

Having Candidates Volunteer at Your Agency

One of the best methods to help candidates understand the needs of people who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness is through service learning. Service learning gives candidates an opportunity to better understand the need for such services by engaging the issue of homelessness. It also provides an opportunity for individual citizens, service providers, and advocates to speak directly with their representatives, as well as to educate the candidates on issues important to those citizens, service providers, and advocates.

The following is a brief guide to help make candidate volunteering worthwhile.

1. Select a Project

The first step is to select a community service project that will interest the candidate. For example, if the candidate is interested in housing issues, you may want to set up a project to renovate low-income housing. Perhaps the candidate would be interested in volunteering in the day-to-day operations of your organization like serving food.

2. Contact the Candidate

Call the candidate's campaign headquarters and ask to speak with the person in charge of the candidate's scheduling. Let them know who you are, whom you are affiliated with, and what you have in mind.

Helpful hints:

- Let the scheduler know that you do not want to make more work for them. This is an opportunity for the candidate to visit a great project and gain some media exposure.
- Be flexible with the dates and times so that you can accommodate the candidate's schedule.
- Make sure that you put something in writing to the campaign office. Send them a letter right after your phone conversation.
- Request and obtain a written confirmation.
- Once you have received a verbal or written confirmation, you can begin to plan the logistical details of the project.

3. Plan the Project

Contact the location where the service project is going to take place, gather all of the necessary materials, and organize a group of individuals to take part in the service project.

Helpful hints:

- Start the event between 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. to get maximum media coverage.

- Make sure to let the site know that the media may be attending. Often homeless shelters or soup kitchens do not want their guests on camera without advance notice. Discuss the appropriateness of having the guests on television or interviewed by a newspaper reporter.

4. Notify the Media

Any media coverage of the candidate's volunteerism serves both your organization and the candidate. For this reason, it is a good idea to coordinate with the campaign's media people to publicize the event since they will have many different media contacts and resources.

Whether or not you are working with the candidate's campaign, write a news advisory or media release that can be faxed or emailed out two to three days before the event. Include brief directions to the service location for the public wanting to attend. See the sample news release on p. 67.

Helpful hints:

- Asking the name of the reporter who will be covering the story is both a way to confirm coverage and obtain the media contact so that you may contact him/her before the event.

5. Finalize Details

Make sure that you call the candidate's office the day before the event to remind her or him of the commitment. It is also a good idea to contact the location in order to remind them of the activity planned for the next day and to contact and remind those who will be helping you out as well.

6. Hold the Event

Arrive early and have everything set up and ready to go. Once the candidate has arrived, greet him or her, orient the candidate as to the plan for the service project, and then begin. Enjoy the day!

7. Follow Up

At the end of the day it is important to debrief with all participants about the success of the day. One idea is to have a written evaluation form already prepared ahead of time. This is important to give closure to the experience and to find out what you can do better next time. Finally, it is important to send a thank you letter to the candidates for participating. The letter should also include a recap of the day, sample news clippings of the event, quick facts about homelessness in your community, and an encouragement to support pending anti-poverty legislation.