The Challenge:

The effects of Superstorm Sandy in October 2012 devastated Ocean County, NJ. The elderly lost their homes, their cars, and their support networks. One hundred of our existing volunteers could no longer help us because their own lives were completely disrupted as well. At Caregiver Volunteers of Central Jersey (CVCJ), our challenge was filling the increased need for services with a decreased pool of available volunteers.

Why Volunteers Were the Solution:

The majority of post-Sandy resources went to individuals whose homes were destroyed, leaving the elderly and disabled to fend for themselves. Most volunteer opportunities involved physical labor, such as rebuilding homes and cleaning up damaged areas. Yet CVCJ received numerous calls from people looking for ways to help. We turned to new volunteers who wanted to be part of the recovery efforts, but who could not do physical labor.

How Volunteers Help Carry Out Our Mission:

CVCJ was fortunate to receive a grant from the NJ Hurricane Sandy Relief Fund to address the needs of homebound seniors and disabled individuals, many of whom were already vulnerable and found remaining independent after the storm extremely difficult. We needed to create a system to increase our capacity by mobilizing existing and new volunteers to serve this population.

We formed an “Easing Hunger Volunteer Team” to complete online shopping for 50 homebound, elderly, disabled seniors who were not able to get to the grocery store or navigate a store’s aisles because of disability and/or those who lost their existing support system.

Impact:

This initiative aligns perfectly with our agency mission and previous shopping service. When we began, we didn’t know if the elderly would want their groceries ordered online and if they would adopt this model. When the phone calls and requests began, the volunteer team members knew they were part of a wonderful new chapter for CVCJ.

For the Organization: This program greatly increases our capacity to serve. While grocery shopping by in-person volunteers has a 1:1 ratio, grocery shopping online can have a 1:3 ratio. By adding this program, we are able to shop for more people and attract younger, working volunteers.

For the Volunteers: The Easing Hunger Volunteer Team brought together a willing, talented, and capable team of volunteers. This initiative provided them with a clear, consistent mission that made a direct impact on the lives of people in great need. Knowing that they had eased the burden of their elderly neighbors made the volunteers extremely proud.
For the People Served: Our dedicated volunteer team achieved the goal of completing online shopping for the 50 seniors in need. Two years later, we continue to offer this service of ordering groceries online for delivery to elderly who do not drive or who are disabled.

Funding and Resources:

To fund the project, we used a $20,000 grant from the NJ Hurricane Sandy Relief Fund to purchase additional computers and reimburse the elderly for their delivery charges if they could not afford this. Funds also went to volunteer recruitment and training. Resources needed to maintain the project include ongoing volunteer recruitment, training, background checks and insurance. CVCJ receives their funding from the Ocean County Office of Senior Services, foundation grants and donations from their community.

There is no monetary value we receive from this program. We thought that perhaps the grocery stores where we did online shopping would support us at a greater level than they did in the past because we were giving them so much additional business, but this never materialized.

We were very fortunate to receive funding in the past from the National Council on Aging focused on the development and implementation of older adult volunteer teams, so we had experience working with this dynamic. This experience was invaluable!

Value:

The volunteer team directly advanced the mission of CVCJ and our capacity to serve our community. We now have a greater ability to help seniors and the disabled remain independent in their homes and support them when they are released from hospitals to reduce re-admission rates.

It is hard to put a value on how rewarding it is for volunteers to feel like they are making a difference in their community, especially after a natural disaster strikes. Those times tend to bring out the best in people, and their altruistic nature shines through.

When one is healthy and can drive, it’s easy to take for granted running to the grocery store to get the food you need. But for the homebound elderly or disabled, the worry about having enough food to eat is a real concern and one that causes fear and anxiety. Our volunteer team was able to hear the relief in the voices of their elderly clients.

Sustainability:

Prior to this initiative, grocery shopping was completed by volunteers going to the store, shopping, and delivering groceries on a basis of one volunteer to one client. Online grocery shopping increased the volunteer to client ratio to 1:3. In addition, this volunteer team opened the door to younger, computer-savvy volunteers who work or had young children, since they were able to shop for their clients from their home computers at night or on weekends.

Initially, the Easing Hunger Volunteer Team was envisioned to last one year post-Sandy. Because of its great success and the dedication of the volunteer team members, it is now a permanent service that our agency offers.
Replicability:

The volunteer team leader created a replication guide for conferences that CVCJ attended and presented at in the fall of 2014. The NJ Sandy Relief Fund, which closely monitored this grant, was extremely impressed with the initiative and the unique way we met community needs following this disaster. They provided additional funding to create and duplicate this guide.

We presented this online shopping model by volunteers at a Kessler Rehabilitation Conference that provides services to disabled individuals. The American Red Cross and the Jewish Family Services have also asked for our replication guide. Since this was a pilot program, our volunteers learned many important lessons along the way that can be shared. The keys to success for this initiative can be easily transferred to any area that has a grocery chain or stores that makes home deliveries (very common nationwide).

These were our keys to success:

- Clear-cut goals.
- Funds through a grant allocated to the effort.
- A track record of volunteer recruitment and orientation.
- Excellent, dedicated Volunteer Team Leader and volunteers.
- Our agency’s reputation: Because we are well-known in the community, we were able to partner to get the word out about program and work with media for press releases.
- Staff “buy-in” and cooperation.

Here are additional lessons we learned:

- Consider this type of program as a way to involve younger, working volunteers who want to give back to their community but have time constraints. Our volunteers were able to order online from home and at a time that was convenient for them. Because they called their client every two weeks, they developed lovely relationships. Even though they never met their clients, the volunteers got the rewards and satisfaction from knowing they were making a difference in someone’s life.

- Think of how you can transition responsibilities to your volunteers to save staff time. Our Executive Director led this program and coordinated volunteer recruitment and initial meetings. After about three to four months of the project, the Team Leader Volunteer took over a lot of the responsibilities.

- If you recruit volunteers and train them, utilize them quickly or they will go to another agency. Appreciate, appreciate, appreciate in many different ways. Vary opportunities and try to tap into volunteers’ talents and interests.

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