

A City's Investment Pays Off

The Need

In March 2020, when volunteer efforts in many cities across the nation ground to a halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Fort Collins – a municipality of about 175,000 residents located at the foot of the Rocky Mountains in Northern Colorado – recognized that volunteers could play a pivotal role in responding to this crisis; it was immediately clear that many residents would be isolated in their homes and need assistance with errands, groceries, and neighborly support. While the City's recreation centers, arts centers, and many indoor public programs were temporarily shuttered, Fort Collins pivoted its volunteer engagement to meet the new needs for neighbor-to-neighbor support. But this story of tapping volunteers for response began long before COVID-19.

About Fort Collins

Since 1985, volunteers have played a vital role in the City's mission of "exceptional service for an exceptional community," with more than 10,000 volunteers serving each year. Prior to the pandemic, Fort Collins volunteers contributed over 153,000 volunteer hours across 29 municipal programs, with an economic impact of nearly \$4 million – more than a 7X return on volunteer investment.

Beginning in 2015, the City streamlined its approach across initiatives, departments, and programs by integrating all facets of engagement into one cohesive strategy. These efforts helped Fort Collins in its successful bid for a 2017 Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award and subsequent achievement of Service Enterprise certification. More importantly, the investment of time, funds, and human capital into the coordinated volunteer engagement strategy positioned Fort Collins to effectively combat the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Strategy

Innovations in City Volunteering

As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, the City's Office of Emergency Management quickly turned to the Volunteer Services Program to extend its resources. Recognizing that engaging volunteers had shown a positive return on their investment, Fort Collins leadership leveraged that precedent to make additional investments in volunteer engagement across 29 departments.

Within days of the first COVID-related quarantines and shutdowns, the City's volunteer engagement team partnered with colleagues to plan the creation and launch of a virtual COVID response center that leaned on existing technology to onboard new volunteers and pair them with neighbors needing help.

Strategy, continued

Responding to facility closings, staff members revamped the existing Adopt a Neighbor program – which initially paired volunteers with a neighbor in need of support for daily tasks – to help those most severely impacted by COVID-19 isolation. Volunteers enthusiastically jumped on board and were trained virtually, supported by staff, and assisted by the City's robust volunteer software system, which enables residents to connect with volunteer opportunities while City departments screen, manage, and track volunteers. With leadership support, guidance from consultants at VQ Volunteer Strategies, and assistance from the Spark the Change Colorado volunteer center, the redesign and pivot were accomplished in just five business days. Adopt a Neighbor was far-reaching and widely impactful, with volunteers supporting 80+ residents in small – but vital – ways, like picking up prescriptions, shoveling front porches, and getting groceries.

The Adopt a Neighbor program was not without its challenges. Volunteers discovered that individuals requesting assistance had needs – such as significant memory loss, financial crisis leading to food insecurity, or physical mobility issues – beyond the services built into the program. Realizing they were surfacing issues that fell beyond the scope of original intent, Fort Collins staff reached out to partner agencies to make referrals and helped connect residents to appropriate resources.

A second program called VirtuVisit was made possible by funding through the CARES Act and City investments. VirtuVisit pairs the power of volunteers and technology to connect isolated residents with family and friends. In the fall of 2020, 50 tech-savvy volunteers were recruited and matched with some of the most isolated residents. They provided tech support, tablets (where needed), and ongoing support, helping the residents sustain a sense of community and connection by communicating virtually with friends and family.

Impact

Both programs, while new to Ft. Collins, demonstrate the City's ongoing willingness to engage volunteers to meet emerging needs – and to look to volunteers as a resource to solve problems, whether big or small.

- Within the first year of the pandemic alone, volunteers contributed more than 66,000 hours of service across the city.
- Within Adopt a Neighbor, more than 400 volunteers applied and stood ready to support families. As noted above, more than 80 families directly benefited from being matched to an Adopt a Neighbor volunteer.

VirtuVisit, on the other hand, impacted a smaller group of 38 people in deeply profound ways, reducing isolation and increasing well-being during those tough months, according to research-

Impact, continued

based metrics. During a two-month follow-up survey, all participants reported having a tablet; 85% had gained comfort in making video calls with family and friends; more than 50% reported connecting with volunteers for problem solving, tech support or sharing interests; and all participants reported they will likely or very likely recommend the program to others.

“Although the scale of impact varied,” explained Sue Schafer, Volunteer Services Program Manager for Fort Collins, “together, the success of both programs demonstrates how engaging volunteers can extend services and be impactful, even if the stories are different.”

Next Steps

The models continue to evolve. When Fort Collins was at a standstill in 2021 due to record-breaking snowstorms, the Adopt a Neighbor program model was utilized to recruit a new set of volunteers to help residents with tree debris removal.

The City views volunteers as a vital resource and an investment that demonstrates a significant return. “Thanks to our talented staff’s ability to quickly pivot,” explained Schafer, “Leadership now includes volunteer engagement in the discussion of how to address emerging needs. They are willing to invest in the technology, staff, expertise, and infrastructure to ensure that volunteer engagement is done well.”

Recommendations

To help volunteer engagement leaders achieve similar success, Schafer suggests:

- Consider pursuing the Service Enterprise certification to help build organization-wide buy-in, communicate the impacts of volunteer involvement in powerful ways, create new, meaningful roles for volunteers, and become more adaptable and sustainable as an organization.
- Plan to make a strong investment in technology that can expand with program needs.
- Tap into your professional networks to share ideas and gain resources on crisis response.
- Develop strong working relationships with complementary agencies with whom you can partner in times of need.