

For Example...

The Value of Volunteers



Summary

“They just asked if they could help” according to Leslie Babcock, Eligibility Supervisor for Roanoke City Department of Social Services. The beginning of this excellent example of a volunteer-based outreach effort was as simple as that. The president of the Melrose-Rugby Neighborhood Forum, Estelle McCadden attended a workshop conducted by the Action Alliance and SignUpNow in November 1999. The event was intended to encourage community programs to reach out to families in the Roanoke area and help inform them about the availability of Medicaid and CMSIP and to train staff how to assist families with applications. Once Mrs. McCadden realized that so many area children were missing out on free health insurance she knew she wanted her neighborhood association involved and she approached Mrs. Babcock to ask how her organization could help.

The Forum had recently purchased a building and was renovating it (with much volunteer labor) for use as an office. The President was looking for good community projects and realized that the building would provide an ideal location to meet with area residents and help them apply for Medicaid/CMSIP. Mrs. McCadden took the idea back to her association and with the help of several retired nurses, convinced the membership to take this on as a project. An association member, Vivian Parks was asked to serve as coordinator.

Although it took many months to get everything ready, eight volunteers have now been trained by the Roanoke City Social Services. Mrs. Babcock says “I strongly encourage any community group to contact their local agency and form a partnership, [this] can only be a win-win situation!” They officially began the project May 15, 2000 and the volunteers have established regular hours to accommodate working parents. They are available from 11AM-2PM on the 1st Monday and from 4PM-7PM on the 3rd Monday of each month. At this time, plans are for the Forum to continue offering this service indefinitely.

Mrs. McCadden proudly reports that “We can do everything but the approval.” The trained volunteers inform callers and walk-ins: about the benefits of the programs for children - how to complete the application - offer to assist the person on the spot, make all necessary copies and mail it in for them - or let them take it home along with a stamped envelope addressed to social services. The group plans to follow-up later to see if further assistance is needed by those families.

In an effort to advertise this community service, the group has used the local newspapers and even gotten a reporter to do an article on the project. Additionally, Mrs. McCadden reports that “we are a largely black neighborhood and we use our churches.” They have put up notices and are sending flyers to area churches and distributing them in other key locations around the area. They hope to expand the effort and are using other neighborhood associations to help spread the word.

Steps

Learn how volunteers can help - A key member of a volunteer organization needs to learn about these programs and how volunteers can help. The local department of social services or SignUpNow would be a good place to start.

Get a commitment - A “pitch” should be made to the organization’s membership to generate enthusiasm and to gain a commitment.

Work with local social services - Contact the eligibility unit at the beginning and let them help design the project for maximum success.

Find a place - A setting that is convenient, friendly and provides room for private conversations

works best for volunteers and families. Be sure it has a copy machine handy.

Recruit volunteers – Do presentations for the membership and even open the opportunity up to other organizations. The Roanoke project includes one volunteer from another organization.

Provide training and materials – Volunteers need to be knowledgeable about the details of the programs in order to help families be successful. Local social services will probably be quite willing to provide training at convenient times and provide all necessary forms.

For more information on this project, contact:

Mrs. Leslie Babcock
Roanoke City Social Services
540.853.2422

Mrs. Estelle H. McCadden
Melrose-Rugby Neighborhood Forum
540.342.2763



Steps *(continued from inside)*

Schedule and advertise regular hours - Remember these are working families, so offer assistance during both day and evening hours. Use local media and other neighborhood groups to help spread the word.

Plan for follow-up - Create a system to contact families after a reasonable time to see if they have further questions or need assistance. Arrange with local social services to track the cases receiving assistance from the volunteer project.

Results

In the first three application assistance sessions conducted by the Melrose-Rugby Neighborhood Forum the volunteers have helped twelve families pursue insurance for their children. As word of this service continues to spread in the community – and beyond, the Forum volunteers are looking forward to increased activity.

Lessons Learned

 Most people really don't know that these programs are available for their children. Mrs. McCadden reports that many people in her area were very surprised and pleased to learn that their children could qualify even at their income level.

 Many people want to pick up the forms and take them home to complete or take them for someone else. It is particularly important to have follow-up with these families to offer encouragement and assistance.

Cost

\$ Because volunteers provide the labor and the building was available, there is no cost to the association.

\$ According to the Roanoke City Department of Social Services, the cost to the agency is minimal.

Unintended Consequences

Because of the positive press coverage more people are learning about the neighborhood association as well as Medicaid and CMSIP. Churches in nearby counties have heard about the project and expressed interest in either referring families or replicating the project in their area.

“There are many modern day Robin Hoods that are willing and eager to do whatever it takes to get the job done. Not only are these eight ladies ready to help, they go beyond conventional boundaries and offer 100% support in making sure that the children's needs are fully covered. It is up to us at the local agency to lend whatever support is needed in securing the means by which our kids are medically safe.” – Leslie Babcock

SignUpNow 

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For Example...

A series highlighting good ideas in CMSIP/Medicaid outreach in Virginia.

Issue Two

