

# Cut Your Expenses: Become a Volunteer Magnet

Here's how one nonprofit has garnered 200,000 hours of volunteer help each year.



By Karen Eber Davis

**A**ttracting volunteers is one of the key goals of the Houston Food Bank. This successful nonprofit has designed its buildings, operations, and processes to put volunteers at the center of its work.

Creating extraordinary volunteer experiences provides tremendous community branding and something critical to the Food Bank: reduced labor costs. Distributing 70 million pounds of food a year requires a myriad of volunteers to sort through thousands of collection barrels. Last year 23,500 individuals volunteered at the Food Bank.

## How It Works

Staff members have designed the organization's infrastructure to support volunteers and introduce people to the Food Bank. To accommodate volunteers, it is open 22 hours a day. It offers a state-of-the-art sorting center. Here a mechanical contraption brings volunteers baskets of food to sort. Baskets are used because they're more engaging than conveyor belts. Not only is the work engaging, it's also valuable. Each hour of volunteering is valued at \$75 because of the food that it provides.

Moreover, the complex is designed to make sure thousands of new people know about the Food Bank each year. Its footprint includes a conference center that can support 1,000 participants. The Food Bank provides the conference center to businesses and community groups at cost. When someone attends a conference, they see the Food Bank at work.

The Food Bank's design also includes skilled labor. A job-training program offers warehouse work to people recently released from prison. With the help of several government agencies, trainees learn how to use state-of-the-art warehouse equipment.

## The Essentials of the Approach

The Food Bank's strategy bypasses the need for cash and directly obtains needed labor by creating engaging opportunities. The approach is renewable. Volunteers who love the experience return. Through its conference center, the organization also educates over 20,000 people a year about its work. It creates donors, often for life.

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## Six Steps You Can Take to Explore This Strategy

**1. Answer the following: “What stops you from doing more mission?”** If you reply, “Money,” then answer this question: “If you had money what would you buy?” If you reply “Staff,” answer this: “What exactly would they do?”

**2. Gather ideas about how you might obtain more volunteer services** to fulfill your mission. To start, collect at least a dozen ideas. Expand your list as you work.

**3. Organize your ideas into areas, such as skilled and unskilled labor.** Within these categories, gather two kinds of ideas:

- **easy-to-implement ideas**, like promoting a night for people to volunteer as a family
- **first-step-ideas**, like collecting e-mails.

Pull out the ideas that need to be added to strategic-plans — for example, adding a conference center for long-term actions.

**4. Select one area on which to focus.** The Houston Food Bank didn't immediately build a conference center or start a job-training program. They began slowly and improved volunteer opportunities one experience at a time. From this base, they created a system that generates 200,000 hours of volunteer help yearly.

**5. In your focus area, combine an easy-to-implement and a first-step idea.** For instance, start a quarterly family volunteering event. During the event, incorporate a first-step-idea, such as collecting e-mails. After the event, use those e-mail addresses to send thank-you notes and invitations to the next event.

**6. Keep up the momentum.** Gather more ideas. Study the work of others. Improve your opportunities one increment at a time. 

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*Karen Eber Davis (karen@kedconsult.com) is an expert in nonprofit innovation and author of Nonprofit Income Without the Mystery. For over 20 years, Karen has helped leaders make dramatic improvements that “move the needle” in excellence, effectiveness, and bottom lines. Sign up for her free newsletter “Added Value” at kedconsult.com.*