Problem volunteers. Find us the shelter that's never had one — and bless those that have. But good volunteers provide the lifeblood of many an organization, and understanding your shelter's culture and knowing who to accept into your program can help you prevent most conflicts.

BY ALEXANDRA KLEINKOPF

Please Curb Your Volunteer

Imagine the most difficult animal you've ever had at your shelter.

Did she display aggression? Never obey? Upset daily shelter functions, make good workers quit, and cause the staff to wince every time they had to deal with her?

Forget dogs, cats, and those notoriously vicious bunnies. As most shelter folks know all too well, the most difficult animal to show up at most facilities is likely to be a human. It's hard enough when the troublesome creature is an irritated member of the public, but when it's someone working within your own walls, her crazy-making capacity can rise by leaps and bounds.

Volunteers are the saving grace of many an animal shelter. And given the amazing work they do, many managers find it difficult to deal with the occasional bad apple—even when the whole barrel starts taking on the stink. After all, even the volunteers creating problems are working for no money, and most of them have only the best intentions for the animals in your facility. Why else would they be volunteering?

But their good intentions don't always mean they won't do the animals a disservice, or unwittingly throw a wrench into the operations of the whole organization.

The problems created by difficult volunteers can vary with the nature of the people: A stickler for clean laundry insists on throwing out another shift's unfinished load to send them a message. An overzealous volunteer decides to play publicist, and contacts local media to discuss the shelter's programs from her personal perspective. Or—the stuff of many a shelter director's nightmares—perhaps a couple of passionate volunteers lock horns with management over a euthanasia decision, decide to seek support from the board, and end up causing an experienced shelter manager to resign.

Whatever your horror story may be, whatever nuisance or outright upheaval you may have endured, remember: good volunteers far outnumber the bad, and the good ones are worth their weight in kibble. Volunteers are a crucial component in the work of most shelters. And you can take steps to ensure you get (and keep) the good apples by matching potential recruits to your programs with the same careful judgment you use to match pets with potential adopters.

Prevention is Nine-Tenths of the Cure

"In animal welfare organizations, it's easy to recruit a lot of people," says Maggie Huff, volunteer coordinator for Lollypop Farm (also known as the Humane Society of Rochester and Monroe County) in Fairport, N.Y. "It's also possible to attract people who may not end up being the most productive volunteers."

That's probably an understatement for Huff, who has a horror story or two under her belt. But she's

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Matching volunteers' unique skills to your organization's unique needs is as important as matching animals with appropriate adopters. A bad match is never better than no match at all.

learned from the trials and tribulations: Through Humane Society University, the animal care training program run by The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Huff teaches courses on creating successful volunteer programs. When it comes to dealing with problem volunteers, she stresses first and foremost the importance of prevention.

"From the minute you start talking to a new volunteer, you're setting the stage for how your organization works," she says, "and the old-fashioned idea of letting volunteers do whatever they want, whenever they want, just doesn't work anymore. You have to have structure. You're making a deal with every new volunteer."

Some problems begin with the misconceptions of incoming volunteers, Huff says. "There's a gap between what people perceive goes on in the program and what actually does go on," she says, explaining that many people think volunteering will be a relaxing activity where they can play with puppies and kittens all day and not have to bother with people. If this illusion isn't dispelled from the get-go, Huff says those people will become disappointed, setting everyone up for failure.

Providing a structured volunteer program starts with understanding the unique needs and functions of your shelter. According to Megan Webb and Hilary Anne Hager, if a volunteer coordinator isn't honest with herself about where the shelter is and where it intends to go, she's positioning the program for a big problem.

Webb, the community outreach program director for Oakland Animal Services in California, was paired up with Hager three years ago to present Animal Care Expo workshops about creating and maintaining healthy volunteer programs. Hager serves as the shelter activities coordinator for Everett Animal Services in Everett, Wash.

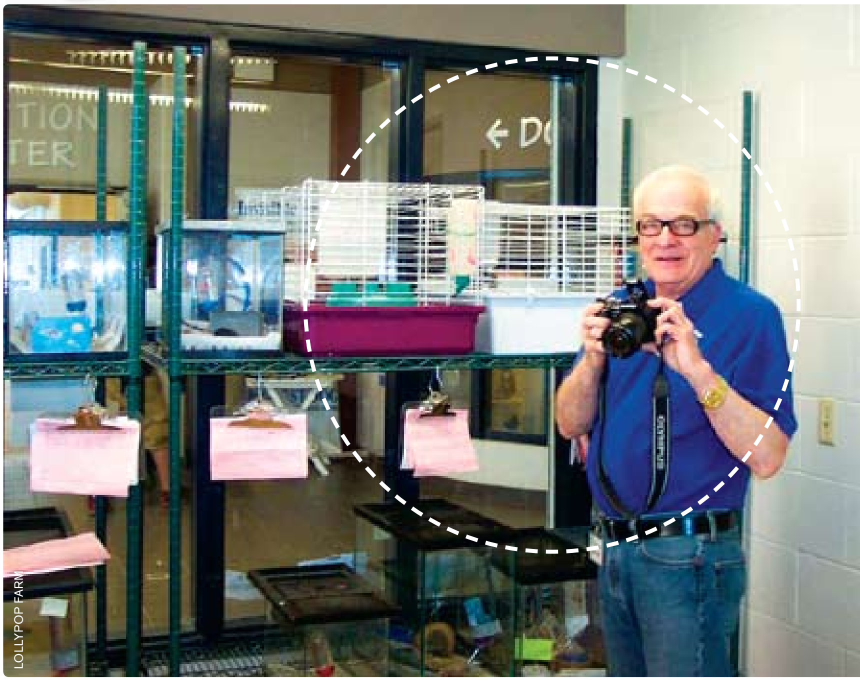
Despite their differing backgrounds—Hager started at a well-developed nonprofit, and Webb in a hectic animal control environment—the two share many views on volunteer management; they now co-teach the online volunteer management certification course at Humane Society University. They agree that by knowing your shelter, you'll know what type of volunteer to look for.

"When you're screening, you need to really think about your organization and what the qualities of the [ideal] volunteer would be," says Webb, "everything from the physical, mental, emotional, and superficial levels of qualities that they need." For instance, she says, if the shelter's staff have had negative experiences with volunteer programs in the past, it will be even more important to look for volunteers who already have a fair level of experience, require little supervision, and will be able to handle pressure well. Or, for example, if your shelter is high-admission, high-euthanasia, volunteers who are emotionally fragile or lack calm dispositions may be a bad fit.

"The responsibility is on us as volunteer coordinators to give a real good picture of what the organization does so that the person can make an informed choice," Huff says, noting that she encourages managers to have specific job descriptions for their volunteer positions. Job descriptions, Huff believes, are the beginnings of a structured program that will set expectations for those interested in volunteering—and, should conflicts arise, will serve as a document that staff and managers can use to bridge a communication gap. Creating a clear and honest job description, she says, can be as simple as asking staff what would be helpful for a volunteer to do, and writing it down.

"Thinking about what interpersonal skills your volunteers need is really important, and I think that step gets overlooked," says Hager. "But after that, then you actually have to be upfront with volunteers and say, 'Here's what we're looking for—here's what our ideal volunteer is.'"

Just as Huff encourages written volunteer job descriptions, Hager suggests a shelter's "ideal volunteer" statement be put in writing and made to serve as a workplace culture agreement. This transparency will



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help avoid future confusion and failure to meet staff expectations. Hager says that while not every possible infraction can be put in writing—she openly admits not having an explicit policy against puppy juggling, cat bathing, or dog spooning, all of which have come up in her work over the years!—the majority of conflicts can be averted this way.

Though the interpersonal skills needed in volunteers may vary from shelter to shelter and job to job, Webb feels that one quality is a prerequisite for volunteering anywhere: positivity. Volunteers who complain a lot and generate negativity are her "biggest challenge," and they can have a chilling effect on the volunteer program.

"One person can cause a lot of volunteers to even leave because they don't want to work with that person," she says, adding that a single volunteer can also sour paid staff's view of the volunteer program as a whole. "I want people who can come in and not accept the reality, but instead be willing to change it in a positive way, and work with me to change it. …" she says. "I need people who are going to really move with me, rather than just kind of wallow in the negative stuff that's happening." Webb says she wants volunteers who look forward to coming to the shelter and see it as the best part of their week.

One Step Back, Two Steps Forward

As an overarching tip in prevention, Webb and Hager can't stress enough the importance of training volunteers *before* accepting them into your program. Then, if they prove to be a good fit, they can sign an agreement making them "official." It's a hard rule to live by: Many shelters, they say, are caught in the throes of a vicious "chaos-crisis cycle," so overwhelmed and desperate for volunteers that they'll accept anyone. But this haste to make things better does the shelter a disservice: Hiring the wrong kinds of people perpetuates more chaos and can disillusion both volunteers and staff. Such disillusionment leads to more desperation for stability—a need volunteer coordinators often seek to fill by recruiting more volunteers. And so the cycle continues.

"What we're suggesting is instead slowing down, looking at what your program really needs, and maybe not even bringing in any more volunteers until you really have the things you need in place: the screening process, the training process, some supervision—and then bringing in the right volunteers who are really going to suit your program and be supportive of the program and be good ambassadors for the program," says Webb. "And then more people will start coming in … and you're going to start building a group of individuals who are just the right match."

Webb highlights her reliance on mentors—expert volunteers able to take a leadership role by helping train newbies. It takes extra energy to train a mentor, but Webb says the payoff is worth the effort, since it will greatly reduce your workload and free up your time for more complex tasks.

Whether conducted by a mentor or a shelter staffer, training before hiring allows volunteer coordinators to get a good feel for who new volunteers are, and gives the volunteers an idea of what tasks they'll be helping with. Within a 45-minute walk-through of the shelter, Webb can give a potential volunteer an honest look at what they'll be doing and how the shelter works. She finds this process invaluable, especially because she's able to dispel misperceptions instantly. For example, many of her potential volunteers are surprised to learn that 60 percent of their time will be devoted to citizen and customer relations. They're equally surprised when they discover her shelter is not the furry oasis of repose they envisioned, but more like an ER—without George Clooney

A single orientation session won't be enough to get new volunteers fully immersed, of course; newbies may be excited on the tour, and distracted by all the new details and scenery. But if you begin by training people in what they think they want to do, they may recognize their ideas are unrealistic—or at least you will!

A Volunteer for Every Job …

Huff had one such problem with a frail older woman who wanted to walk dogs. Against Huff's better judgment, she allowed the woman to do so, though she wanted to match her to a more suitable position. As Huff feared, on her first day volunteering, the woman

Before bringing volunteers into your shelter, consider what your shelter needs help with. Do you need PR assistance? A good photographer to take adoption pictures for the Web? Having a plan will help you recruit the right people.

Not Wanted: Bad Apples

Deal with these outlaws before they end up in your corral

God's Gift to Kittens — This is the guy with a Superman complex. The animals in your shelter are victims, and he envisions himself as their solo savior. He's on a mission—but it might not be *your* mission. He thinks of himself as a lone gun, and his refusal to work well with others or within boundaries can make him a problem volunteer. Fortunately, the typical hero complex can be spotted a mile away (look for the radioactive glow), and with proper advance training, you may be able funnel his powers into tasks that can help the animals and the organization.

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The Type A on 'Roids — She's watched, like, an entire season of *Dog Whisperer*, and has decided she's the latest incarnation of Cesar Millan. And not only does she know it all, but by golly, she's going to *do* it all, right down to trying out new behavior training methods and the latest cage cleaners. Rules that apply to other volunteers don't apply to her; this boundary-free know-it-all is living proof that a little information can be a dangerous thing. But she does have energy! If your Type A is reasonable and can be brought in line, Huff suggests asking her to focus on one task. If she shows she can do it well and as directed, she can build up trust, and her responsibilities can be increased once she's on point.

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The Misanthrope — A potential volunteer says he came to your shelter because he gets along with animals better than people. "People don't like me … and I don't like them," is one of his favorite pearls of wisdom—when he can bring himself to speak to you. Open misanthropy, Huff says, should be a bright red flag, since much volunteer work directly involves dealing with customers, some of whom are irate or grief-stricken. Even if this volunteer will only be sitting in the back bathing puppies, ask yourself if his particular brand of antisocial behavior will be pleasant to work with.

Debbie Downer — You must refrain from taking her by the shoulders and rattling her to the teeth as you holler, "Why do you even volunteer?!" Ms. Downer is incessantly complaining. She spews negativity. She's quick to point out when something doesn't work (or doesn't work for *her*), but offers no solutions. She sucks the morale of the whole operation like Dracula on a hemoglobin binge. The staff can't stand her. This is not a volunteer you can work into your program, nor should you try to. The good news is this royal buzz kill can usually be spotted at orientation within five to 10 minutes—just watch for the sneer.

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The A-Little-Too-Softy — This person clearly loves animals—so much so, she can barely get through a day without crying. While everyone in your shelter should be passionate and compassionate, shelter work sometimes takes a stiff upper lip. Besides having a rough time with the sadder parts of sheltering, the Softy may also be overly sensitive to comments of staff or other volunteers, and might take constructive criticism (or any criticism) personally. While you might really like her as a person, if you're worried about her emotional state, you may need to help her seek counseling—and perhaps a less difficult volunteer opportunity.

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The June Bug — This seasonal volunteer isn't a problem in himself, but the timing of his training might be. Huff explains that summer is a hectic time for almost every shelter, with puppies and kittens crawling out of the woodwork. For this reason, she doesn't train any new volunteers during July and August, since high intake and high tension can scare off newbies—and those volunteers who aren't yet at ease with the work can slow things down and frustrate stressed-out staff.

was knocked over while walking a dog and sustained a concussion. Even after recovery, the woman still requested to walk dogs. When Huff denied her, the woman wrote an irate letter to Huff's boss. Beyond the drama and danger caused by a regrettable decision, Huff says some insurance companies are now coming after shelters to cover the medical bills of people injured on the job—bills that could put a big dent in the budget of any nonprofit.

"A volunteer for every job, but not a job for every volunteer," she says. "By bringing in poorly trained or incompetent volunteers, you're undermining the staff, and that's the opposite of what the volunteer program should do." Remember: A bad volunteer is *not* better than no volunteer at all.

Furthermore, Huff says that volunteers must be given all the role options up front and shown exactly what each entails. This will help most of them make wise choices before getting in over their heads. Under no circumstances, she says, should the tail wag the dog. Volunteers who tell the organization what they will do—rather than taking the assignments and role they're given—can create problems.

Webb says that it's important to be upfront with potential volunteers in the screening process; coordinators should make it clear that not everyone will be accepted and that jobs will be assigned based on the shelter's needs and the volunteer's abilities, not on what the volunteer feels like doing.

She also feels it's crucial to do some self-assessment about what the shelter looks like to outsiders. For example, she says, "What is it like to walk in as a volunteer? … What are the challenges that someone would face walking into your shelter? What are they going to see? What are they going to experience? … And that doesn't mean the culture can't change later; it means what is it like *now*?"

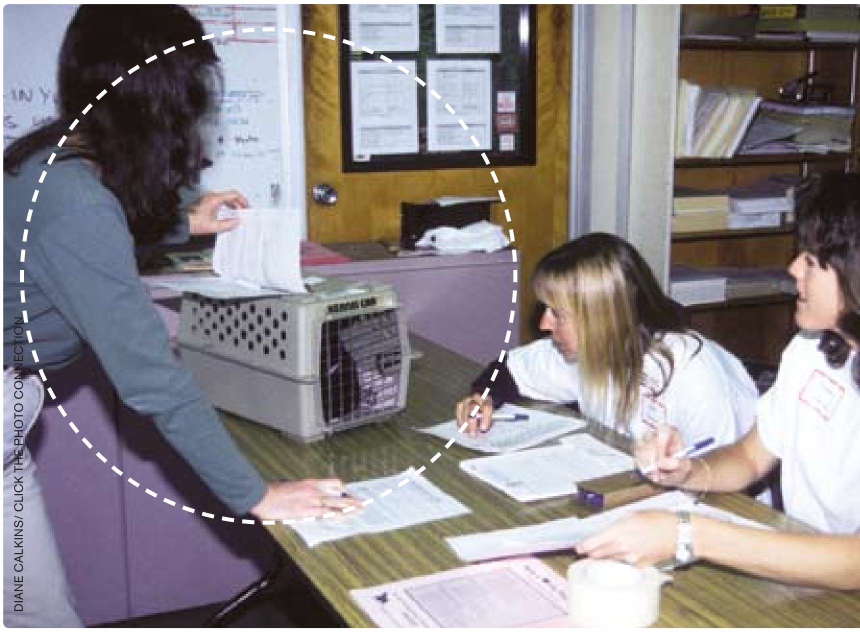
Asking yourself and other key staff these kinds of questions will help you develop realistic ideas about the volunteers you're seeking. Webb says it doesn't mean your requirements for volunteers will always be the same, but they need to fit into the culture of the shelter. If they don't agree with the direction your organization is heading, they're going to try to change what you're doing rather than help it move forward.

"You Can't Fire Me! I *Volunteer*!"

Even when you've laid the groundwork for volunteers through proper preparation and planning, problems can still crop up, even with volunteers who have been around for years. Sometimes confronting these problems can be very difficult, particularly if the problem is personal in nature. It's one thing to sit down with a volunteer and say, "You're constantly arriving late;" but it's quite another to have to say, "Your breath reeks of alcohol, and people think you're a drunk."

"If you find that there's a volunteer that you are avoiding dealing with … then that's probably a really big indicator that you really have to deal with it," says Webb.

Hager adds that no one likes having difficult conversations, but there are self-help books and courses that teach conflict-management skills and can help minimize discomfort from all ends. Avoiding the problem is not recourse. Hager reminds coordinators that volunteers don't have to be their close friends, but must still mesh with other personnel and the organization's mission.



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Providing clear direction and feedback for volunteers is essential to preventing problems. Staff shouldn't just observe worrisome volunteer activity and report it to volunteer coordinators, but should instead correct the behavior with constructive criticism.

Hager also emphasizes the need for staff to oversee volunteers on a daily basis, and not rely solely on volunteer coordinators for conflict resolution. The volunteers' supervising staff member should handle day-to-day matters, she says, while volunteer coordinators are better resources for major or recurring problems, like a personality clash between a volunteer and a staff member. She says that staff should not just report problems to the volunteer leadership team and expect them to get resolved. Instead, Hager stresses a team approach in which staff members oversee volunteers and give them direction and feedback, both positive and negative.

Huff recommends that shelters able to have distinct positions for a volunteer coordinator and supervising staff use that model. She refers to it as the human resources approach—the volunteer coordinator functions much like an HR department, focusing primarily on filling needed positions and only intervening in daily functions when a conflict between a supervisor (staff member) and an employee (volun-

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Eagerness alone doesn't always get the job done. To keep both people and animals safe, assess your volunteers' limitations and match them with appropriate tasks. A volunteer able to walk a little terrier mix may not be the right walker for an energetic malamute.

teer) can't be resolved. This creates a system where volunteers have supervision, and both parties have an authority to appeal to in cases of irresolvable conflict. "I can't supervise 700 people, but 60 staff [members] that I work with can," Huff says. "As much as possible, I try to keep the relationship between that staff member and the person who works for them."

Of course, not every shelter has the resources for this approach. But even in those organizations where the volunteer coordinator acts as the supervisor of volunteers' daily activities, Hager says, someone needs to be designated as a liaison. That way, she explains, if there's conflict between the supervising staff person and a volunteer, the liaison can assist with the resolution. "In that case, a grievance policy and procedure will help to figure out how that's going to work," she says.

In a worst-case scenario, Hager stresses that no volunteer is exempt from being fired. Just because they're not getting paid to do a job doesn't mean they can't royally botch it up, and some bad seeds need to be spit out. In a case like this, a third-party arbiter may have a more objective view of the situation. Hager adds that she does not accept the "That's just how they are" argument as a defense against poor attitudes or problem behavior. That kind of logic just allows people to be unaccountable for being jerks, and ultimately lowers the bar for everyone else.

But before it gets to that point, the lines of communication between volunteer and supervising staff must be open. If someone is doing something wrong, give them feedback.

"If I were doing something incorrectly, I would rather have somebody come and tell me so I can do it the right way, rather than rolling their eyes, telling everybody else I'm not doing it right, waiting till I'm gone, and then redoing all my work," Hager says. "It's just not an appropriate way to treat people."

Taking the Muzzle Off

While you don't want your volunteers leading you around by the nose, it's important to be open to their suggestions. After all, new volunteers aren't quite part of the furniture yet, and might offer new perspectives on shelter operations. Webb and Hager say this lets volunteers feel empowered to help move things in a positive direction. It's good to show that you're open to change, and by listening to your volunteers, Hager says, you're sending the message that your shelter is a safe space to bring ideas. And bring them they will.

"I find that the best volunteers are the ones that come up with some of those great ideas," says Webb. "They're the ones that are really motivated to be there. And when they see some of the things that they thought of getting enacted—wow! They feel so connected to the shelter and empowered."

That's the sort of openness that made a difference for the Kitsap Humane Society (KHS). The organization started its KHS 101 program in 2007 to give both volunteers and community members a one-hour, behind-the-scenes crash course on what makes the shelter tick. In one of the first sessions, an attendee suggested KHS be more transparent with its statistics on intake, adoptions, and euthanasia, and explain to people why that number of animals met the fate they did. The suggestion led to KHS not only divulging its numbers to local people, but to other shelters as well. It then began a network with shelters and rescues so that animals could be transported to other facilities where there was room, saving them from being euthanized. KHS's development director Dana Lerma says the suggestion "has *absolutely* saved lives."

To entertain volunteers' suggestions without becoming overwhelmed, Hager recommends setting aside a specific time for volunteers to approach you with their thoughts. That way you'll be able to listen without being distracted by everything you're busy with at the moment. Some suggestions you legitimately can do, others you probably can't—for the time being. But Hager keeps a sort of "suggestion box" for all the avant-garde ideas people come up with that the shelter isn't quite ready for. Communication is key. Explaining to volunteers why a particular suggestion won't work right now (or perhaps ever) is important to building a healthy working relationship and helping generate future ideas that are more on target. Just make sure the suggestions you reject truly need to be rejected, and are not discounted simply as a knee-jerk reaction to change.

"Sooo many people—*sooo* many people—have the idea that they're open to change, and they really aren't," says Hager, who is constantly assessing herself for open-mindedness. "I think it is really easy to be defensive initially when someone brings an idea to you." Keeping an open dialogue with volunteers and staff will let you know if you are considering their suggestions fairly.

We Can All Use a Pat on the Head

In the hullaballoo of work that goes on every day at an animal shelter, gratitude can often get lost in the mix, pushed so far down on the priorities list that saying a simple "thank you" gets overlooked altogether. But Webb believes that thanking volunteers for their work and dedication is probably one of the most important elements of a good volunteer program.

"That five minutes I take to do a thank-you note will keep that volunteer around," she says, adding that much of volunteer retention is based on showing appreciation and telling volunteers they indeed make a difference. Webb recalls several instances where volunteers approached her months after she wrote them personalized thank-you notes, and they tearfully thanked *her* for letting them know they mattered.

Instead of investing time and effort into recruiting volunteers, she says, shelter managers should spend more time working to retain the good volunteers they have. And that goes for staff too. Praising volunteers for good work and neglecting to recognize staff members can lead to resentment of volunteers or of the whole volunteer program. By praising both groups for a job well done, directors foster a sense of teamwork.

Retaining good people also means making your shelter environment as enjoyable as possible, and intentionally focusing on fun. Though you obviously can't throw a party every day, Webb says something as simple as sprucing up the lounge with plants, decorations, comfy furniture, or just colorful coats of paint will warm up the atmosphere. When volunteers are constantly encumbered by chaos, crisis, and the weightier realities of sheltering, they likely won't be long for your program—no matter how good they are. Even though you're dealing with tough issues under pressure, the job will only be harder without strong team morale. And those who are doing good work deserve to feel good about it. AS

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Potential volunteers will have a better understanding of their roles—and be happier in them—when you provide job descriptions that make their duties clear in advance.

Resources

Sharpen your volunteer management skills, explore staff-volunteer relations issues, join the volunteer management listserv, and more at *animalsheltering.org/volunteermanagement*.

- Order The HSUS manual *Volunteer Management for Animal Care Organizations* by Betsy McFarland (120 pages, $15.95) at *animalsheltering.org*.
- Check out the workplace culture agreement of the Progressive Animal Welfare Society, published in *Animal Sheltering* (Jan-Feb 2005) and viewable in the *animalsheltering.org* Resource Library.
- Sign up and receive free training and resources through The HSUS's "Everyone Ready" program at *animalsheltering.org/everyoneready*.
- Look into further training through Humane Society University's online volunteer management certificate program: *humanesocietyu.org*. Search for "volunteer management."
- Find more educational materials at Webb and Hager's volunteer management Web site, *volunteerforanimals.org*, and look for their new column on volunteer management in *Animal Sheltering* in 2009!