

# The Leighty Foundation

*An update to the case study originally published by Reimagining Service*

## VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

### Case Study in Investing

Are you a funder interested in investing in nonprofit capacity? Read how one Colorado foundation has invested in volunteer engagement to build capacity of its grantees and the community at large to help achieve greater community impact.

#### PIKES PEAK VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

The Pikes Peak Volunteer Engagement Initiative sought to increase the effectiveness of nonprofit volunteer engagement strategies in the Colorado Springs, CO area. The goal was to enhance organizations' capacity to fulfill their missions and meet community needs. The Leighty Foundation, a small family foundation, views volunteer engagement not as a program, but rather as a critical strategy for achieving community impact. Based on this core belief, the foundation convened and led a five-year Initiative to increase the capacity of nonprofit organizations in the Pikes Peak region. The Initiative was organized into two phases that reached more than three dozen organizations.

Key to the success of the Initiative was integrating the following elements throughout all five years.

#### CONVENING

Throughout the Initiative, The Leighty Foundation served as a community convener, bringing together leaders, organizations, and volunteer engagement professionals to share, learn, reflect, and, ultimately, make tangible changes in their practice. The Initiative launched in 2011 with focus groups. Thirty nonprofit executive directors identified organizational needs and issues related to volunteer engagement. This process fostered peer exchange and nurtured leadership support for strategic volunteer engagement. These sessions informed the content and format of a 2012 Symposium on volunteer engagement, which 27 organizations attended. This was followed by seminars, peer learning sessions, and reflection gatherings over the next two years. These sessions laid a solid foundation of volunteer engagement best practices as well as networking and collaboration between organizations. Starting in 2015, Phase II of the Initiative built on that base, integrating peer-to-peer learning into every aspect of the training, both virtual and in person. The feedback around the peer-to-peer learning and the focus groups underscores the value of funder-sponsored convenings.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

Throughout the five years, The Leighty Foundation partnered with other organizations in the community, including the United Way Volunteer Center, Center for Nonprofit Excellence, and the Community Foundation, in addition to consultants, trainers, and facilitators. The partnerships leveraged organizational expertise and staff time, while also helping to identify nonprofits that were truly ready to successfully participate in the Initiative. Through the collaborations, the Center for Nonprofit Excellence emerged as a logical home for this work in the future, carrying forward The Leighty Foundation's legacy. Additionally, new partnerships between community organizations have emerged in conjunction with the work, including resource-sharing, referrals of volunteers, and collaborative programs.

## **TRAINING**

Sharing trends in engagement, best practices, and tools for success was a vital part of the Initiative. During Phase I, 27 nonprofits attended a Volunteer Engagement Symposium that included assessment, tools, and action planning designed to expand, enhance, and institutionalize volunteer engagement strategies. Phase II of the Initiative kicked off with a half-day training on volunteer engagement trends and innovations, attended by 24 organizations. Participants were then invited to apply to be part of Phase II, which included in-depth training and support. Nine organizations were selected. The year began with an online orientation, the completion of a pre-project assessment to identify baseline practices in volunteer engagement, and a full-day Summit on volunteer engagement trends, best practices, and work planning. Over the subsequent seven months, teams received individual coaching as well as cohort-wide trainings to support their work as they implemented volunteer engagement innovations and infrastructure improvements. Phase II culminated in a post-project assessment and a reunion to share results and plan for the future.

## **LEADERSHIP**

Because leadership buy-in and support for volunteer engagement is vital to developing volunteer engagement as a strategy, organizations participating in the Phase I Symposium attended as a team of three individuals—the executive director, volunteer manager, and a board member. Similarly, leadership support was required for applicants to the Phase II cohort and most teams included the executive director or a board member. The Leighty Foundation also considered leadership on a community level. By inviting other leading organizations into the development of the Initiative, the evaluation after Phase I, and planning of Phase II, the foundation established a culture of shared leadership and community commitment to volunteer engagement. This certainly contributed to the decision to embed the work within the Center for Nonprofit Excellence moving forward so that the momentum will be sustained and the work will be expanded.

## **INVESTMENT**

As part of this Initiative, The Leighty Foundation invested in individual organizations through Volunteer Impact Grants, in the community through securing experts to provide training, coaching, and tools to dozens of organizations, and in the future through its support of the Center for Nonprofit Excellence as host of the ongoing work. Over the course of five years, The Leighty Foundation has invested approximately \$75,000 in expenses and an additional \$144,500 in Volunteer Impact Grants and contributions to organizations. Following the Symposium, participating nonprofits were invited to apply for a Volunteer Impact Grant of up to \$5,000 to assist them in further developing their volunteer initiative or enhanced infrastructure. In Phase II, funding primarily supported consultants to deliver the assessments, training, coaching, and evaluation to nine organizations. Moving forward, The Leighty Foundation is supporting the Center for Nonprofit Excellence as it develops a strategy to support volunteer engagement capacity-building in the region.

## **EVALUATION**

Evaluation was central to the work in all phases. Reflection and feedback sessions were facilitated in Phase I to collect information and input which informed planning. Formal pre- and post-project assessments were built into the Phase II work. Through those assessments, measurable growth was identified in the following areas:

- Increased organizational understanding of the value of and commitment to volunteer engagement as an organization-wide strategy
- Enhanced application of volunteer engagement best practices and access to valuable skills
- Expansion of grantees' current work – more organizational capacity to expand organizational mission
- Addition of critical programs created and managed by volunteers.

## **FUTURE OF THE INITIATIVE**

The work of the Initiative continues under the leadership of the local Center for Nonprofit Excellence. The momentum will be sustained and expanded, as The Leighty Foundation transitions to a support role.

## **IMPACT OF THE PIKES PEAK VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE – PHASE I**

Among the many positive impacts of the Initiative, the shifts in attitude around volunteer engagement and establishment of new volunteer engagement practices stood out in Phase I. Executive directors noted that their organizational practices changed in three key areas:

- Organizational view of volunteers
- Role of the executive director in instituting organizational changes
- Impact of changes in the organization as well as those served by the organization

Specific changes included organizations hiring dedicated staff to support volunteer engagement and implementation of best practices such as well-crafted position descriptions and volunteer cultivation plans. As a result, organizations were able to expand programs, serve more clients, and increase community impact.

## **IMPACT OF THE PIKES PEAK VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE – PHASE II**

The nine organizations in the Phase II cohort benefitted from not only the training and coaching, but also from:

- Integration of approaches that enabled them to effectively use high-impact volunteers to increase organizational capacity
- Opportunities to practice new skills and techniques in a supportive learning environment
- Opportunities to create a community of practice that supports ongoing volunteer engagement efforts
- Access to tools and strategies to support future volunteer engagement efforts

Program participants overwhelmingly indicated that the Initiative structure and format provided them with the tools and accountability to increase their competence in engaging volunteers. The pre- and post-Initiative surveys measured progress in eight key volunteer engagement practices (such as cultivation, screening and placement, and organizational commitment to volunteer engagement). Across all eight practices, the cohort scored measurable improvements by the end of the project. Additionally, the team approach of the Initiative set the tone for future collaborations within their organizations and with skilled community members. Ultimately, the teams reported that strategic volunteer engagement enabled them to tap into volunteer skills and networks to increase their impact in the community, while not dramatically increasing expenses.

## **RESOURCES**

Training and coaching for the Pikes Peak Volunteer Engagement Initiative was provided by:  
Beth Steinhorn, President, JFFixler Group ([www.JFFixler.com](http://www.JFFixler.com))  
Betty Stallings, President, Building Better Skills ([www.BettyStallings.com](http://www.BettyStallings.com))  
Facilitation was conducted by Jon Stepleton and Trudy Strewler Hodges, consultants

For more information on the Initiative, please visit The Leighty Foundation website ([www.leightyfoundation.org](http://www.leightyfoundation.org)) or contact the Center for Nonprofit Excellence ([www.cncoloradosprings.org](http://www.cncoloradosprings.org)).