

July 2014

Volunteer Expo

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Recommended Citation

Sjoblom, L. (2014). Volunteer Expo. *OLA Quarterly*, 19(2), 5-6. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1386>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Volunteer Expo

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Liisa Sjoblom has been a library professional for over 25 years working in both academic and public libraries. She began her career at Reed College as a library assistant and supervisor before heading to the University of Texas at Austin where she earned her MLIS in 1992. After five years at the University of Wisconsin — La Crosse she returned to Oregon and began her public library career at the Deschutes Public Library in Bend. Currently she is a Community Librarian at the Downtown Bend Public Library focused on providing library services to local businesses and individuals making career transitions.

On January 27, 2013 the Downtown Bend Library celebrated our 5th annual volunteer fair, *Know Volunteers — A Volunteer Expo*. It began as a simple suggestion on a program evaluation form, “program on volunteering.” This is the story of how we went from this simple suggestion to a popular and heavily attended event.

A program on volunteering was a great idea, but how could we make it interesting? A formal program with talking heads sounded boring. Why not bring in a number of organizations at the same time, set up some tables, and let people talk to the organizations that interest them the most?

The team began planning in September by selecting a date for the event. January was the first thought for everyone because this is a time for New Years’ resolutions and volunteering is something that people tend to consider at that time of year. We determined the Sunday after Martin Luther King Day would be ideal since community service would still be fresh in everyone’s mind and we always have great foot traffic on Sundays. To this day we hold our volunteer fair on the fourth Sunday in January at the Downtown Bend Library.

The next step was to determine which organizations to invite to participate. Our space is limited and we always strive to offer access to a variety of organizations. We started with organizations that we already partner with and added a few more to round out a list of about 30. This list has grown over the years to include organizations who wish to participate the following year. While we initially mailed paper invitations, we now conduct this part of the planning electronically via email. That first year we limited participation to 16 organizations. This year we doubled up a few of the tables and were able to have 22 participants.

Publicity has always consisted of posters, entries in the calendar of events, and a press release to local media outlets. Nearly every year one of the local television outlets requests an on-camera interview prior to the event and they often show up to film the day of the event. We also expand our reach by asking the participating organizations to promote it along with their publicity materials and send along electronic copies of the posters. This works well as one of our participants is Volunteer Connect,

“Congratulations on a very successful Volunteer Expo that was well done. At the city table we had at least 12 people take a volunteer application. It was a fantastic venue and seems to draw more attention every year. As soon as the doors opened people were coming to explore!”

— *City of Bend*



“I’ve participated every year and this has been the best one yet! I had one person fill out a volunteer application right here and five people fill out volunteer interest cards!”

— *Healthy Beginnings*

Tips to Make Your Volunteer Fair a Success

- Establish a diverse planning team.
- Develop a solid action plan.
- Check for other similar events held in your area.
- Measure your event space carefully and determine how many tables can comfortably fit in the room.
- Aim for a wide-ranging group of agency participation.
- Select a high traffic location and day to hold the event.
- Hold the event at a time of the year when people are serious about volunteering — possibly January or September.
- Provide concise information with invitation including the registration deadline.
- If you develop a waiting list, plan how you will confirm participation in the event.
- Supply a list of what is provided (tables, chairs, tablecloths, WiFi, etc.) and what participants should or can bring.
- PR — Lots of it. Ask participants to talk up the event and to provide assistance with hanging posters around town.
- Provide participants with copies of the press release and posters.
- Invite the local media to attend the event.
- Count attendance. A clicker works well.
- Provide snacks and water for participants.
- Take pictures of the event for publicity for future events.
- Provide an evaluation form to be completed at the conclusion of the event.

a central Oregon organization that connects volunteers with volunteer opportunities throughout the tri-county area.

On the day of the event we prepare the room and the tables. Tables are covered for a uniform look and spaces are pre-assigned for ease of set-up. We ask that organizations arrive one hour prior to the library opening for setup. At each table we provide light snacks, a DPL pen, and an event evaluation form. The participant evaluation form is very important and has provided valuable feedback about how everything worked for the organizations. We are especially interested in finding out if they were able to sign up new volunteers.

So has this program been successful? Absolutely! That first year we had 16 organizations participate and there were more on the waiting list. Over 150 people visited with the various organizations and everyone signed up volunteers. This year we had 22 participating organizations and about 150 people looking for volunteer activities. One of the organizations even commented that they sign up more volunteers at this event than through any other recruiting method.

Will we continue the program? Yes. In fact, the event has expanded to the north county area and has been offered at the Redmond Library the past two years. It has been highly successful and we have developed some great partnerships with our local non-profit community. Little did we realize that one simple suggestion nearly six years ago would lead us to develop one of our most successful and eagerly anticipated annual events. And yes, on January 26, 2014, we will hold our sixth annual volunteer fair.

“Thank you so much for the great opportunity to connect with potential volunteers! Set-up was smooth and overall it was a very positive experience. I think the library was a great spot to hold the event.”

— *Grandma’s House*

