Mission Control
for Volunteer Teams

Photo courtesy of Habitat for Humanity of Metro Denver

Habitat for Humanity affiliates find they can coordinate volunteers for home-building projects with far greater ease, speed, and accuracy than before. It's all thanks to VolunteerHub, an innovative web-based service.

Habitat for Humanity is a non-profit organization seeking to make simple, decent shelter a matter of conscience by eliminating poverty housing and homelessness. The organization relies on teams of volunteers to build homes for low-income families in over 1,600 communities in the United States and 100 countries around the world.

"It's urgently needed work—and also a big challenge to organize," says Eric Knackmuhs, AmeriCorps volunteer and Interfaith Coordinator for Habitat for Humanity of San Francisco (HHSF). Per Knackmuhs, HHSF is streamlining the task of coordinating volunteers with the help of an easy-to-use web-based service called VolunteerHub.

"We've been building houses in the city since 1996," he says, as he clicks through the affiliate's VolunteerHub website. "We've built 22 homes to date. Since 2005, we've used this system to schedule build days, orientations, and other volunteer activities."

HHSF currently relies on VolunteerHub to coordinate work on 12 single-family homes on DeLong Street in San Francisco's Outer Mission neighborhood. As Knackmuhs notes, managing volunteers before VolunteerHub was mostly a tedious manual process that included hand-keying information into Microsoft Excel and Word documents.

"Before VolunteerHub, volunteers just walked onto build sites. There were always too many or too few volunteers."

"Useful…Effective…Easy"

Habitat for Humanity volunteers give thumbs-up to VolunteerHub.

"I'm a 'regular' with Habitat for Humanity," says Jane Salland, "so I use VolunteerHub frequently to sign up for construction projects. The website has been very useful and effective for me."

Salland works with Habitat for Humanity of Metro Denver. Her normal sign-up procedure is to first access the site to locate a build day needing volunteers during a time she is available. Next she checks the online description to see what type of work the build site will be doing so she can prepare accordingly. After securing her time slot with Volunteer-Hub, she prints directions to the site.

"I like being able to log on at all hours to browse build days and sign up online," Salland says.

Joel Boymel volunteered as part of a coalition group working with HHMD. "Our coalition really appreciated how easy it was to get people to sign up and to report back to the members," he says. "We were also able to use the information gathered on VolunteerHub to augment our group's mailing list."

Easy for Groups and Individuals

On the other side of Bay Bridge—in Oakland, California—Eliza Schissel is using Volunteer Hub to print a worksite sign-in sheet. Schissel is the Volunteer Program Manager for Habitat for Humanity of East Bay (HHEB). She has coordinated work on many of the 100 houses built by the group throughout Alameda and western Contra Costa counties since 1988.

"We started using VolunteerHub in spring 2004, and have relied on it as our primary method of scheduling volunteers ever since," says Schissel. "Now we post build days on the web for every Wednesday through Saturday. It's not unusual for 60 volunteers to register for each day."

Staff at the build site logs into VolunteerHub each morning to check the number of expected volunteers, and to find out who the groups for the day will include. Coordinators can register groups of volunteers with the same ease as individual registration.

"We also use VolunteerHub to post Saturday orientations, special clinics, and workshops," says Schissel. "Sometimes I'll log on in the morning and get a surprise because new features and capabilities have been added to the system overnight."

Still, says Schissel, "There's very little on the 'Hub' that I don't use right now."

Not Too Many, Not Too Few

Meanwhile, just east of the Rocky Mountains, Volunteer Coordinator Beverly Young is logging into VolunteerHub from her desk at Habitat for Humanity of Metro Denver (HHMD). "We were one of the first Habitat affiliates to adopt the system," says Young, a VolunteerHub user since September 2004. "Before that, we had no automated system at all. Our volunteers just walked onto the build sites, so there were always either too many or too few volunteers."

With an ever-increasing number of construction projects running simultaneously, HHMD now requires volunteers to pre-register online for all construction workdays at build sites and outlet facilities. "With this requirement, we're able to better control the number of volunteers at the sites. It also significantly reduces the number of phone calls we receive in the office," Young explains.

Based on her own experience and feedback from volunteers, Young reports that VolunteerHub is user-friendly and easy to learn. "Very few volunteers even call to ask how to use the system because it's so simple."

Register and Reschedule Online

Why do Habitat for Humanity affiliates depend so heavily on VolunteerHub? For Eliza Schissel of HHEB, the most important reason is handling the increasingly large number of volunteers working on East Bay projects.

Before transitioning to the system, says Schissel, HHEB needed to individually call or email each volunteer—a time-consuming task. Repeat correspondence was often necessary when volunteers had to cancel or reschedule their build days.

"Now, with volunteer opportunities listed online, people can see which dates are available without needing to call and ask. Plus they can register or reschedule for events at any time, including outside of normal office hours."

The bottom line: "VolunteerHub," says Schissel, "has greatly reduced the workload for our Volunteer Coordinator in scheduling volunteers." z