A few words on **Sustainability** – rather than “Retention”

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I often get asked – how do we retain volunteers – meaning how to we keep them longer. Here’s the news about baby boomers and the generations that follow – they may not stay as long as volunteers of previous generations. They often want to get in, accomplish the goal, and move on . . .

The 2011 Volunteering in America report by the corporation for national and community service, showed a slight decrease in the volunteer rate since 2010 – they think the decrease is due to a corresponding decrease in volunteer retention.

Our best shot at retention is to be sure we are enriching the volunteers’ experience: matching their skills to their volunteer position, providing good training and professional development opportunities, as well as meaningful recognition.

We need to keep practicing those retention strategies in order to keep them as long as we can, however, what we need to talk about now, is not how to keep the same volunteers toiling every Tuesday night until they step into the grave – but how do we SUSTAIN THE WORK so it’s not disrupted when a volunteer moves on.

Let’s look at some Sustainability Strategies:

• Create Substitute positions – When volunteers decide to travel more in their retirement and twant to stop doing their regular “Meals on Wheels” route, offer them a substitute position where they can be called in as needed – perhaps when other regular route volunteers are ill or traveling.

• Break assignments into smaller pieces – If you have more people working on parts of a project, when you lose one person, you don’t lose everything. Remaining volunteers can pick up the slack while a new person is recruited.

• Team assignments – Give a small group responsibility for an assignment and allow them to manage the work. Again, if you lose one person, the others can adjust.

• Job Share -- Could two people split one job? Again, if one leaves, you’re not left empty handed.

• Consultant positions -- create positions that are short term on specific things -- like a PR volunteer or a Graphic Design volunteer -- use them as volunteer consultants who can provide you their expertise on specific projects -- they’re not necessarily your volunteer all year long, but can be called in when needed.

• Virtual Volunteers -- create positions that people can do from home or from wherever they are.

• Seasonal positions – “snow birds” -- people who come to a warm climate in winter from the snow . . . Or summer people, who spend summers in your community . . . Create positions you can plan to be needed only when those folks are available. Many are interested in feeling more a part of a community that they call home part of the year.

• Two Deep Leadership – Try not to have a key position that doesn’t have someone in training for it - just in case! – “Vice Chair” or “Assistant” positions are great to have for just about any position.