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Lending a Helping Paw: Streamlining a Volunteer Handbook

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December 10, 2018

Author’s Note

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Project Abstract

Peace of Mind Dog Rescue (POMDR) relies heavily on its volunteers to carry out important operational needs that allow them to fulfill their mission of being a resource and advocate for local senior dogs and senior citizens. From overseeing adoption events to foster care to administrative duties, volunteers serve as the arms-and-legs of the organization. Despite having a volunteer base of over 700 individuals, POMDR faces a challenge in preparing new volunteers for their role within the organization. To address this organizational concern, a digital volunteer handbook was created to provide current and prospective volunteers with an easily accessible resource that will help them to understand the organization’s policies and their role as a volunteer. A volunteer base that is readily available and well-prepared will allow the organization to provide better services and will help them to grow and flourish for years to come. As a result of implementing this new handbook, POMDR will save around $800 annually and will be able to use these savings to provide more medical services for their senior dogs. It is recommended that the organization annually update the handbook in order to ensure that their volunteers are up to date with the organization’s most current policies.

Keywords: volunteer, resource, handbook, senior, dog, rescue, organization
I. Agency Description and Community Served

Peace of Mind Dog Rescue (POMDR) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to be “a resource and advocate for senior dogs and senior people on California's Central Coast” (Peace of Mind Dog Rescue, 2018). Located in Pacific Grove, California, the dog rescue is dedicated to finding homes for senior-aged dogs as well as helping local senior citizens.

POMDR features three areas of service:

*Rescue and Adoption:* Taking in senior dogs who have been left behind in shelters and from senior guardians who can no longer care for them in Monterey, Santa Cruz, and San Benito counties. Each dog is housed in a foster home where they are treated like family until their adoption. All potential adopters are screened to ensure that the dog and their new family are a good match.

*Perpetual Care:* Through advanced planning, the Perpetual Care Program ensures that dog guardians, who enroll their dog in the Perpetual Care program, will have the peace of mind that their dog will be cared for in the event that they are no longer able to care for them in the future. Each dog that is enrolled in the Perpetual Care program will be guaranteed a loving home for the rest of their lives.

*Helping Paw Program:* The Helping Paw Program provides assistance to seniors and hospice patients, so they can keep their pets in their homes as long as possible. Assistance includes transportation to vet visits, financial assistance for veterinary expenses, dog walking, and temporary foster care during hospital stays. The program is designed to lend a “helping paw” to help keep the human-animal connection alive and well, even in times of need. Through volunteer assistance and financial support, Peace of Mind Dog Rescue is able to help so many people and their pets during challenging times.
II. Problem Definition

*Problem Statement:* There are too many unprepared volunteers at Peace of Mind Dog Rescue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factors That Contribute to the Problem</th>
<th>Problem to be Addressed by Project</th>
<th>Consequences of the Problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of easily available/accessible information</td>
<td>There are too many unprepared volunteers at Peace of Mind Dog Rescue</td>
<td>Ineffective services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of available staff to train</td>
<td></td>
<td>Limited participation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service (2015), 62.6 million or 24.9% of United States residents were volunteers and through their efforts, about $184 billion worth of services were contributed. Having a large amount of volunteer supporters is essential for any nonprofit to grow. However, if the volunteers are not prepared or are unqualified to carry out services, then that number carries no value. The issue and need that will be addressed by the project is that the number of unprepared volunteers at Peace of Mind Dog Rescue is too high. While there are many experienced volunteers in the program, there is also a number of supporters who are unprepared for the work. POMDR relies heavily on their volunteer supporters in order to provide their services. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “volunteers spent a median of 52 hours on volunteer activities” (2015). POMDR does not require a mandatory amount of service hours from their volunteers, but many of them end up with a similar amount if not more, especially those in the Foster Care program.

Two risk factors that contribute to this problem have been identified by the agency. The first risk factor that there is a lack of information that is easily available or accessible for the volunteers to obtain. According to Hager and Brudney (2004), “Charities interested in increasing retention of volunteers should invest in recognizing volunteers, providing training and
professional development for them, and screening volunteers and matching them to organizational tasks” (p. 1). The volunteers’ only source of information regarding POMDR and its policies and guidelines is either found in their individual packets or for the individual to directly ask staff members any questions they have. Because of the amount of questions that are requested and answered on a regular basis, it is proving that the packet is not effective enough. It is a brief packet and can easily be lost or disregarded. The lack of easily accessible information becomes a risk factor because as the volunteer’s progress into carrying out the mission and providing services, if they are unsure of themselves and do not know what is expected of them then the quality of service will suffer. If that were to occur, then the reputation of POMDR would suffer and this would lead to a “snowball effect” of problems.

At this time, there are only five paid staff members at POMDR. Having such a small staff on-hand means that there is big reliance on the time and skills of volunteers and thus creates another risk factor that contributes to the problem. There is simply not enough staff available to manage every volunteer. Questions can go unnoticed and unanswered due to a lack of available responders. When this occurs, the volunteer suffers because he or she is not getting enough support. Thoits and Hewitt (2001) found that, “people who are involved in community service may have greater life satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of purpose in life, physical health, and mental health, among other consequences” (p. 118). The last thing that POMDR would want to happen is for a volunteer to have a bad experience with the organization due to feeling unsupported.

With the problem of having too many unprepared volunteers comes the associated consequences. These consequences include the following: ineffective services provided, limited participation from volunteers, and limited number of services executed. The first consequence is related to the fact that volunteers do have an easier way to receive the support they need to
improve their work. When the volunteer is not supported, the quality of work they do will suffer. The services that they provide will become less effective than before or it is possible that their services become ineffective because they do not have the help available for them to learn from.

The second consequence is more of a possibility if the trend continues. There is a possibility that the number of active volunteers will decrease if they continue to feel unsupported or uninformed from the agency. Current volunteers might resign from their positions and it is possible that prospective volunteers may not be intrigued to apply due to word of mouth or the reputation of the agency’s failure to provide supportive information to volunteers. Should this happen, then another consequence would occur. That consequence would be limitations on the amount of services that are provided. If there are less volunteers on hand, then it becomes more difficult to carry out services. This could cause those who are already there to have to increase their share of the workload. The alternative to an increase in workload would be to put a limit on the services provided. This would mean less people and dogs get the help they need and then the agency would not be fulfilling their mission.

III. Project Description and Justification

*Project Title: Lending a Helping Paw: Streamlining a Volunteer Handbook*

The purpose of this project was to better prepare prospective and current volunteers for Peace of Mind Dog Rescue. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service (2015), 62.6 million or 24.9% of United States residents were volunteers and through their efforts, about $184 billion worth of services were contributed. Having a large amount of volunteer supporters is essential for any nonprofit to grow.

POMDR relies heavily on its volunteers to carry out their mission of being a resource and advocate for senior dogs and senior citizens on California’s Central Coast. Volunteers serve as the arms-and-legs of the organization and without their support, POMDR would not be able to do
what they do. Their commitment has proven to significantly expand the organization’s capacity as there are now over 700 volunteers currently supporting the agency (POMDR, 2018). Yet, given their crucial role, the expectations and guidelines for volunteers to follow sometimes goes overlooked and information can be unclear.

*Description of implementation plan:*

The first step of the project’s implementation was to create a draft of the handbook. Copies of the documents that had been used in the physical volunteer packets were individually downloaded and then combined into a single, master document. Having a document that contained all of the handbook information in one place made the next step possible; to format the handbook. The physical packets had printed documents that were formatted differently from one another. This included different fonts, font sizes, margins, letterheads, page numbers, etc. Merging these documents into one meant updating the entire document so that each page had matching formats. Once the entire handbook was formatted, the next step involved updating the content.

Each page was carefully reviewed and updated to be the most current version and was then approved by POMDR management. This included updating all contact information, policies, procedures, and example dog adoption contracts and questionnaires. After updating the handbook’s content, the next step was to add a cover page, table of contents, and POMDR pictures throughout in order to add POMDR branding and improve the handbook’s visual appeal for readers. With the handbook being completed, the final step was to let volunteers review the new handbook and offer their feedback.

*Scope of Work and Timeline:*

The first draft of the POMDR volunteer handbook was completed May 2018 and was submitted to agency staff for review and feedback. When the Fall 2018 semester began in
September, edits and improvements were made based on agency feedback and requests. The second draft of the handbook was finalized and submitted to staff in early October 2018. When feedback was received, edits and improvements were made once again. By the end of October, the final version of the handbook was completed and sent in to agency staff for a final review. When the final version of the handbook was officially approved, the handbook was sent via email to a small group of the most experienced volunteers at POMDR. This email included a PDF version of the handbook for review, as well as a link to an online questionnaire for them to present their feedback. By late November, all volunteer feedback was accounted for and reviewed by POMDR staff and final edits will be made based on the agency’s decisions. See Appendix A for visual of scope of work.

Challenges/Obstacles:

Some of the challenges and obstacles that affected the implementation of the project involved obtaining management approval of changes/edits. Versions of the handbook were prepared and ready to be reviewed but due to the busy schedules of POMDR staff and management, reviews were often be pushed back for a few days to a week. This caused progress to come to a brief pause as there was a waiting period before being allowed to proceed.

IV: Project Results

Expected outcomes:

During the capstone idea development, POMDR mentioned their desire to move away from mailing their physical, printed volunteer packets. They wanted to replace it with a new, digital resource for their new and current volunteers to utilize moving forward. As a result of these discussions, the idea of creating a digital handbook was approved and project outcomes were established. The organization’s expected outcomes for this project were the following: to
eliminate the production of printed packets and to increase volunteer retention by at least 50 percent.

POMDR expected that the elimination of the printed volunteer packets would prove to be a cost-effective measure for the agency and would help them to become more environmentally-conscious by reducing their usage of paper and ink. The money saved would allow for them to provide more animal welfare services for dogs currently in or entering their program. POMDR anticipated that by having an always available and easily accessible digital resource, they would be able to increase the knowledge retention about the volunteer program in their new and current volunteers. Volunteers would have a better understanding of their role and the agency’s policies and standards and in turn, be able to perform better quality services.

Assessment of program outcomes:

Volunteer feedback was the primary assessment plan for assessing their knowledge retention. Once the handbook had been approved for volunteer review, a small group of the organization’s volunteer base received an email informing them about the new handbook. This email included a PDF file of new handbook for them to review and a link to an online questionnaire. The questionnaire included a list of 11 questions for the volunteers to provide their feedback on the new handbook. See Appendix B for volunteer questionnaire. In addition to the survey, volunteers were also free to share their thoughts and feelings about the handbook’s current version and to provide POMDR staff with any suggestions or improvements they would like to see made.

The assessment of the cost-effectiveness and official amount of annual savings that the project was able to create was not be possible during this timeframe due to the ending of the student internship with the agency. The project would have needed to have been in use for at
least one year in order to determine the official amount of annual savings. Instead, an estimate of the annual savings was determined through a cost analysis of producing the physical packets.

**Findings/Results:**

The project met the expected outcome of increasing volunteer knowledge retention regarding the organization’s policies and procedures for the volunteer program. 25 out of the 30 volunteers that were sent a copy of the handbook to review, responded to the feedback questionnaire. 76% of POMDR volunteers answered that they “Strongly Agreed” that the new handbook provided them with more information about policies and procedures that they were previously unaware of. 68% of volunteers answered that they “Strongly Agreed” that they now have a better understanding of their role as a volunteer at POMDR after reviewing the volunteer handbook. See **Figure 1** below for the results to four questions and responses from the handbook questionnaire.

![Figure 1. POMDR Volunteer Handbook Questionnaire Results](image-url)
As previously stated, assessment of the cost-effectiveness and official amount of annual savings that the project was able to create was not be possible during this timeframe due to the ending of the student internship with the agency. With an estimated 117 new volunteers gained per year, it is estimated that POMDR spends approximately $755.13 per year on packet production. This includes costs for printing and postage. There are approximately four large print orders per year at around $75 each. This includes the packets and documents inside. One packet costs roughly $3.89 to mail out (4 three-ounce stamps and 1 additional ounce stamp per envelope). With these estimated annual savings, POMDR would be able to cover the costs for animal welfare services such as: An intake exam, spay/neuter procedure, rabies vaccination, a DHPP (Distemper, Hepatitis, Parainfluenza, and Parvovirus) vaccination, a Bordetella vaccination, and a microchip for a shelter dog coming into their program, 16 intake exams for incoming rescue dogs, 1 dental procedure for a senior dog, or 47 rabies vaccinations (A. McKee, personal communication, 2018). See Figure 2 for the estimated annual cost to produce physical packets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approximate Volunteer Packets Cost / Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Item</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing / year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 oz. stamp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional oz. stamp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Volunteers / Year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Approximate Annual Savings / Year** $755.13

**Figure 2. Estimated Annual Volunteer Packet Cost**
Strengths/successes

A strength of the project was that it was able to educate volunteers in areas of the volunteer program that they had previously been unaware of. As seen in Figure 1, 96% of questionnaire participants agreed that the volunteer handbook taught them something about POMDR that they did not know or fully understand before reviewing. This shows that the project was able to achieve its purpose and reach its audience.

Limitations/challenges

A major limitation for the project was that it was not utilized long enough to determine the official annual savings amount. This project was a foundation for the agency to build upon and to develop more for years to come rather than being a one-time usage project. In order to find that savings amount, the project needed to be in use for over a year in order to determine the savings.

V. Personal Reflection/Final Thoughts

Recommendations

It is recommended that POMDR continue to utilize the volunteer handbook. The handbook should be reviewed annually to ensure that the information within it is on par with the agency’s most current standards. It is recommended that they identify areas that are in need of a revision and to update the content accordingly. When changes are made to the handbook, every volunteer should be informed of any changes made, in order to ensure that all parties involved are on the same page.

Personal/professional growth

The personal and professional growth that happened for me as a result of completing this project was learning how to turn a project idea into a reality. It took a lot of hard work and dedication to achieve the goals that I planned out at the start of developing the project. Creating
a project like mine requires you to work effectively and efficiently. It is not something that should be rushed or thrown together. I had to learn how to get the most productivity out of myself during the short work weeks of the internship program. My project took a lot of collaboration and communication with my mentor and the other staff, as well as, working with the volunteers themselves. I had to learn how to become a better communicator both verbally and through writing. Personal meetings would take place and I would have to explain the progress I was making and to explain any challenges that I was going through where I needed support. I would have to send professionally written emails out to volunteers requesting feedback. During my time at POMDR, I learned so many useful skills that I will take with me into my professional career and I would like to express how grateful I am for having this opportunity to grow as a person and professional.

*Broader Social Significance*

Although volunteer retention is not a health or social problem, it is still a challenge many nonprofit organizations must face. According to Christine Litch (2007), one of the biggest factors for why volunteers leave an organization is due to a lack of training or orientation. When the volunteer is not supported by their organization, the quality of their work can suffer and the services that they provide can become less effective. It is mine and POMDR’s hope that the volunteer handbook will be used for years to come as a tool to help increase the retention rate for all of their volunteers.

For future students working on their capstone at Peace of Mind Dog Rescue or working on a similar project, my advice to you would be to consistently check-in with your mentor on your progress throughout the entirety of the project. Because you are making something for an agency that they will be using moving forward, you want to make sure that you are doing the project to their set standards.
References


Appendix A

*Scope of Work* (Fall 2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Deliverable</th>
<th>Completion Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Handbook Draft Edit #1</td>
<td>Word document/PDF file</td>
<td>Mid-September 2018</td>
<td>Edits/improvements to be made based off of agency feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handbook Draft #2</td>
<td>Word document/PDF file</td>
<td>Early-October 2018</td>
<td>2nd version of online volunteer handbook to be sent to agency staff for review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handbook Edit #2</td>
<td>Word document/PDF file</td>
<td>Early-October 2018</td>
<td>Edits/improvements to be made based off of agency feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handbook email sent to volunteers</td>
<td>Email link/PDF</td>
<td>Mid-November 2018</td>
<td>Link to online handbook is sent out to current volunteers via email. Feedback is requested.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer Feedback (Results/Evaluation)</td>
<td>Google Forms survey/questionnaire</td>
<td>Late-November 2018</td>
<td>Feedback from current volunteers is received and reviewed for evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handbook Edit #3</td>
<td>Word document/PDF file</td>
<td>Early-December 2018</td>
<td>Final edits/improvements are made based off of volunteer feedback.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B


Peace of Mind Dog Rescue Volunteer Handbook Feedback

As part of my senior capstone project, I am expected to gather feedback from Peace of Mind Dog Rescue volunteers in order to properly evaluate the success of my project. If you could review the volunteer handbook and fill out this brief questionnaire with your most honest answers, I would greatly appreciate it. All responses will remain anonymous (no need to add your name). Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire!

- Andrew Donati, POMDR intern

* Required

Characteristics of Respondents

1. Based on the standards of Peace of Mind Dog Rescue (frequency of volunteering, last volunteer date, etc.), would you currently consider yourself an active or inactive volunteer at Peace of Mind Dog Rescue? *

Mark only one oval.

- Active
- Inactive

2. How long have you been a volunteer at Peace of Mind Dog Rescue? *

Mark only one oval.

- Less than a month
- More than a month, but less than 6 months
- 6 months to a year
- 1-2 years
- 3-4 years
- 5-6 years
- 7-8 years
- More than 8 years

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1t8SS2mesqfB-c56H1bR883CJO4mk7kRQ0FFjYe3HFE/edit

1/4
3. How often do you volunteer at Peace of Mind Dog Rescue? *
Mark only one oval.
- Every day
- A few times a week
- Once a week
- 2 or 3 times a month
- Once a month
- Every other month
- 4 times a year
- 2 times a year
- Once a year

Handbook Questions

4. The volunteer handbook was easily accessible. *
Mark only one oval.
- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

5. The language used in the volunteer handbook was easy to read and understand. *
Mark only one oval.
- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

6. The volunteer handbook was visually appealing. *
Mark only one oval.
- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
7. The volunteer handbook provided me with more information about Peace of Mind Dog Rescue’s policies and procedures that I was previously unaware of. *
   Mark only one oval.
   - [ ] Strongly Agree
   - [ ] Agree
   - [ ] Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - [ ] Disagree
   - [ ] Strongly Disagree

8. I will utilize the volunteer handbook when I am unsure about something volunteer related at Peace of Mind Dog Rescue. *
   Mark only one oval.
   - [ ] Strongly Agree
   - [ ] Agree
   - [ ] Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - [ ] Disagree
   - [ ] Strongly Disagree

9. I have a better understanding of my role as a volunteer after reviewing the volunteer handbook. *
   Mark only one oval.
   - [ ] Strongly Agree
   - [ ] Agree
   - [ ] Neither Agree nor Disagree
   - [ ] Disagree
   - [ ] Strongly Disagree

10. Are there ways in which you think this handbook could be improved? Including areas that could have been expanded upon? Areas that were too wordy or redundant? Topics that were missing? *

11. Is there any other feedback you have?