**How to Deal with Unreliable Volunteers**

Volunteers are much appreciated. They assist with the many projects, duties, and tasks that help the library staff in providing service to the community. As much as volunteers are appreciated, there is always the volunteer who is unreliable. Sure they have great intentions, but something comes up at the last minute and they ditch their commitment on that day or they just completely forget to show up. Unfortunately, when schedules aren’t kept it can impact library services. How should a supervisor handle these situations? The simple rule is to treat volunteers in the same way you treat paid staff. The same tips can be used for the volunteer who performs poorly at his/her assigned duties.

Here are a few tips:

**Be specific** – Don’t exaggerate or make generalized statements like “you’re never on time.” Stick to exact accounts, such as “you’ve had to cancel the last two times you’ve been scheduled.”

**Focus on the requirements of the volunteer position** – Be clear in explaining how this unreliability affects everyone. It’s quite possible that your volunteers don’t understand how integral their roles are. This is why orientation is so critical. Once they understand this, they may approach their volunteer duties more seriously.

**Consider the needs of the volunteer** – Always try to address the situation in the manner you think will get the best results from that volunteer. Keep in mind that some are forthright and would prefer you get to the point, while others may seem distressed to hear they aren’t doing well. With this in mind, consider how you are going to get your message across.

**Give timely feedback** – If you have a problem, deal with it right away.

**Make sure the volunteer understands** – Don’t ask yes or no questions. After you have made your point, ask the volunteer to recap what you just discussed. By hearing it in his/her words you will be able to tell if he/she understood the points you made in the discussion. If they didn’t, try again.

**Document** – Always keep a paper trail of your conversations, as well as the behavior prior to and after them. Just as you would for your paid employees, remember to document good behavior as well as bad.

Many volunteer supervisors are hesitant about conflict of any kind, but using the tips above will make the process go more smoothly. There are two outcomes: the volunteer will improve his/her performance and reliability or decide that the volunteer experience isn’t a good fit. Either outcome is apt to result in an improvement to the overall benefit of your library.