Volunteers In The Canteen

Recruiting Volunteers

Many canteens have problems recruiting volunteers as people these days are so time-poor that they cannot spare time to help out in the canteen. Canteen volunteers were once largely comprised of stay-at-home mums, however the structure of families has changed with a large portion of households being single parent households or families where both parents need to work. This has had a huge impact on the school canteen, as parents, who have little free time, are more reluctant to spend it volunteering.

Below are some ideas for recruitment:

- Send out a letter to parents at the start of the year to inform them how the canteen operates and how important volunteers are. Include an outline of daily duties when volunteering in the canteen so they understand what is involved.
- Include a canteen update in the school’s newsletter, featuring a photo of the canteen volunteers having a great time. Many canteen volunteers become involved as a way to make friends.
- Some canteen managers find that the schoolyard approach works well. Parents or relatives who stand and chat in the playground after the children have gone into class might have some spare time to volunteer in the canteen. Canteen managers can hand out a flyer to these parents to inform them that they are in need of volunteers and that their help would be greatly appreciated by the school and its students.
- Arrange an award system and let potential volunteers know that they may win a prize for volunteering their time.
- Parents of Kindergarten and Year 7 students will be attending information sessions. This is a great opportunity to let parents know that you need their help. Also let the parents know that the canteen appreciates all volunteers even if they are not parents of the students at the school. Most canteens are happy for grandparents, aunties, uncles and family friends to help out too.
- Advertise the volunteer positions in the local newspaper.

Retaining Volunteers

It’s one thing to recruit a volunteer to the canteen but it is a completely different thing to keep them coming back. Below are some suggestions to retain volunteers:

- Make sure that each volunteer is treated with the respect that they deserve. It is important to greet them by name with a warm welcome and tell them how much the school and the entire community appreciate their time.
- Develop a volunteer policy for the canteen.
- Provide an orientation session including food safety training etc.
- Ensure procedures are readily accessible, for example how to make a salad sandwich. This also ensures consistency of foods from day to day.
- Give volunteers a proper induction.
- Ensure a safe and healthy working environment.
• Make sure that they have a good experience while volunteering in your canteen. If a volunteer has a bad time then it is unlikely they will volunteer for the next roster. It is important that they have set duties, are given the assistance that they need and that the workload is reasonable and achievable.
• Ensure that the volunteers have reasonable and flexible hours, for example split shifts. A volunteer may be able to arrive early in the morning set up and serve recess but not be available for lunch. If canteen managers are flexible with volunteers’ needs then you will both win.
• Small things like sharing jokes, having a cup of tea together at the end of the day or listening to music while preparing the food can also be a way to create a pleasant and welcoming working environment.
• If two volunteers have a personality clash, make a roster swap as soon as possible so that you do not lose a volunteer.
• Give each volunteer the opportunity to voice his or her opinion on the daily activities of the canteen (try a survey). If they feel that they are being listened to they will be more willing to let you know what they like or don’t like. This can make the difference between retaining and loosing a volunteer.
• Make sure all cupboards are labelled so that new volunteers can easily find what they need. It is also important to ensure that all of the tools a volunteer requires are readily available, for example some volunteers may need calculators to help them add up the cost of selected items.
• Make sure volunteers are rewarded. See the next section for great volunteer rewards.

Rewarding Volunteers

Many canteen managers are under the impression that rewarding volunteers has to cost money. There are hundreds of different ways of showing appreciation that don’t have to cost a lot of money and will help you retain a canteen’s most valuable asset – the volunteers.

Volunteering Australia (www.volunteeringaustralia.org) has created a list of the top ‘101 Ways to Thank Your Volunteers’. Here are the top ten reward strategies, which canteen managers can adopt in their canteens. Visit the Volunteering Australia website for a further 91 reward ideas:

1) Say ‘thank you’ often, and mean it.
2) Give a certificate to commemorate anniversaries of involvement. Photographs taken in the canteen of volunteers can be framed or laminated and given to them with their certificate.
3) Give them a mug, bookmark, T-shirt or apron with a logo or ‘Thank You’ motif.
4) For long-standing volunteers, collect coins in the amount of hours contributed, place them in a vase tied with a royal blue ribbon and present to them at a special afternoon tea.
5) Host an annual breakfast, morning tea or afternoon BBQ for all of the volunteers and supply them with some nice food and beverages.
6) Arrange discounts for your volunteers at local shops.
7) Send articles about your volunteers with other canteen updates to the local newspaper or run them in the school newsletter. It is also nice to include their name on recipes they helped develop or anything else they have contributed towards.
8) If possible reimburse any out-of-pocket expenses (such as tolls or petrol).
9) Run a volunteer of the month award. Display their photos in the canteen and give them a small prize, even a coffee voucher for two at the local café would be appreciated.
10) A really great way to show canteen volunteers that you appreciate them and to keep them coming back is to nominate them for the Healthy Kids Association’s Canteen Recognition Awards. Check out our website for more details www.healthy-kids.com.au
Carlingford High School retains and rewards their volunteers by giving each volunteer a school coaster at the end of every year at their ‘thank you’ afternoon tea. The volunteers at the canteen all strive to collect a set of six coasters, which keeps them coming back six years in a row.

**Volunteer Hours**

Canteen volunteer hours will obviously vary with the needs of individual canteens. Most canteen managers will try to keep their volunteers’ hours the same to ensure consistency, however many people may wish to be a volunteer but are unable to start early or stay late. One way around this is to have set hours on your volunteers’ information or sign-up pack but note that “Those who wish to be a canteen volunteer but cannot spare a full day of their time can arrange special hours”. This will encourage volunteers to the canteen who may have wanted to volunteer previously but have not been able.

Some canteens have one standard shift starting at 9 or 10am until 2 or 3pm while other canteen managers have 2 daily shifts, for example 9am to 12pm and 12pm to 3pm. This gives volunteers the opportunity to work either the morning or afternoon, or work the whole day if they have the time. If you are having problems recruiting all day volunteers perhaps try introducing the two-shift option.

**Volunteer Rosters**

It is important to keep rosters as simple and consistent as possible so that they are easy to read and remember. Most canteens send out their reminders in the schools newsletter.

If you roster the same group of people on for the same day, during the same week every month then it is easy for the volunteers to remember. For example, it is easier for a volunteer to remember that they are rostered on for the canteen on the first Wednesday of every month, rather than random dates throughout the year.

**Volunteers Duties**

It is important to keep the volunteers duties simple and clear. Make ‘procedure’ cards which outline what needs to be completed and in what time, this will help volunteers stay focused and keep busy.

**Procedure Card Example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9am</td>
<td>Cut all fresh salad items for the sandwiches, wraps and rolls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30am</td>
<td>Warm pie oven, prepare cheese rolls, stock pre-packaged recess items, cut fruit for fruit cups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10am</td>
<td>Place muffins in oven, prepare jaffles ready for toasting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30am</td>
<td>Cut tops off frozen fruit sticks and stock up straws and napkins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11am</td>
<td>Recess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30am</td>
<td>Remove tops from noodles and fill hot water kettle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12pm</td>
<td>Place pies and sausage rolls in pie oven and heat soup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30pm</td>
<td>Prepare sandwiches, wraps, rolls, burgers and salads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1pm</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2pm</td>
<td>Clean up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to a daily duty card, it can also help to have procedure cards made that outline the step-by-step details of each task such as preparing the wraps. Take a photo of each step to create instruction posters, then laminate the posters and hang them on the walls. This will also make it easier for the volunteer.

Remember to give volunteers all the help they need to prepare the food properly and serve the students. Some volunteers will have strengths in particular areas so make sure that they are given duties that match their skills.

**Problems with Volunteers**

**Q. I think one of my volunteers is stealing from me. How do I approach this situation?**

A. Stealing is a criminal offence and it can be very awkward to approach someone who you suspect is stealing. It is best to ensure you mention the seriousness of stealing at your information session so that any potential thieves are discouraged.

Other ways to minimise the risk of theft include not having any pockets on canteen aprons and ensure the canteen manager collects all of the notes regularly. Keep accurate records of wastage levels and perform regular stocktakes. This will reveal if you have any stock unaccounted for.

**Q. My volunteers get annoyed with me when I ask them to do things differently, what can I do about this?**

A. When volunteers come on board it is the best time to let them know that all food must be prepared the same way each day so that people know what they are paying for and what to expect. If the canteen manager clearly outlines that there are processes that need to be followed and constantly reminds volunteers what these processes are then there should be no need to ask them to change what they are doing. Create procedure cards and place them on the canteen walls.

If they still refuse to follow procedure it is best to have a word with them and let them know that there have been complaints in the past for inconsistency, which is why procedures have been developed and need to be followed.

**Q. Some of my volunteers are really “forgetful”. They regularly don’t show up and don’t call to let me know. How can I stop this from happening without appearing pushy?**

A. The best way to deal with this situation is to introduce a “reminder call” system. The canteen manager or a volunteer can call the list of people rostered on the following day to remind them of their shift and ensure that they aren’t sick or have made other arrangements. If the volunteer has forgotten it gives the canteen and the volunteer a few hours to arrange a stand-in volunteer rather then being short staffed.

It might also be worthwhile placing a blurb in the school’s newsletter about the procedure to follow if a volunteer has to cancel their shift. Some canteens also place the next week’s canteen roster in the school newsletter.
Q. My volunteers give free food to their children. This is starting to be a problem. How can I prevent this situation from getting worse?

A. The best way to deal with this situation is to have an information session at the start of each year or term to remind the volunteers of the canteen’s procedures. It is important to stress the issue of not giving free food, as in some canteens it can make the difference between a profit or a loss. In addition, place some friendly reminder signs around the canteen about what can and can’t be done so it stays fresh in the volunteer’s minds.

Q. One of my volunteers doesn’t seem to have the best personal hygiene. Is this a food safety problem and what can I do about it?

A. This problem can be difficult to address if it does arise so it is best to make sure that it is prevented all together. Once again, the best way to deal with this is to address hygiene at an information session. Let the volunteers know what is acceptable and why, and which procedures need to be followed. Bad personal hygiene can be a real problem when food is involved. Bacteria from the body can cause food poisoning if it comes in contact with food. It is more important to say something to a volunteer than to be too embarrassed to say something and risk spreading bacteria.

Welfare to Work Reforms

Q. Can volunteering in the canteen take the place of part-time paid employment as a way for principal carer parents to continue to receive income support?

A. Welfare to work reforms have recently introduced part time participation requirements for principal carer parents in receipt of income support. Canteens who depend on volunteers and are having problems recruiting volunteers can contact Community Work Coordinators in their area to discuss possible Work for the Dole or Community Work activities in their canteen. Principal carer parents can replace paid employment with volunteering in the canteen so long as these community work activities do not reduce the hours of a paid worker.

For further information and contact details of Community Work Coordinators visit www.workplace.gov.au