

# Profiles in Service



**Downtown Women's Center**

Los Angeles, California

## ***What happens to your volunteer engagement philosophy and practices as you scale?***

Service Enterprises consider how their organizations can and should address volunteer engagement at different points in their growth. The Downtown Women's Center (DWC) has witnessed exponential growth, moving from a small storefront run entirely by volunteers to an organization of over 60 staff and 2,500 volunteers annually. Their growing pains – overcome and ongoing – are eased with a dose of Service Enterprise principles.

The Downtown Women's Center was founded in 1978 when Jill Halverson, a social worker inspired by the perseverance of a homeless woman named Rosa, used funds from her own life savings to rent a storefront to serve the unique needs of homeless and very low-income women in the Skid Row area of downtown Los Angeles. Responding to best practices in addressing chronic homelessness, DWC also opened a residence in 1986, assisting formerly homeless women to live in safety and dignity.

Over 200 women now visit the Day Center each day; 90,000 meals are prepared and 20,000 showers are taken annually. Services include meals, case management, a medical clinic, health workshops and screenings, computer literacy, government benefits advocacy, support groups, and job counseling. There are 119 units of permanent supportive housing at two residences.

For the first 14 years, the Downtown Women's Center was entirely volunteer-run. It has since experienced several growth phases, with significant growth among both staff and volunteers. In 2009, DWC had 26 staff and 800 volunteers; in 2010, the numbers jumped to 40 staff and 1,800 volunteers. DWC is currently in another growth cycle, with 60 staff and over 2,500 volunteers,

***“We understood then that community involvement was a major part of the organization.”***

annually contributing more than 30,000 hours. Volunteers' roles range from working in the Learning Center to preparing meals in cooking clubs and hosting the front desk at the residences. Volunteers come from a variety of backgrounds, including students, retirees and professionals.

The number of women DWC serves is also on the rise. In 2009, DWC served over 2,500 women and by the end of 2012 that number increased by 72 percent to 4,300 women.

### **Volunteer Engagement at DWC**

The current CEO came to DWC 13 years ago with a significant volunteer engagement background and provided the necessary leadership to hire the first volunteer coordinator in 2000. Since that time, resources have been directed to develop a volunteer engagement department. In 2010, DWC merged the existing development and volunteer engagement departments to create the development and community engagement department charged with grants, development, corporate partnerships, and volunteer engagement.



## Volunteers at DWC

Gay for Good volunteers assemble dressers (left); individual volunteers cook breakfast and bake pumpkin pies (right)

Under the old model, the volunteer engagement department worked in direct service with volunteers. After 2011, three department staff – the community engagement manager, community engagement associate, and volunteer engagement associate – partner with other departments at DWC, training them in volunteer management practices. In this way, volunteer engagement isn't in a silo but becomes a function of every department in the organization. With less time in direct volunteer supervision, the three volunteer staff have increased capacity for recruitment, training, and scheduling of more volunteers and corporate groups to accommodate the expansion of the organization's programs and women served.

DWC has a rich history of community involvement. After an earthquake damaged the original Day Center in 1987, community members rallied to help rebuild and expand to double its capacity.

*"We understood then that community involvement was a major part of the organization".*

The department change drew on this history and also signaled DWC's view of volunteer engagement as part of a continuum of community engagement. For example, Bank of America and

CVS Caremark came to DWC as supporters at different points along this continuum. The new model allows DWC to see this as just an “initial touch point” and consider different ways of deepening the relationship with these community partners, whether it is providing pro-bono services, in-kind goods, or board members and long-term individual volunteers.

Recruiting volunteers at DWC requires consistency and up-to-date communication. Community engagement staff found synergy working alongside the communications department, sending e-mail communications, providing tours to newcomers, and collaborating on volunteer appreciation events. Recently, DWC has been highlighted on National Public Radio and in the *Los Angeles Times* as it opened an additional residence and a social enterprise resale boutique. Regular communication with the existing volunteer base, along with far-reaching media coverage, provides an opportunity for DWC to build name recognition and communicate volunteer needs.

DWC also uses its website to recruit volunteers and keep the community abreast of new opportunities. Their online volunteer calendar shows different placement and shift opportunities, helping to recruit and retain people with a variety of schedules. A monthly e-newsletter sent to over 5,800 individuals also includes ‘hot-projects’ and volunteer recognition.

As DWC program needs change, the type of volunteer needs change. Recently a volunteer coordinator saw a need for nutrition counseling as part of DWC’s health services. This required targeted recruitment and outreach to several universities for graduate level students that could provide this resource.

***“We paused to reflect...and realized we were inefficiently using staff time to plan special projects each time.”***

*What do you want to get out of the volunteer opportunity? What motivates you?”*

The volunteer engagement associate, responsible for individual volunteers’ onboarding, is selective and strategic when considering placement, to meet both the needs of the DWC and to improve the volunteer’s overall experience.

Aligning interests go beyond placement. DWC previously had created more customized service days for corporate volunteer groups but realized that there were only a finite number of projects that could accommodate large groups.

Ongoing opportunities are now more readily available to corporate partners through weekly cooking clubs and donation sorting activities. Customized one-off corporate service days still occur, but only when DWC’s needs change. For example, when DWC opened additional housing, corporate volunteer groups helped build furniture for the new residents.



## Volunteer Projects at DWC

Turner Broadcasting volunteers cooked lunch  
and organized donations for the women

Volunteers are given a voice in suggesting new workshops and other programs, but staff are now the primary agents in identifying volunteer needs, thinking strategically about what will be sustainable and best meet the needs of the women served.

### **Communicating Clear Expectations**

At DWC, clear expectations begin with an understanding of homelessness and the unique needs of the clients. To this end, volunteer onboarding begins with a 2-hour orientation on DWC's mission and programs, education on homelessness, and an overview of ways to get involved. A 3-hour in-depth training follows, focused on DWC's volunteer policies. At the end of these two events, potential volunteers are provided opportunities to self-select placements and schedules, and talk with the volunteer engagement staff. Onboarding for corporate and group volunteers differs, as scheduling an orientation for a large group is difficult; instead, volunteer leaders are selected to facilitate groups and answer questions about DWC and homelessness.

Orientations usually begin with 60 people but by the time the volunteer coordinator meets with those who have successfully completed the series of events, numbers are down to about a quarter of that. In order to get a critical mass, recruiting at DWC has to be extensive. DWC has turned to volunteer matching sites like Volunteer Los Angeles, as well as community partners like United Way and local universities, to recruit noting that it is easier to create excitement given the number of opportunities open with DWC's recent growth.

Clear expectations also closely resemble typical human resources practices, including how volunteers should inform supervisors of absences. During onboarding, staff stresses the importance of showing up and being responsible, culminating in signing a volunteer agreement.

For a few program staff, roughly 30-50 percent of their job is managing volunteers. Staff was not always comfortable with increased volunteer management responsibilities, especially between 2009-2010, as volunteer numbers more than doubled. Communicating an organization-wide value of community engagement and allowing staff to see what they could accomplish with consistent support from volunteers caused a shift in thinking.

Staff is trained in volunteer management and is provided with written grievance procedures for the unlikely case that a volunteer is not fulfilling their expectations. While program staff is the first contact, the volunteer engagement staff can also be brought in to mitigate issues. Reviewing DWC's values and the signed agreement serves as a compass to clear any confusion and end inappropriate behavior. Volunteers are also redirected to different opportunities that may be a better fit, and in rare cases, the relationship is ended if necessary.

### ***"Letting them know what they do matters."***

The volunteer engagement staff stresses the importance of creating feedback loops for volunteers, giving them a voice in the organization. DWC implemented a volunteer survey but found only 20 percent responded. Instead of relying on this method alone, volunteer engagement staff checks in with volunteers and program staff regularly about their experiences. This provides a personal connection and direct communication, but DWC continues to look toward ways to make volunteer feedback more consistent as they grow.

Seeking feedback and providing training to volunteers not only improves the service delivery, but also serves as an important way to appreciate and continue engaging volunteers. Recently the volunteer engagement staff held a special workshop for regular volunteers and included program staff to provide professional guidance. These workshops advance the work of DWC and mitigate issues between staff, volunteers and clients while also serving as a personal enrichment tool for volunteers.

DWC has found that recognition is more about a good experience and a thank you rather than large events in honor of volunteers. As DWC has grown, it has had to transition from more personalized ways of recognizing volunteers to more sustainable methods. This includes volunteer appreciation efforts such as social media campaigns and thank-you emails. DWC still writes handwritten cards to individual volunteers in appreciation but wonders how long this will be sustainable as volunteer numbers continue to grow.

Recognition for corporate volunteers requires different strategies; sharing stories and impact have proven to be more successful. DWC also recognizes corporate supporters by listing their logos on the website and tweeting about their community service.

### **Return on Investment**

For the cost of three staff members dedicated to volunteer engagement, the portions of other staff time and a modest budget for volunteer communication, Downtown Women's Center has a considerable return on investment (ROI). DWC's nearly \$5 million operating budget is augmented by over \$1 million thanks to what volunteers give in terms of time and in-kind donations, thereby creating a \$6 million agency budget. DWC also defines ROI with a client to volunteer ratio: two women are served for every volunteer. This information is shared with staff, board members, current and prospective volunteers, as well as donors.

### **Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

Several lessons have emerged from DWC's experience of growth, including the importance of staff engagement, investment, and relationship building.

Volunteer engagement is cost-effective but not free. In order to get a return on investment and incorporate skill-based volunteers, nonprofits must be willing to spend on infrastructure. Too often nonprofits remain in an 'urgent model' where volunteer projects remain traditional and opportunities are missed to move along the continuum of engagement.

When there is support, the director of development and community engagement also stresses the importance of relationship building. For DWC, this has been critical in developing pro-bono opportunities that require mutual understanding, a sense of accountability and a staff trained in managing these different kinds of volunteers.

Finally, staff engagement is an area of continued importance, where the foundation of successful volunteer engagement lies in asking staff about common goals and values, wish lists, and how to best utilize volunteer skills.

*"Staff buy-in helps mitigate issues and provides a community of understanding."*

As many nonprofits know, growing doesn't come without its issues. However, a commitment to leveraging volunteers and their skills to advance the organizational mission can help with these growing pains. DWC has demonstrated best practices throughout their growth phases but also knows that they will need to continue to refine their strategies to meet new needs.

# Nonprofit Service Enterprise Characteristics



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# Downtown Women's Center

## **Demonstrated executive support for volunteer engagement**

- Hired CEO with rich volunteer engagement history
- Identified improved volunteer engagement and community outreach as a strategy; created new model of approach
- Director of community and corporate partnerships frequently talks about impact of volunteer time internally and externally

## **Resources allocated to priority initiatives**

- Volunteer department first to grow, consistent support given to initiatives
- Staff trained in volunteer management
- Staff engage volunteers in identifying priority areas and ways to enhance services in these areas

## **Effective training for paid staff and volunteers**

- Volunteer engagement included in most staff member's position descriptions
- Volunteer engagement strategies are regular topic at staff meetings

## **Tracking system used to manage volunteer resources**

- Track volunteer time, dollars donated or raised, number of community members who benefit
- Translate volunteer hours into number of full-time employee equivalents, ratio of volunteer/client
- Tracked figures are shared with volunteers, staff, board members, funders, and the community at-large

## **Technology leveraged to enhance engagement of volunteers**

- Use technology to recruit volunteers
- Website includes volunteer information and calendar
- E-newsletter to volunteer community
- Utilizes social media to communicate with volunteers
- Realize the limits of technology and when personal contact is needed

## **Clear on-boarding and expectation-setting with volunteers**

- Set clear expectations up front with position descriptions, orientation, training and interviews
- Orientation stresses mission and values and how this relates to volunteers
- Two-way conversation about what organization needs and what volunteer wants
- Staff and volunteers are empowered to say no if it's not a good fit
- Explored opportunities to engage skill-based volunteers in new roles
- Consistent but informal reviews with volunteers to discuss placement, satisfaction, ongoing commitment, and how the organization is doing supporting them

# Downtown Women's Center

## **Ongoing funding outreach to support volunteer engagement**

- Community and corporate partnership department result of merged development and volunteer coordination departments
- View volunteers as a funding source who give money and gifts in-kind as well as time
- Funds budgeted for volunteer support

## **External partnerships to extend into the community**

- Created partnerships with local universities to recruit skilled volunteers
- Work with corporate volunteers individually and in groups
- Volunteers serve as advocates in the community