. The staff does recognize that a significant amount of time is spent on fundraising, and that there are not many individual donors contributing to the organization. This, in turn, impacts other activities, as one staff member's responsibilities may shift while the executive director is participating in a fund raising event.

The volunteer coordinator has the responsibility of coordinating the volunteers and their activities. She utilizes email as the primary form of communication to them. An email is sent out several weeks prior to an event requesting volunteers.

She did identify a few problems with this method. Getting the volunteers to respond to their email requests presents problems at times. In addition, the volunteer's work schedule also creates a potential obstacle. A common reason cited to an inability to participate in a function is a conflict with work schedules. We have provided a few options to help overcome these obstacles in our recommendations.

### 3.2.2 Volunteer Surveys and follow-up interviews

As part of the data collection process, the team issued surveys that were sent out to all volunteers. A blanket email was sent out by the volunteer coordinator, explaining to the volunteers the purpose of the survey and evaluation. This method produced a bias response.
Volunteers were then self-selected. The team members selected the survey questions, collectively, with focus on a qualitative response that would help us identify specific patterns, problems, or provide insight to why they choose to volunteer for this organization.

Though only a small amount of volunteers replied, we received input that was helpful in understanding the background of the volunteers, their connection with the organization, and ways to help increase the participation of the volunteers.

### 3.2.3 Field observations

One means the Nevada Child Seekers relies on heavily for recruiting new volunteers is the internet. In accordance with the evaluation plan, one team member experienced the internet recruitment process first hand by going online to complete the volunteer application process.

While attempting to complete the application online, the team member, Nori Evans, encountered an error with the active server page that NCS uses for the online submission of applications. The web server program repeatedly prevented her from submitting the completed application. Since the application could not be submitted electronically via the web, Nori printed out the completed application and submitted it via the regular mail.

After submitting the application through the mail, she received no notification that the application had been received, nor any indication as to when she might expect a response regarding the approval or disapproval of her application. Approximately 7 weeks passed before she received any information back from the NCS. That communication came in the form of a telephone call from the NCS Volunteer Coordinator informing her that her application had been approved.
Since that communication, she has received no contact from the NCS, despite the fact that NCS has several activities planned over the next few months.

Two team members, Lisa and Nori, attended an event sponsored by the NCS. This observation was performed to witness the interaction of the staff members with the community. In addition, we were able to see the importance in some of the services they provide, specifically education and prevention.

The event was called NetSmartz, a program that teaches adults about Internet safety. It was held at a local elementary school. The program was delivered to a very small crowd of parents. It was an excellent program.

Our team member, Lisa, brought a potential volunteer with her. After inquiring about the volunteer program to the volunteer coordinator, no attempt was made on behalf of the NCS to bring this individual on as a volunteer. We were later told that they didn’t have any applications with them. However, as identified in our research, the most effective form of recruiting is asking. This was a missed opportunity.

3.3 Benchmarking data

3.3.1 How were benchmarking data selected

Because of the overwhelming volume of data available on volunteerism, not all available data or methods were used, or even considered. Benchmarking data were collected in concurrence with the assessment activities documented above. As conditions or areas of potential concern were identified in the assessment process, applicable, relevant data were compiled and used for the qualitative assessments.
Although many information sources were examined, the team relied most heavily on data selected from two primary sources: Independent Sector and the Corporation for National and Community Service. Independent Sector is a coalition of nearly 600 non-profit charities, foundations, and corporations. As “America’s leading coalition of charities, foundations, corporations, and individuals” (Independent Sector, 2007a, p.1), Independent sector regularly compiles data on volunteerism throughout the United States. The Corporation for National and Community Service is an agency of the United States Government that, “in partnership with the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau, ... produced a detailed breakdown of America’s volunteering habits and patterns by state and region” (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007, p. 2). These two sources were singled out because they present some of the most recent findings on a wide spectrum of volunteerism data.

3.3.2 Effective volunteer recruitment methods

Nearly two decades worth of surveys by Independent Sector have consistently shown that “being asked to give has a strong and significant association with giving behavior” (Independent Sector, 2002, p. 44). In a national survey conducted in 2001, it was found that among people who had performed volunteer service over the previous year, 71.3% had been asked to volunteer, whereas 66.6% of people who did not volunteer had never been approached (Independent Sector, 2002, p. 68).

Some researchers have investigated the power of persuasion, and the use of media, to influence people to volunteer (Clary and Snyder, 1993). However recent studies have shown that there is not a significant difference in the perceptions towards charitable organizations, or the need for them, between volunteers and non-volunteers. These statistics suggest that there is little
need for non-profits to engage in elaborate campaigns designed to persuade people to volunteer; they only need to proactively ask people to volunteer.

While conducting the as-found assessments, it was observed that NCS relies heavily on internet recruitment of volunteers. The team therefore specifically compiled data on the effectiveness of internet recruiting. The results showed that in the year 2000, even though approximately 73% of all volunteers had internet access, only 3.3% of volunteers learned about a volunteering opportunity via the world wide web, or responded to a solicitation over the internet. Of those that had internet access, only 13.2% used the internet to learn about volunteer opportunities (Independent Sector, 2002, p. 41).

Although patterns of internet usage have undoubtedly changed since the data above were compiled, they nevertheless strongly suggest that the internet should not be the predominant means relied on for recruiting volunteers.

3.3.3 Volunteer sources

Through interviews with the NCS staff and volunteers, the team noted that, even though the web was the most visible means employed by NCS for recruiting volunteers, a sizable portion of the NCS volunteers learned of volunteer opportunities through other organizations, such as the Metropolitan Police Department or the local telephone company. Therefore information was collected on the types of organizations that are more likely to be fruitful sources of volunteers.

The results of the studies showed that religious organizations were a strong source for potential volunteers. Research conducted over the last two decades has consistently shown that that “...affiliation with a formal religious organization is one of the strongest predictors of

To a lesser degree, volunteers are also much more likely to be affiliated with a non-religious organization, such as fraternal orders, than non-volunteers (Independent Sector, 2002, p. 84).

These statistics suggest that local church groups and community organizations which NCS already works with to conduct community activities such as NetSmartz, and finger printing, are a prime source for potential volunteers.

4 Results & Recommendations

After completing the research, conducting the interviews, and finalizing the results of the surveys, the evaluation team ahs compiled a list of recommendations to complement the current recruitment methods of the NCS.

4.1 Recruitment Techniques

In regards to the methods of recruitment, Internet recruitment was found to be less effective and should not be the major focus for the organization. This is due to many factors, including: many people don’t have Internet access, technical difficulties that occur with the web process, and most importantly we have discovered that most people want to be asked directly.

Throughout the survey process, the evaluators identified a common theme amongst the volunteers. Volunteers tend to have friends or know of others who would also like to volunteer. Therefore, NCS should rely more heavily on current volunteers for recruiting other volunteers.
Another method commonly used by many successful non-profit organizations is the use of fliers. This can be implemented very inexpensively using a computer and word processor.

In keeping with the findings in section 3.3.3 above, it is recommend that these fliers be distributed to religious and charitable organizations. They can also be posted at libraries, schools, civic centers, and many other community centers around town.

4.2 Recruitment Opportunities

The NCS has many opportunities to attract volunteers. They have routine events that involve interaction with the community. These are prime opportunities to ask for volunteers. NCS personnel should carry volunteer applications at all times.

In addition to attracting volunteers at community events, volunteers were identified through networking with other organizations. This was identified in several responses throughout the surveys, volunteers learned about the NCS through their organization or an organization that they were involved with.

4.3 Utilizing Volunteers

The current volunteer pool consists of many talented, skilled individuals. Many volunteers would like to assist the organization in other areas in which they can utilize their specific skills and talents. To optimize this opportunity, we recommend initiating a skills survey of all the volunteers. Once identified, certain tasks can be delegated to the volunteers, which in turn will provide the staff with more time to concentrate on organizational duties. The majority of survey respondents are willing to work more hours than they are currently asked to do.
There are current volunteers with great leadership and organizational skills. A volunteer should be appointed to be a volunteer manager and recruiter. This individual(s) can be responsible for getting volunteers from within the group to carry out the organization’s activities, attending board meetings if deemed necessary, and being the link between the volunteers and the staff.

It is important to keep the experience of the volunteers positive. This will keep them coming back and also lead to their evolution from volunteers to volunteer leaders (Volunteers-How to Get Them, How to Keep Them, 1999, pg 24).

The final recommendation is to employ a master calendar of events. With the hectic lifestyles that many people live, they need to have adequate time to adjust their family, work, and social schedules so they can attend the activities of the NCS. Suggested by several volunteers is the use of a calendar. Many events are routine events, and once a schedule is set, volunteers should have access to all event times and locations. This could lead to more participation from the volunteers.

4.4 Solicit volunteers from other organizations

Those individuals who are interested in volunteering their time and talents to one organization are often willing and interested to do so for others. This provides NCS with an opportunity to recruit volunteers from organizations that may have similar missions or functions as NCS. There are also organizations that have a “service” focus that may provide NCS with access to those who are willing to volunteer for a specific purpose or event with the expectation that the service to NCS will give them “credit” for participation with the other organization.
Those groups that come to mind are the Boy and Girl Scouts, Key Clubs, and many religious organizations.

Recruiting volunteers in this way also provides NCS the opportunity to “partner” at specific events and functions with those groups whose missions are similar to NCS. For example, after working with a Masonic lodge at a child fingerprinting session, the Masons were able to substitute for NCS at another fingerprinting event. By formalizing the relationship, NCS may be better able to meet its mandate of protecting children.

4.5 Target specific types of volunteers

NCS recognizes that Spanish-speaking volunteers are needed to provide non-English speaking families in the state with the ability to communicate essential information to both NCS and the authorities when dealing with the crisis of locating a missing child. Spanish speakers would also be beneficial when conducting preventative education sessions, so that both children and parents for whom English is a second language will have the tools and skills necessary to protect those children from unsafe or predatory situations. Identifying churches and other civic organizations where there is a heavy population of Spanish speaking adults, and then visiting these groups to request volunteer assistance may provide NCS with needed resources. This practice would likely be effective to recruit volunteers when searching for other foreign-language speakers or groups with differing cultural norms. The key is to identify NCS’s needs.
5 Conclusions

The Nevada Child Seekers organization’s recruitment and retention of volunteers may be enhanced by implementing the following seven broad recommendations:

1. Routine events, such as NetSmartz, should be utilized for soliciting volunteers
2. Fliers requesting volunteers should be more widely distributed, especially to religious and community service organizations.
3. Existing volunteers should be more heavily relied on to recruit new volunteers.
4. The on-line volunteer process should be refined, but not relied on as the primary source of volunteers
5. Attempts should be made to identify and utilize the available skills of current volunteers
6. Communication should be more frequent through the volunteer application process
7. A master calendar of events should be developed and distributed to volunteers several months in advance.

6 Special Thanks

The evaluation team would like to extend thanks to the entire Nevada Child Seekers organization, including staff, volunteers, and board members, for their assistance and patients. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Vic Schultze whose idea it was to conduct the evaluation and from whom we obtained preliminary background information on the organization.
7 References


8 Additional Resources


9 Appendices

I. Preliminary Program Evaluation Plan

II. Program Evaluation Plan

III. Program Evaluation Schedule

IV. NCS Volunteer Recruitment Form

V. Volunteer Survey

VI. NCS Evaluation Preliminary Briefing

VII. NCS Evaluation Status Update Briefing

VIII. NCS Evaluation Final Briefing