

Case Study: Engaging Skilled Volunteers to Meet Organizations' Needs

Pro Bono Consultant Program

Montgomery County, Maryland

The Pro Bono Consultant Program, based in the Montgomery County Volunteer Center in Montgomery County, Maryland, uses a searchable database to help volunteers who want to serve and nonprofits that need help find one another. In some cases, it helps organizations realize that through this program, they can receive free professional service.

The program has many examples of people over age 55 who are donating their professional skills to nonprofits.

- **Murray Blank**, who previously worked with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, has assisted Community Ministries of Rockville with a housing proposal.
- **Diane Martin** applied her technology skills to help the Gandhi Brigade revise its proposal process.
- **John Gaffney**, who prior to retirement worked in statistics and electrical engineering, developed a study to quantify the impact Interplay Company Band was having on its participants, which helped the band obtain funding.
- **Judge Bruce Birchman** is a retired federal administrative law judge who provides a legal perspective that helps investigators with the Office of Consumer Protection – Montgomery County resolve cases.

Program Overview

The Pro Bono Consultant Program originally began for those over 55 with the idea that people who had just retired and had a professional career behind them were looking to contribute to their community in a meaningful way. The program originated as a way to help people in that demographic find various opportunities to volunteer, while helping find volunteers for nonprofits and government entities that needed professional help.

While the Pro Bono Consultant Program no longer focuses exclusively on retirees, it does still work with a number of people who have retired, such as retired accountants, retired association executives, and retired grant writers who are interested in using their professional skills to give back to the community. Generally, the projects are short term and outcome based. At times, people will start out as a Pro Bono Consultant and end up on the organization's board or heavily involved in other ways.

The program is based in the Montgomery County Volunteer Center, which is run and funded by Montgomery County. While there is paid staff, most of the people who work in the Volunteer Center are skilled volunteers.

Process

Many of the consultants discover and apply for the program online. The Pro Bono Consultant Program then finds a project that would be a good fit for each individual's skills and interests. Nonprofits can list any kind of opportunity on the Pro Bono Consultant searchable database, and they can find consultants

within the database. The program helps facilitate these connections and does some recruiting on both ends.

After the consultants are placed at organizations, the Pro Bono Consultant Program will check in every so often and offer help to keep the project moving forward. As the Pro Bono Consultant Program is serving both the consultants and the nonprofits, it strives to ensure that everyone who wants to volunteer finds a project and every nonprofit gets needed help.

Challenge

There can be challenges with matching volunteers and organizations, as some nonprofits are not ready to use volunteers in a professional manner, do not have the time to think it through, or are concerned volunteers may not show up.

The Pro Bono Consultant Program helps organizations realize that through this program, they can receive free professional service. The program also works to get a commitment from volunteers to take this as seriously as they would a paid position.

Experiences of Pro Bono Consultants

Community Ministries of Rockville

Murray Blank previously had worked in multifamily housing at the Philadelphia office of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. After retiring, he began working with the Pro Bono Consultant Program and in 2012 assisted Community Ministries of Rockville with a housing proposal.

When reviewing requests for proposals regarding Section 8 subsidized vouchers, Mr. Blank gave Community Ministries of Rockville his insights on issues, concerns, or questions that needed to be answered before the organization worked on the application. Mr. Blank also reviewed and commented on various drafts of the application. His past experiences allowed him to pose questions to the staff that he felt the ultimate reviewer would want to know.

Community Ministries of Rockville obtained the new housing project. Mr. Blank's work was greatly appreciated, and he has continued to volunteer with the organization in different avenues.

Mr. Blank believes the Pro Bono Consultant Program is an excellent opportunity for volunteers and organizations alike. He said one key to success for organizations is making sure there is a good fit between the consultant and the organization. This includes both a personal and professional fit between what the organization wishes to accomplish and the consultant's past experience or ability to research what needs to be done.

Gandhi Brigade

Diane Martin was looking for a project that would allow her to give back and keep her skills sharp and had a start and end date. The Pro Bono Consultant Program introduced her to the Gandhi Brigade.

The organization originally wanted someone to do some technical changes to Salesforce; however, after meeting with the Executive Director, Ms. Martin realized she could first help him articulate what he was

trying to accomplish. With tools she had used in her previous work in the IT field, Ms. Martin prepared his business requirements and statement of work in a format he could use to get proposals.

For organizations interested in tapping skilled volunteers or working with pro bono consultants, she recommends treating the process like a hiring process. See if the individual has relevant experience and assess whether he or she appears to be a good fit for the organizational culture. Ms. Martin believes her experience was a success because the staff member she was working most closely with made himself available. They had two to three hour-long meetings over three months, which allowed her to receive guidance on any questions she had.

Interplay Company Band

John Gaffney, who prior to retirement worked in statistics and electrical engineering, wanted to perform a volunteer task that would use his professional experience. Interplay Company Band, a percussion band for individuals with cognitive or physical disabilities, wanted to evaluate its program to help get grant funding.

After reviewing sociological literature, Mr. Gaffney developed a set of criteria to measure people's behavior and the value of the band to them. The criteria included the ability to follow directions and interact with others, and musical ability.

Mr. Gaffney first completed a pilot study, then modified the scoring after feedback. The final evaluation asked the band members' guardians to score from one to five how well the band members performed the metrics prior to and after their involvement with Interplay Company Band. The evaluation also asked them to score the importance of the various metrics to them.

Mr. Gaffney found that for those band members who were evaluated, there was an improvement of the overall score that was coincidental with the band experience. The study results were used in a request for a grant that Interplay Company Band received. Mr. Gaffney left a lasting impact on the organization by helping staff learn how their work was impacting their participants and quantifying that information.

Mr. Gaffney believes organizations interested in engaging skilled volunteers must reach out to individuals in the community through various avenues such as advertisements. He considers his experience a success because he completed a project that was helpful to the band, professionally interesting to him, and based on his skills.

Office of Consumer Protection – Montgomery County

Judge Bruce Birchman is a retired federal administrative law judge who has continued to privately mediate energy-related issues subject to the jurisdiction of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

For the past year and a half, Judge Birchman has been volunteering with the Office of Consumer Protection – Montgomery County, assisting the investigators with complaints and cases. While his pro bono consulting work is related to law, it is quite different from his prior work experience. He decided to take on this pro bono work because he wanted to provide this benefit to local government.

With the exception of the director, Judge Birchman is the only lawyer in the office. Therefore, he is able to give a different perspective to the other investigators. While he assists one particular investigator, other investigators in the office will often seek him out when they have a difficult problem and ask him for feedback, and his experiences are helping them to solve their cases.