

# Recruiting and Supporting Latino Volunteers

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## Author's note

*The author acknowledges that as much as she has tried to write this publication from a non-biased perspective, her own Euro-American cultural background still influences her approach. She hopes that this work will stimulate ongoing dialogue between Latinos and Euro-Americans around the issues of volunteerism.*

Communities across the United States are becoming more cultur- and ethnically diverse. Indeed, demographers predict that by 2030 most of America's school-age children will be from a minority group and by 2050, so will most Americans (Hodgkinson 1996). This increasing diversity changes the nature of the population served by volunteer-based organizations, and likewise, also should change the makeup of the volunteer base. Capturing the volunteer potential of diverse community members will enrich organizations by expanding the number of volunteers, by helping to make services more culturally appropriate due to the similarities between volunteers and clients, and by bringing diverse viewpoints to inform practice (Chambre 1982). However, many volunteer-based organizations, accustomed to operating in more homogeneous environments, are finding it difficult to attract volunteers from diverse backgrounds. Their usual approaches to volunteer recruitment and support have not proven effective.

Latinos make up one minority group that many organizations would like to better recruit for volunteer roles. This publication was prepared to help volunteer recruiters better understand the characteristics of the Latino community that impact volunteering and to suggest strategies or steps to use in successfully recruiting and supporting Latino volunteers. The information is based on a study of Latinos and volunteerism conducted in Oregon in 1999 (see Appendix). The majority of data gathered was in reference to Latinos who are relative newcomers or second generation and of Mexican origin, characteristics shared by most of Oregon's Latinos.

While the data offer important insights about Latinos and volunteerism, a word of caution is warranted. The term "Latinos" refers to a heterogeneous group of people who may differ on any number of characteristics including country of origin, race, class, level of education, and the time and circumstances of entry into the United States. Generalization of the findings should always be considered in light of the specific information known about an individual or group.

## How Latinos View "Volunteering"

In many Latin American countries, volunteering refers to activities carried out by the wealthy and well positioned on behalf of the poor. For many of the immigrants coming to the United States, volunteering is not part of their history. Once in the United States, Latinos associate volunteering with the broader community, involving mainstream organizations with which Latinos have little if any connection. Being a volunteer, then, isn't within the realm of their experience.

## **Do Latinos Volunteer?**

Latinos do indeed volunteer, but the extent of their contributions is not reflected in the various statistics gathered on volunteerism in the United States. The reason for the discrepancy is that Latinos do not volunteer in the traditional American pattern. Latino volunteerism occurs first in the context of family and secondarily in the neighborhood and church as opposed to mainstream community-based organizations. These efforts, though numerous, go undetected by the mainstream tracking processes.

Helping others is second nature to Latinos. It isn't viewed as something you do at a particular time, for a particular group. Caring and helpfulness occur every day as needs arise. Whether it's giving time, money, or other resources, Latinos willingly volunteer to help family, friends, and community members. Helping isn't so much a thing to do as it is how things are done as a matter of course.

## **The Challenge for Organizations**

Given that Latinos readily demonstrate helpfulness, the question becomes: How can mainstream organizations tap this potential volunteer resource? What must organizations do to connect with and involve the Latino community, encouraging Latino adults to extend their giving to programs and causes sponsored by organizations outside their immediate ethnic community, but ones which do or could benefit Latinos? To help answer this question, consider the following information and strategies to promote connections and facilitate the involvement of Latinos as volunteers.

## **Connecting with the Latino Community**

Building a relationship with the Latino community and establishing trust is the way entry is gained to the community. It is most often a slow process, but a step without which nothing else can be accomplished. It requires a modest and unobtrusive presence, one that is nonthreatening.

Initially the task is one of listening and observing, of going to where the people are and talking with them to learn about the community, to develop an understanding of the culture and context in which people live, and to get to know people as individuals. These conversations also are a time to learn how people view mainstream organizations and issues involving the greater community. They also provide a chance for the community to get to know you. It means attending the fiestas, shopping in the shops, and getting involved in educational events. It also means seeking out and talking with the outspoken members of the community, those who will "tell it like it is" rather than tell you, the outsider, what you want to hear.

What are the issues and concerns of the community? What differences exist within the community regarding country of origin, education level, immigration status, language fluency, etc.? What skills do individuals possess that can be used in a volunteer role? Additional insights may be gained by reading the newspapers Latinos read and by tuning in to their favorite television and radio stations.

Identifying and enlisting the support of elders and other perceived leaders in the community and working jointly with established community organizations that enjoy a positive reputation greatly facilitate establishing a presence in the community. Each can provide access to groups and individuals in the community, and their endorsement brings with it a certain level of credibility and trust. Taking the time to listen to the people and to work through community leaders demonstrates respect for the culture and for the differences that exist between Latinos and the mainstream. Respect is an important part of trust building.

### **Steps to Building a Relationship and Trust with the Latino Community**

- Spend time learning about the community and the individuals within
- Become involved with community organizations and events
- Enlist the support of elders, other community leaders, and established community organizations that enjoy a positive reputation
- Carefully choose outreach staff who can relate with and be accepted by community members and whose personal and professional goals support the mission and goals of your organization
- Demonstrate respect for the Latino culture in all that you do
- Be patient

### **Choosing Outreach Staff**

Entry depends on building relationships. Relationships are built with people, not with organizations; thus the people who approach the community on behalf of an organization must be chosen carefully. Finding someone who is from the Latino community and who is bilingual may seem ideal, but in some cases it will not necessarily guarantee successful outreach. There also must be a match between the personal and professional goals of the person and the mission and goals of the organization. Is s/he interested and willing to fill the position as described by the organization?

When hiring a Latino for outreach, compare the background of the individual with that of the majority of the target audience. Take into consideration such characteristics as class, place of origin, and education level. If they differ significantly, be sure that the outreach person can empathize with the community and can be accepted. Age is another consideration. In the Latino culture, older adults generally are accorded more respect.

Bilingual/bicultural skills are a top priority for staff. Being Latino brings additional benefits. For all staff, a critical factor is their ability to earn the trust of the community.

### **Introducing the Organization**

As part of the process of establishing a presence in the community, outreach staff should introduce the organization's mission and goals and how they apply to the Latino community. Community members must be convinced that the organization's work is worthwhile and meaningful for their family and community. Being able to relate the goals of the organization to education and health issues that impact Latino families is a strength. These issues generally are

of particular concern to Latinos. It's also important to underscore the critical role that volunteers play within the organization and give specific examples of activities volunteers carry out. In these conversations, the values inherent in the organization also will be conveyed. Some, such as equality and informality, may not be well understood or expected, and therefore will require repeated explanation.

In many Latino households, men may significantly influence the activities of their wives and other family members. Therefore, it's especially important to reach men when introducing the organization. They need to understand the importance of the work, what exactly their wives will be doing, and what impact volunteering will have on family life.

If the people have no previous experience or understanding of the organization, its value may have to be demonstrated. For instance, involving Latino youth in 4-H sponsored activities hosted by the cultural center or in conjunction with ESL classes for adults at the community college will provide concrete examples of the value of 4-H activities for families. With their children involved, a connection between the adults and 4-H is created. They feel somewhat affiliated and this increases the chance of their becoming involved as a volunteer. This will take time; it will not happen after a few sessions.

## **Identifying Potential Volunteers**

Volunteers may be drawn from a wide range of Latino community members. High school and college students may want to volunteer to fulfill practicum and community service requirements. Senior citizens, if they are not needed to contribute to the economic support of the extended family, may have time to volunteer. Established professionals are good volunteer candidates as they have predictable work schedules and understand the Anglo culture. Stay-at-home mothers often are overlooked, but they can be a valuable resource. They usually have the time but may need child care, transportation, and permission from their husbands to become involved. They do have skills to offer and will contribute if they are shown how they can help.

Across all age groups, the newly arrived and those focused on meeting basic survival needs are the least likely to volunteer. People with higher levels of education, better English language skills, and some degree of financial security are the most likely candidates.

Latinos are motivated to volunteer for a number of reasons. Many want to give back for what they themselves have received. They want to help their own people. Some are looking for opportunities to learn skills and gain experience that will help them find better jobs. Others are looking for a personal challenge. Still others will volunteer if the program provides ways to pass along the traditions of their culture to younger community members or to share those traditions with the greater community. Other motivators are the chance to meet people and the sense of pride that comes from making a worthwhile contribution.

## **Inviting Participation**

One reason few Latinos volunteer with mainstream organizations is that they have never been asked to help. Just asking will greatly increase the chances of obtaining Latino involvement. How you ask also will impact your success.

Much of the work of inviting Latinos to participate as volunteers needs to be done on a one-to-one basis either by direct visits or through phone conversations. The personal contact may be made directly by outreach staff or by community leaders and groups who are supporters. In the Latino culture, personal relationships are the foundation of the community. People will respond more readily to an invitation if they are contacted personally. You must “go to them” rather than make an announcement and expect them to “come to me.” This applies across all levels of education and socioeconomic status. When addressing a person, use his or her surname unless permission is given to use the first name. Never “Anglicize” a Spanish name.

To reinforce personal contact, invitations to volunteer or to attend a meeting to find out about volunteering can be extended in other ways. Flyers and brochures written in Spanish as well as English might be posted in spots frequented by the target community. The message should be short, presented as an invitation (not an announcement), written using terms the people will understand, and illustrated. Spots on Spanish radio also can be effective. Spanish radio is very popular and conveys credibility to the information broadcasted.

Another key approach to volunteer recruitment is word of mouth. Community members who have a successful volunteer experience with an organization will spread the word and will be very effective in recruiting others to volunteer. Latinos look to other Latinos for a model of volunteering.

What doesn't work is relying solely on written communication such as notes sent home with children from school or posted flyers. Some recent immigrants have had little formal schooling and can't read either Spanish or English. Others who do read still require a personal contact to reinforce all other approaches.

If you hold a meeting to gather potential volunteers, create a welcoming atmosphere. Hold the meeting in a location that is familiar and comfortable for the people. A church may provide space, but don't assume all Latinos will be comfortable in the Catholic Church. Latinos belong to other denominations, too. A school is another likely place, but it should be one that is familiar to the people. Generally, holding meetings at established organizations in the Latino community such as a cultural center ensures a high comfort level and likely will encourage people who are affiliated with that organization to attend.

The timing of meetings must take into account the work schedules of the families. Evenings and weekends often are better than weekdays, but no one time frame meets everyone's needs. Be aware that when you set a meeting time, there will be some who will come later. The Latino culture does not value promptness in the same way as Euro-American culture. Latino culture is oriented toward family and human relationships. Taking a few moments to be with someone you meet on the way to a meeting is more important than being at a meeting early or when it is

scheduled to begin. Euro-American culture, on the other hand, is more task-oriented, and schedules are given great importance. If your Latino volunteers show up after a meeting has begun, it doesn't mean they aren't interested or committed; it's simply a reflection of their placing greater value on relationships over time schedules. One way to accommodate both those who are "on" time and those who are "in" time is to have a timed agenda and meeting notes on the wall for all to see. In this way, latecomers can catch up quickly with the group, and those who are on time are not left waiting for the meeting to begin. It also is important to let your meeting participants know ahead of time that you will be starting on time and that participants are still welcome if they find they are running late.

Food, door prizes, and live music are a few sure ways to attract people to a meeting. Offering familiar food of some kind is a must. Either provide food or make it a pot luck event. Pot luck events are especially popular as they provide a way for all to contribute and to feel included. Expect the whole family—not just the adults you're targeting—to attend meetings. Conducting meetings in Spanish also will encourage attendance. Monolingual Spanish speakers will be more apt to speak up at the meeting if it's conducted in Spanish rather than translated into Spanish. Even attendees who are bilingual will appreciate the comfort level accorded by using Spanish. Be sure the Spanish spoken reflects the daily language and the daily lives of the people.

It's very important to greet people at the door. If possible, spend a few minutes talking with them. This will help build a personal relationship, which adds to their comfort level. It's also a good idea to plan an activity that will engage people as they enter. The activity should be social in nature and should encourage people to learn a little about each other.

The message you convey about volunteering should reflect what you know about the audience. If the people don't have a history of volunteering in the larger community, use the term "helping" instead of volunteering. This makes what you're asking for much clearer. Be sure you also refer to helping in print material. Relate the work they will do as volunteers to the benefits their families and their community will receive. When talking with individuals, take an empowering approach. Explain specifically how their talents and skills will allow them to make a difference. Many feel they have nothing to contribute. Let them know you believe they do.

In your conversations, emphasize that your organization is making a long-term commitment to the community. This isn't tokenism or an attempt to be politically correct.

Be aware of any embedded hesitancy to fulfill certain roles. For instance, in Mexico, teachers are accorded a very high status and most people would never think of themselves in that role. The 4-H or cub scout leader easily could be seen as a teacher. Thus, to recruit leaders of youth groups it would be important to relate the role more to the parent who teaches his child everyday skills than to the school teacher.

Generally, more success is achieved when volunteers are recruited initially for short-term assignments. Sometimes, directly asking an individual to carry out a task works better than waiting for someone to step forward and volunteer. Once people do agree to perform certain tasks or to attend a meeting, call them to remind them of their commitment. You might have to do this more than once. Often there is no calendar in the home to help adults remember.

Don't become discouraged if people don't respond to your invitations to participate. Keep asking. You're introducing a new idea, and it will take time to be adopted. Continue to explain exactly what volunteers are asked to do, how it benefits families and community, and what it can do for the individual. Be aware also that duty to family takes precedence over all other obligations. Inconsistent participation may be due to family needs that arise unexpectedly.

### **Strategies for Volunteer Recruitment**

- Personally extend invitations to volunteer through visits or phone calls
- Supplement personal invitations with print information (flyers, posters, newspaper articles) written in Spanish and/or English
- Utilize Spanish radio spots
- Hold meetings in locations where the people will be comfortable
- Offer food, door prizes, and possibly music as a part of meetings
- Take into consideration the daily schedule of potential volunteers when setting meeting times
- Accommodate language preferences
- Explain how your organization benefits Latino families and their community
- Specifically describe how volunteering will benefit families and community
- Initially recruit for short-term assignments
- Don't become discouraged by limited response—keep asking

### **Supporting Volunteers**

Once you have recruited volunteers, it's essential to create a supportive work environment. This means scrutinizing current organizational structures, policies, and practices and making any changes that are needed. It also means preparing current volunteers and staff for these changes so they don't feel threatened by new ways of doing business. Following are a few other steps you can take to make your organization supportive.

1. **The organization's meeting and work spaces** should reflect a diversity of cultures, in particular the Latino culture. This can be accomplished by such simple things as the choice of prints you hang on the wall, the artwork on your calendar, the decorative objects on tables and shelves. Be sure always to greet each person by name as they arrive and thank them for their efforts when they leave. Provide food, even if it's simply a cup of tea. Your hospitality increases their feeling of acceptance.
2. **Try to meet the personal needs** of volunteers and thus eliminate many of the barriers that may hinder their participation. If some volunteers are not English speakers, have staff available who speak Spanish. Assess the need for transportation. Is there a way to organize car pools or otherwise assist with transportation? Latinos are very family oriented. They want to be together. Find ways for families to volunteer as a unit and provide child care for younger children who accompany adult volunteers. Are there out-of-pocket expenses they can't afford? Find ways to cover or avoid such costs.
3. **Make paperwork as simple as possible.** It can be a relatively unfamiliar and thus intimidating task to fill out forms. Clearly explain why the information is needed and

how it will be used. Understand that some potential volunteers will be unwilling to complete the forms because of issues related to their immigration status or a general distrust of government. Accept their refusal graciously, even if it means they will be unable to participate.

4. **Treat volunteers as co-workers**, not free help. Make them feel a part of the team. Prepare a package that explains the organization and its programs, procedures, and policies. Write a job description for them. This will ensure that their time is used productively and that they feel their efforts are worthwhile.
5. **Provide suitable working conditions** and exposure to a variety of experiences. Give volunteers a choice of assignments where possible. People volunteer for a number of different reasons in addition to wanting to help their community, and they bring with them different interests and skills. A choice of assignments will enable a match between the skills and motivations of the volunteer and the tasks that need to be done. Explain any risk factors that might be involved in their work. What happens if there is an accident?
6. **Provide quality training**. If the job is unfamiliar to them, train them to do it. Be very specific as to what they are expected to do and how they should do it. For some, not having a clear understanding of expectations discourages them from participating. One way to build skills and confidence is to have new volunteers work in partnership with seasoned volunteers. This may be designed as a buddy system, a shadowing process, or a mentoring experience. Check in with volunteers and provide guidance and direction whenever needed. Help them feel connected and supported. Help them be successful.
7. **Ask for input** and really listen to their ideas. Let your volunteers be creative. Empower them as part of the planning team. Perhaps start with a broad idea about a new direction and then ask for their suggestions about how they could accomplish it. Demonstrate that you believe in their capabilities.

Good volunteers are precious. They are needed for so many tasks, but be careful that they are not overworked. If demands are too great, they'll eventually stop volunteering. Balance the work with opportunities to meet and socialize, to have fun.

Often organizations find that providing training and volunteer experiences for new Latino volunteers as a separate group creates a more comfortable and inviting environment and results in more active participation. For those with limited English skills, being able to converse in Spanish eliminates the language barrier. For those with limited involvement in the greater community, a separate program offers an opportunity to hone skills and develop confidence in a familiar and comfortable environment before applying those skills in an integrated setting. If separate training and work experiences aren't feasible, try to recruit a critical mass of Latino volunteers so those who do come forward are not lost or, worse yet, ignored in the larger group.

## **Ways to Recognize Volunteers**

Like other aspects of the volunteering process, recognition of contributions must be designed within the cultural context if it's to be appropriate and meaningful. In general, because Latinos

are modest people, recognition is best carried out in ways where attention to the individual in front of a large group is minimized. Don't expect your Latino volunteers to attend a formal, community-wide recognition event. They will not attend recognition dinners; they will not find appearing before a meeting of county commissioners reinforcing. Realize also that Latinos may shy away from recognition events because they don't want to call attention to their community. Some communities purposefully try to go unnoticed to protect those who are undocumented.

Recognition given informally, however, is appropriate. You recognize volunteers when you treat them as very important people, provide support and many thank you's, and invest time in getting to know them. Telling their peers about their contributions, such as when introducing them to a new volunteer or printing the names of volunteers in the monthly newsletter, also is reinforcing. Providing opportunities for additional training or advancing a volunteer to a position of greater responsibility are other forms of recognition. If volunteers have worked in programs to support their children, they will obtain recognition indirectly when their children's success is recognized.

Informal gatherings, such as family pot lucks, a weekend camping trip for volunteers and their families, or a small celebration within their community, are another form of recognition. Consider also presenting certificates at such events. If volunteers work in programs for children, having the children present the certificates can be especially meaningful.

Giving small gifts can be met with mixed reactions. If you are working very closely with a few volunteers and you develop a close relationship with them, a gift may be appropriate. In other cases the gifts may be seen almost as an insult—"You think I'm doing this because I want something." Still others who receive a gift might feel obligated to give a gift in return. Knowing your volunteers well will guide you as to what form of recognition will be appropriate and well received.

## **Conclusion**

The participation of Latinos as volunteers in your organization will increase your understanding and sensitivity to the Latino culture. In turn, it will strengthen the programs and services you provide, expand the audience you are able to reach, and provide a personal growth experience for all your volunteers and staff. The community as a whole will benefit from the resulting increase in access to expanded programs and the leadership development of the volunteers. In essence, building a strong, diverse volunteer base is community development.

How successful you are in recruiting and retaining Latino adults as volunteers depends on your awareness of and sensitivity to the cultural differences between the majority society and Latinos. It also depends on how willing and able your organization is to accommodate those differences. Outreach to Latinos must be the mission of the organization as a whole, not the personal mission of one individual. Through it all, patience is key. Building relationships with the Latino community, developing trust, and learning how to work together all take time. Progress will be incremental. The outcomes, however, justify all the hard work.

## **Appendix**

In the spring of 1997, the Oregon 4-H program identified outreach to Latino youth and families as a program priority. Subsequent outreach efforts resulted in greater participation by Latino youth but failed to achieve a corresponding increase in Latino adult volunteers. It was evident that 4-H had to redesign its approach to volunteer recruitment in light of the cultural context presented by Latinos.

As a first step to developing new strategies, a study was undertaken to increase understanding of the Latino culture as it relates to volunteerism and to identify practices that would encourage Latino adults to become volunteers in community-based organizations such as 4-H.

Three focus groups and a literature search composed the study. The majority of data gathered was in reference to Latinos who are relative newcomers or second generation and of Mexican origin, characteristics shared by most of Oregon's Latinos. The three focus groups involved a total of 18 participants. Thirteen of the participants were Latino, two were Latino males. All had actively recruited and supported Latino volunteers for their organizations. The focus group discussions were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed. The transcriptions formed the primary data base for the qualitative study. The literature review yielded few related articles or publications. Those that were identified corroborated the findings derived from the focus groups.

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