



## **Interviews with Volunteers from Immigrant Communities Regarding Volunteering for a City**

Cities across Minnesota are taking a new look at involving volunteers to assist the city. One of the opportunities facing many cities in doing this, is how to engage the diversity of the city in volunteering. This would offers potential advantages to the city of valuable to connection to the communities and volunteers for city programs. To provide resources for cities on this topic, the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA) interviewed volunteers who had immigrated to the United States to gain their insights on volunteering. This was done as part of the MAVA initiative on city volunteer engagement. From these interviews we gained insights on why people who moved here from another country might be interested in volunteering for a city, what makes for a good volunteer experience and suggestions for cities on involving new Americans as volunteers. This report shares key insights learned from the volunteers.

### **Process**

The volunteers interviewed were from the Cities of Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Burnsville, Roseville and Plymouth. To find volunteers to interview, MAVA inquired with about 20 cities in the metro area and Greater Minnesota regarding talking with volunteers who were new Americans or from diverse cultural communities. These cities emerged as the ones where it was possible to set up interviews. Of the 12 people interviewed, nine were current city volunteers. The Cities of Brooklyn Park, Burnsville, Roseville and Plymouth generously assisted with the project and recommended the volunteers to interview. Interviews were also done with three additional new Americans who volunteered for other organizations to add the perspective of immigrants who are volunteering, but not for a city. This included one person who had done a Master's project to study volunteerism in the Cameroon community who shared insights on volunteering from the 70 people involved in her study. Eleven of the people interviewed were born in another country and moved to the United States as a young adult or child, and one person was second generation in the United States. Several of the people interviewed had been in the United States for less than two years, and some had been here for 20+ years. The volunteers were originally from Cambodia, Cameroon, Guatemala, India, Italy, Iran, Laos, Liberia, Romania, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The interviews were done in November and early December, 2015. Interviews were done instead of a focus group to reduce language barriers in communication. Nine of the interviews were done in person to facilitate easy communication and three were done via phone. The notes from the interviews were analyzed for common themes.

### **Insights Learned from Volunteers**

The volunteers shared many thoughts on why they volunteer, what is important to them when they volunteer and how to find volunteers. Seven themes emerged from the discussions.

**The idea of volunteering for a city initially came to the volunteers from a variety of ways.**

An interesting part of the discussion was how the volunteers first got connected with volunteering for a city. Volunteering for government was not a practice that any of the volunteers grew up with, though a few indicated that volunteering for an NGO (Non Governmental Organization) or a church was done in the country where they grew up. Several volunteers said that the original idea for volunteering was related to growing up in their home country in a family that helped others. For them, volunteering for the city was related to the helping they saw their parents do. For others it was stimulated by learning from friends and contacts that part of life in the United States is volunteering. For example, one person mentioned that he first volunteered for his son's school and when talking to other volunteers that he learned about volunteering for the city. Three people mentioned that an elected official or city staff had personally asked them to volunteer. One person said she was looking at the city website while still in India after her husband had a job offer in Minnesota. She saw the invitation to volunteer on the website, was not sure what it was about, but checked it out once here.

*"Just grew up that way, with the idea that you helped out. Mom and Dad always did things for poor and elderly in Cambodia."*

*"I grew up with parents helping others. Then, I saw here how people are volunteering."*

*"My family expected me to focus on academic work when growing up and I did not volunteer. Once here, saw my friends volunteering and thought I would try it also."*

*"Then, a city staff person who knew me asked me to help with the festival"*

*"To me, if someone asks me to help, I will help."*

**The main motivation discussed for volunteering was to help people. However, some of the reasons given for volunteering were related to the experience of being in a new community.**

The most commonly mentioned reasons for volunteering for the city was liking to help people and enjoying being out and meeting new people. However other interests in volunteering for the city were related to being in a new country. These motivations included:

- Seeing that it is important, when in new country, to get out and have new experiences to learn. Volunteering opened many doors to learn how things are done, especially by volunteering for a city. Some of this learning was for themselves, but also to share with family and friends.
- Feeling that people helped them when they first came to this country and from that came the idea to help others and "pay back the debt."
- Having a love for their new city or love for America. Volunteering for the city was a way of demonstrating that pride in being an American. It is also a way to contribute to building their new community.
- Realizing that being seen as a city volunteer is also a way to reduce people being prejudiced. By volunteering for the city, they are seen in a new light.
- Seeing that volunteering gives them the opportunity to share their opinions with the city.
- Viewing volunteering as a way to help build a resume with local experience.
- Setting a good example for their children by being involved in the community.
- Wanting to invest in making the community a good place to live.
- One person mentioned being tired of people asking where she is from, because she is from here. She wants them see her volunteering and know she is part of the city.

*"I meet a lot of people. Each teaches me a different thing. By volunteering, I connect to the next level of knowledge. I can tell my son anything that I learned that he should know about,"*

*"I would like to pay back debt from those who helped me".*

*"It is my way to show my gratitude that I am here."*

*"I love this community. So peaceful, such good education, so helpful. I want to help."*

*"I love American, my country." I want to help.*

*"As Kennedy said 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.'"*

*"Because I volunteer, people are not prejudiced. When volunteering, people will walk up and talk. People open up. It gives a platform to start talking."*

*"For me, I believe to volunteer for the place I live is a good thing."*

*"The city is the place I live and grow my family. I want to see it prosper and be safe. I want a clean city."*

*"I know the city and the city knows me."*

*"I want people to see me and that we are here, that I am part of the community."*

*"On my volunteer application, I put down the reason for volunteering was to be a role model for my kids, to show them that 'We are American.' "*

### **The most important aspects of a good volunteer experience are that it is well organized and they can see the results from the time they spend.**

When asked about what was important to them in a good volunteer experience, the expectations mentioned were basically good volunteer management practices. Especially important was the work being well organized, being able to see the impact of what they were doing and having a good staff person to work with. All of the volunteers said that they appreciate how well organized their city volunteer experience was. However, beyond good volunteer management practices, it was especially important to volunteers who had immigrated that they felt welcome, and that the education and experience they have from their former county was valued. Several volunteers mentioned they have friends who have tried to volunteer at organizations and no one got back to them which made them feel not wanted.

*"When I volunteer, if I see results, I am happy to go back"*

*"It is important that I see results and it is well organized. If results are low, and the organizer does not guide you that much, then I feel left out. If disorganized and not a plan, I feel like I am wasting my time."*

*"Jackie is amazing. She took time to understand me and found what I would really like to do. She is great. She is a big part of why it is so good to volunteer here."*

*"People have been friendly to me. There are so many first times in a new country and people here are helpful."*

*“It is amazing here. It is very welcoming and really nice. They are happy to see me and say nice things to me.”*

*“First contact needs to be reaffirming. It needs to show that it is good here”.*

*“Make sure you get back to people. I hear often that people try to volunteer and never hear back. They think that maybe it is because they have an accent.”*

**If you want to get more people who have immigrated involved with the city, volunteers recommend starting by reaching out to the associations and emerging organizations in the cultural communities and develop relationships.**

The volunteers encouraged cities to reach out to the cultural communities within the city and build relationships. Suggestions on how to do this included: stopping at a neighborhood ethnic grocery and asking who it would be good to talk with, going to a community cultural event to talk with people, going to a meeting of an association of immigrants to show your interest and contacting the emerging nonprofits within the communities. It was suggested to find leaders in the cultural communities who are interested in helping their community connect with the city. A recommended next step after this was to hold an information session on a topic the community is interested in, to show your interest and further build relationships. The advice was to work to build relationships before you ask people to help you.

*“You need to get involved with people who are immigrants. It is hard to deal with people not know about.”*

*“Don’t feel uncertain about approaching our organizations. We are a welcoming people.”*

*“The City should get our upcoming organization involved. We are the ones trying to help people. We are the ones that know the needs, culturally. Get us involved.”*

*“You guys don’t know who is working out there. Until you know that, will not be progressive.”*

*“Hold an information session. Could have an open event.”*

*“Do a wellness session where people can express concerns about what is holding them down – where they can talk about concerns.”*

**While some new Americans are able to volunteer, it is important to understand that there are barriers to volunteering such as transportation, language, family commitments and working two jobs.**

While overall the people we talked with were encouraging that there are people who would like to volunteer for the city, we learned that it was important to understand how some recent immigrants are not able to volunteer because they have to stay focused on earning money and taking care of their family. One person suggested that it might be younger people, people with more education, and people who have been in the country longer who are in a better position to volunteer. Several of the people we talked with were in positions of trying to recruit volunteers for their own organizations and told us that it can be hard for them also to find volunteers because of these barriers.

*“How to find volunteers is the million dollar question. I don’t know. I have the same question.”*

*“Finding volunteers is difficult. People are working. People are going to school so they don’t have extra time. Transportation is a problem. My organization is also having trouble finding volunteers.”*

*“People come here around age 20 with the dream of making it. Most have college degrees. Their parents borrow money for them to come here, so there is pressure to pay them back. There are high expectations of them. Last thing in mind is to work for free. They are thinking of making money as fast as they can.”*

*“When I talked with a neighbor about volunteering for the city, he was not interested. Not sure if he didn’t want to be involved or didn’t see it as an obligation.”*

*“The people that I talked with about volunteering, it is not that they are against volunteering, they say ‘I am not sure’. They are curious, but not sure”*

**If you would like people to volunteer, it is important to reach out and ask them, as most people have no idea how to volunteer, or even if the city would want them to volunteer.**

Several people mentioned that they know people who have wanted to volunteer and have not known where to go for information. They advised that if you want people volunteer, it is very important they know who to talk to and what the process is. We were told that very few people know this. It is also important to let them know that you want their help. They advised to realize that some people are afraid to volunteer because they do not know if their English is good enough or if they could keep up with what is expected.

*“The main problem is not being asked. I know people who value volunteering, but they do not know how to go about it.”*

*“A lot of people want to be a volunteer, but do not know how to do it. I hear that from some of my friends. Need information on who to call.”*

*“How would I know how to volunteer for the city? I don’t use a computer much. How would I hear about it?”*

*“Some volunteer for their own community, but not comfortable to go out beyond that. I tell my kid, ‘We are all Americans and we can volunteer where we want to.’”*

*“Make volunteering easy to do, so that people know when, where and how to do it.”*

*“I have two friends who are interested in volunteering. Some do not know what a volunteer activity is, and you need a way to explain it.”*

*“Talk about the activities they will be doing, the word volunteering might not mean anything to them.”*

*“A friend is afraid she might be rejected if she offers to volunteer. ‘They don’t want me.’ She has a mindset. She is afraid her English is not good enough.”*

*“A friend said, ‘I don’t know how comfortable I would be volunteering.’ Some, they are scared that they will not be able to communicate. They don’t know how to do it. They have not done before. They don’t know if they can keep up with what is expected of them.”*

*“Many people in my apartment building are from other countries. They are asking me about volunteering.”*

## **Use a variety of ways to reach out to people to let them know that you would like them to volunteer.**

We asked for suggestions on how to reach out to people to let them know about volunteering for the city. The suggestion was to try a number of different approaches to reach people including:

- Ask the local cultural community associations to help get the word out that the city wants their involvement.
- Find a community leader who is interested in connecting with the city and ask his/her help to spread the word.
- Ask your current volunteers to spread the word.
- Encourage city staff to personally ask people they know to get involved.
- Put flyers up in locations your target audience will see.
- Have a booth at gatherings that draw from your target audience.

The people we talked with agreed that a main reason why so few immigrants volunteer is that that they need more information about volunteering and to be personally asked.

*“I came to volunteering for the city from the website. People like me can pass information on to others.”*

*“Get involved with people who can bring people together.”*

*“Could use our umbrella organization, like the Minnesota Cameroon Association, to connect with people. They have email list so all Cameroonians will hear about it. You could come in to talk with their group.”*

*“Let the Vietnamese community organization know you need volunteers. They would spread the word.”*

*“Could have a booth to talk with people at festivals. This could be a window to reach people.”*

*“Religious and faith groups also way to reach people. That is the main way to hear about volunteering.”*

*“Go to Vietnamese church to let know need volunteers.”*

*“Post a flyer. Say ‘we need you.’ ”*

*“Put flyers up in grocery stores – the Vietnamese one, but also Aldi’s and Rainbow.”*

*Put flyers at schools libraries. Or, you could ask volunteers like me to put flyers on doors in my neighborhoods*

*“Do not do everything in English. Have flyers in other languages. Not everyone reads English.”*

## **Conclusion**

Our discussion with volunteers led to the discovery that volunteering for a city is potentially an ideal volunteer experience for someone who has immigrated to the United States.

- There are unique and powerful reasons that volunteering for a city is of interest to people who have moved to the United States. It is an opportunity for people to learn important things about their new country, to build their own community, and to show their pride in being an American. By understanding those reasons, you can provide volunteers with an opportunity that is valuable to them as well as to the city.
- We learned that volunteers are seeking to have an impact and want to be involved in a program that is well organized. This makes a city a good place to volunteer because most city volunteer programs are well organized and can show the results of volunteering.
- Immigrants from some countries have a low impression of the Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in their country which makes volunteering at a city a good choice for where to start volunteering.

However, there is work to be done to reach immigrants about the opportunity to be involved with the city. The people we talked with were each in somewhat of a unique situation in how they connected with the city to volunteer. Several volunteers had done an extraordinary job of going outside of what most people think of doing to reach out to volunteer. Other people had the good luck of connecting with a city staff person or an elected official who asked them to help out. These people have broken the ice and demonstrated that volunteering for the city is both good for the volunteer and for the city. To take this to scale the next steps are reaching out to the people who might be less willing to step out of the comfort zone to step forward, and building relationships to personally asking people to get involved.

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