

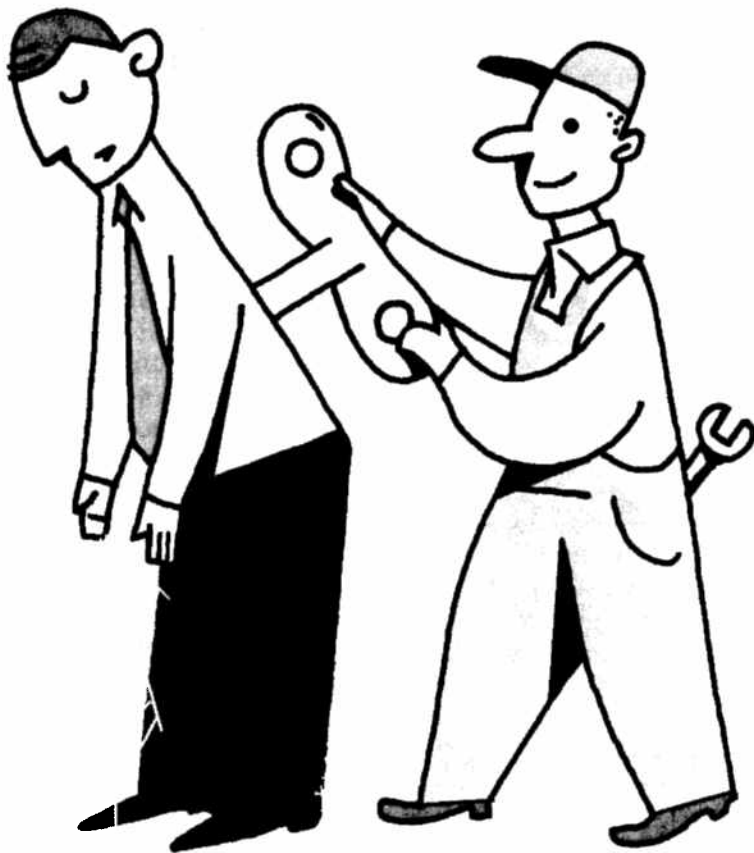
# forces

## How to Reduce Volunteer Burnout

By Clint J. Warrell, CMCA, AMS, LSM, PCAM

Robert volunteered for his community's architectural control committee soon after he moved in. He wanted to use his experience as an engineer to improve the association's permit process. His knowledge and effort improved the system tremendously. He was tireless.

The board soon asked him to serve on the budget committee, then on a special task force to review facilities. Next, the board asked him to supervise a paving project. When that project was completed, Robert quit.



TOO OFTEN when competent, reliable volunteers like Robert step up, they're asked to take on more and more until they burn out. This scenario is fictional, but it's similar to those played out again and again in community associations across the country.

Volunteers frequently start out with a bang, ready to help in any way possible, only to fade after several months. Some quit for reasons that you can't control—perhaps their responsibilities at work have increased or their growing family requires more time.

However, many leave because they feel overworked and unappreciated. Without proper nurturing, new, enthusiastic volunteers quickly become frustrated.

Ironically, about 60.8 million Ameri-

can volunteers have a set of goals that every member understands and accepts. Outline the committee's authority and the decision-making process in your association. Assign a board member to serve as a liaison to each committee or group of volunteers. When volunteers understand their roles and their tasks are clear, they are less likely to become overwhelmed or feel frustrated.

Encourage new ideas and open discussion. And then, listen! People want to be heard and are more apt to achieve greater success when they believe their suggestions are taken seriously. Make them feel comfortable expressing their feelings about the subject. Always be available if they have a problem or concern. Check in on them

regularly, which quickly lead to burnout. Always remember, there is more to holding successful meetings than a powerful leader and a book of parliamentary procedure!

**Get to know the volunteers and their interests.** Take time to understand why they volunteered in the first place and what is motivating them. Get to know their likes and dislikes. Volunteers will get more from their experience if you match their tasks to their interests.

**Set reasonable workloads and deadlines.** Board members and managers can't expect volunteers to do the same amount of work in the same amount of time as paid staff. Set specific, but reasonable, deadlines for their work. Be realistic.

**Motivating volunteers can be as easy as picking up the phone and thanking them for what they do for you and their community.**

cans volunteered at least once last year, and the median average hours spent on volunteer activities ranged from a high of 96 hours for volunteers age 65 and over to a low of 36 hours for those 25 to 34 years old, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Surely some of them are in your association.

So, what can you do to motivate and keep volunteers?

#### **GUIDE THEM**

While you should always be looking for ways to bring in new volunteers, you also need a plan for keeping them. Here are some tips for developing and nurturing your volunteers so they'll be productive and effective members of your volunteer force for years to come.

**Communicate clearly.** Volunteers want to perform well at their task just as board members and managers do. Communicate clearly what you expect them to do. Define the tasks as specifically as possible. Give the group a

frequently to make an opening to discuss their concerns.

**Create a good working environment.** More often than not, we don't provide a place for committees to meet that makes them feel a part of the bigger organization. Give them a safe and welcoming area to meet. They need access to things such as a work table, note pads, pens, a coat rack, refreshments and support. Allow them to use a room that is suited for meetings, such as your board room or conference room. It will keep their deliberations more focused and professional.

**Make meetings productive.** Volunteers probably won't show up for meetings if they aren't enjoying themselves. There is nothing more discouraging for volunteers than a poorly organized, unfocused and unproductive meeting. While we all know structure is important to your committee meeting and crucial to getting business done, do what you can to avoid dull or overly

If you don't know all the volunteers or don't work with them on a regular basis, you can easily delegate too many tasks to a committee, causing it to fail. Know your committee's limits.

It's also important to be sure that each committee member is contributing and no one ends up as a committee of one. The conscientious volunteer who gets stuck doing all the work is likely to become frustrated and resent the association in general. Once they leave, they're unlikely to come back.

**Cancel unnecessary meetings.** If there is nothing on the agenda, cancel the meeting. Likewise, if a committee no longer has a purpose, disband it. It's a waste of your time and the volunteers' time to hold on to a committee that has achieved its goal or task.

#### **THANK THEM**

**Express appreciation.** We all want to be appreciated and feel needed. Thank volunteers in both formal and informal

# Symptoms Of Burnout

To determine if your association's volunteers are suffering from burnout, ask yourself these questions:

- Are they constantly complaining?
- Are they frequently late or absent?
- Are they failing to finish the work they've been assigned?
- Do they complain of health issues and fatigue?
- Do they appear to be withdrawing?

—SOURCE: VOLUNTEERS: HOW COMMUNITY ASSOCIATIONS THRIVE, A GUIDE FOR ASSOCIATION PRACTITIONERS, 2005.

ways. Communicate with each one personally—tell them how important they are and how their contributions help support the entire association. Encourage them. Tell them how instrumental they are in achieving the community's goals. Tell them that what they're doing is worthwhile.

Motivating volunteers can be as easy as picking up the phone and thanking them for what they do for you and their community. Or write them a thank-you note. Or praise their efforts in front of their neighbors. While it might not be possible for board members or the manager to attend all committee meetings, try to make it to one or two to show your volunteers that you're interested in what they are doing. E-mail is a great timesaver, but nothing beats a face-to-face encounter. Social contact is a big benefit of volunteering.

About 45 percent of volunteers say they became involved with an organization after being asked to do so, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. It stands to reason that they would continue volunteering for the same reason.

**Host a volunteer appreciation night.** Invite all volunteers and their spouses. If your budget is limited, plan something simple like light appetizers and present certificates of appreciation. If you have more funds, host a banquet at which you present your vol-

unteers with gifts or plaques for what they have accomplished over the past year. The board members should attend and personally present the awards. Invite your local city council members or state representatives to take part. Most public officials are happy to attend local functions. It's an opportunity for them to meet area residents. Officials may be willing to present the association's tokens of appreciation, including a community volunteer-of-the-year award.

**Hold a volunteer golf tournament.** Friendly competition between volunteers, committees or all community residents allows everyone to come together to get to know one another. It also helps

## AT A GLANCE

**Community associations often overwork their best volunteers, who may ultimately burn out. Find ways to keep them motivated. They just might be your future board members.**

**MANAGE THEM** Communicate clearly what you expect them to do and what your association's decision-making process is. Don't overwork them.

**SHOW THEM APPRECIATION** Show appreciation by recognizing volunteers at annual events, in the newsletter or with personal phone calls.

**KEEP THEM AS A TEAM** Imposing term limits is one way to reduce volunteer burnout. Give volunteers time to re-energize and try something new.

create a feeling of unified purpose. Host an awards lunch after the tournament to honor the volunteers. Have fun by handing out humorous awards for the worst score or shortest drive.

The Woodbridge Village Association in Irvine, Calif., hosts a holiday party each December for all committee members and their families. At this party, the volunteers enjoy hors d'oeuvres and wine, while the younger children eat pizza under the supervision of a babysitter. The children each receive a bag of holiday candy as they leave.

Change your recognition program each year so your tenured volunteers have some variety. For example, you might charter a dinner cruise or provide tickets to a local theatre.

At a minimum, volunteers should be recognized at the annual meeting. Present them with a certificate and a small gift. Include your community logo and a statement of appreciation for volunteer service on the gift. Gifts might include pens, wine glasses, outdoor blankets, folding chairs or coolers. Nice gifts also might encourage others to volunteer.

On a smaller scale, invite volunteers to a regular board meeting at which the board presents certificates of recognition and service. Publish volunteers' names and photos in the newsletter or on the website to show the community what they have contributed. This may motivate others to volunteer as well. There are numerous ways you can show your appreciation to volunteers, but the important thing is to do something!

## GIVE THEM A BREAK

**Impose term limits.** While this might seem counterproductive when associations are often desperate for volunteers, implementing term limits can help reduce volunteer burnout. It gives volunteers permission to take a break to refresh and rejuvenate. This can be the biggest thanks of all. Just make sure they know you want them back!

Even if you limit the number of years an individual can serve on a sin-

gle committee, the volunteer could still serve on another association committee. This could help keep the effective volunteers actively involved, while

ation's work and to community life. It's crucial to find ways to recognize and reward them. You wouldn't go years without recognizing your top employees at

serve on the board. Their experience with community issues and the leadership skills they have developed along the way could make them among the best board members your association will ever have. **And that can help everyone. CJ**

CLINT J. WARRELL is general manager of Canyon Lake Property Owners Association in Canyon Lake, Calif.

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**Friendly competition between volunteers, committees or all community residents allows everyone to come together to get to know one another.**

giving them a chance to try something new. In doing so, you may reduce the likelihood of burnout. For example, you could limit volunteers to four one-year terms on any one committee. After a break in service, they may serve an additional two years.

Volunteers are essential to an associ-

your workplace. It shouldn't be any different for volunteers in your association.

Treat your volunteers as the outstanding residents they are. Nurture them and develop their skills so they can help benefit your community in the years to come. If they have a good experience, today's committee members may go on to



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